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From Green to Gold: Community along lines of trade between Dolpo and Mustang

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From Green to Gold

Community along lines of trade between Dolpo and Mustang

Jack Cantor, SIT NPT, Spring 2022
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Asia, Nepal, Lower Mustang & Upper Dolpo(a)

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ABSTRACT

Mustang and Dolpo are at a tipping point of connectivity and community change as road development brings the districts closer to Nepal’s economic centers.

In this independent study, I document contemporary trade relationships between Mustang’s Sangda and Dolpo’s Chharka, currently separated by three days of unmotorable trail.

Through in person interview, archival research, and photography, I document methods of economy and community in three villages- Mustang’s Phelag and Sangda, and Dolpo’s Chharka. I focus upon future community prospects of Sangda and Chharka as road development between the two progresses.

As the two villages exchange goods, develop familiarity, and host traders from one another, forms of community and trust develop demonstrated through trust, systems of credit, unspoken rules of reciprocity, and seller loyalty. However, as road development progresses, residents of both villages opt for cheaper purchases and more lucrative trades in Nepal’s middle hill and Terai marketplaces made accessible by road, diverting a longstanding trade relationship south of the Himalayas.

This paper explores changes brought about by road development, forms of economic community, and hopes for the future, namely improvements in education and medical care.

I begin by grounding this project in my account of the mountainous journey between Sangda and Chharka. I then move to defining my approach, a combination of written ethnography with historical analysis, coupled with photographic narrative. I then ground my account of the Mustang-Dolpo trade route by providing detailed account of political and economic change in each district, namely the closure of the once fluid Tibetan border, the decline of the salt trade, and the construction of the Beni-Jomsom-Korala road along the Kaliganaki corridor. I then provide account of methods of economy for three villages, Phelag, Sangda, and Chharka along the studied route.

I conduct analysis of the trade community shared between Sangda and Chharka, document current and future prospects for Chharka’s healthcare system amidst the promise of road development.

I conclude with photography documenting road driven change in Phelag, and a group of traders traveling from Chharka to Sangda.
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In the completion of this project, I am indebted to many I am proud to call teachers, friends, and family.

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I am humbled and inspired by the hospitality of the herders, traders, farmers, and hosts without whom this project would have been impossible. Thank you for your willingness to open your lives up to a complete stranger.

To my parents, Amanda and Dan, thank you for your never-ending support and patience. I would never have reached Nepal without your encouragement and advice.

To my late grandmother, Barbara Waugh, thank you for encouraging me to pursue the family legacy of photography and storytelling. This project is dedicated to your memory. I love you, forever and always.
INTRODUCTION

Nothing Gold Can Stay

Nature’s first green is gold. The high peaks pulse pink, orange, then fade into white as the dawn light meets the day. Their staunch beauty holds for minutes each morning, long after the stars fade into sky and just before the sun heats the earth, making any steps slow going and tiresome.

I learn to greet the peaks each morning. On the journey across Dhaulagiri massif, from Mustang to Upper Dolpo, one must rise with stars in the sky and walk with the peaks gold. The photographer in me wants to stop to capture the colors on the summits, but I know time is of the essence. My co-researcher, Pema Korchung, tells me our ascents will become torpid and imprecise if incomplete by the time the sun crests the hills.

My experience “mountaineering,” a generous label, on the Appalachian hills of America’s northeast, and Colorado’s high summits tells me a sunrise is the reward for an expedient morning’s journey. The sun beats down on my neck while I take yet another, seemingly endless, step towards 6074 meter Gharchok Chuksa Danda Himal, and I understand the necessity of touching the summit before the sun’s rays.

On the slope of jagged, loose, stone, I knock a fist size rock loose. It rolls, tumbles, then bounces down the hillside, kicking up dust each time it touches ground. I do not see it stop. On my unstable footing, I can’t help but imagine myself meeting a similar fate, my American body no match for the Himalayan ground.

The altitude, sun, and loose footing seem to ameliorate any semblance of outdoor experience I thought I had. As Pema and I enter our fifth hour of ascent, long after the stars have faded, the peaks have glowed, and the sun has emerged, I gain a new appreciation for the sweat equity put into delivering the package of Rara instant ramen noodles I ate for breakfast that morning.

When I finally arrive in Chharka, days later, I understand when locals tell me of the inflated costs of rice, noodles, and basic necessities. Each grain must be strapped to a yak, mule, horse, or human, and carried over, at minimum, the approximately twenty kilometer stretch of unmotorable trail separating Upper Dolpo from Lower Mustang. Such a route crosses multiple ice cold rivers, and ascends to well over five thousand meters twice. The footing is loose, rocks unstable, and the rumble of avalanche and rockfall are a daily part of life.

For many, the journey is longer. Most do not have vehicles waiting at Molumn Sumna or Sangda ready to shorten their travels. For most, the journey from Mustang’s Sangda to Dolpo’s Chharka is forty three kilometers of high Himalayas, screaming ascents, rocky descents, and snow filled la’s (ﻻ) or passes. From Jomsom, Lower Mustang’s population center, the journey is seventy nine kilometers.

Upon my arrival in Chharka, five days five days, seventy nine kilometers, or 137,509 steps, after departing, it was exceedingly clear the village is a hard place to reach. I would later learn that the route I traveled was the trade avenue of choice for Chharka’s residents. To cross two five thousand meter la’s and enter an entirely different district is far easier than making the six day journey to Dolpo’s capitol, Dunai. Indeed, despite my impression of the route being a near impenetrable barrier, a challenging trek only relenting to the most hardened of mountaineers, the journey between Dolpo’s Chharka and Mustang’s Sangda is the line of trade constituting both collective economy and community for both town’s populations for at least three, but likely more, generations.

When I decided to study road development between Mustang and Upper Dolpo, I expected to find two communities isolated from one another, unified by the developmental grace of roads. This assumption could not have been further from reality.

The Mustangi dinner table was surrounded by traders from Dolpa, and the guesthouse in Chharka housed travelers from Phelag, Sangda, and Jomsom, towns of Lower Mustang. The stone shelters enroute were filled with travelers, traders, smoke, laughter, and the smell of Daal Bhat each night. At each campsite, the ground was littered with instant noodle wrappers, cigarette butts, and potato peels. The smoke in the air, trash on the ground, and greetings of familiarity told of two communities linked by trail and trade, exchanging yaks for soda & cigarettes, horses for rice & daal. As I became more attuned to the comings and goings of Chharka and Sangda, the road seemed to be a force of division, rather than unification, diverting a longstanding trade relationship down towards Jomsom, Beni, and Pokhara. Indeed, I arrived at a time when the economic channel that defined a community was at a tipping point of new lines and new trade. As the road promised cheaper goods, better healthcare, and improved education, the communities along the proposed route were sure that their multi generation friendships and community held together by trade would soon die by the hand of the road.

This is their story. This is their requiem.

Nothing gold can stay.
To tell a story

An issue faced by economic anthropologists is the dehumanizing nature of quantitative data. Consider the statistic from the book *Corporate Flight: The Causes and Consequences of Economic Dislocation* . An analysis of the shift of automotive production from the American midwest to east Asian manufacturers: a one percent rise of unemployment is causal for 37,000 deaths. While contemporary statisticians and economists are critical of the assertion of causation, and the application of the 1982 study onto contemporary scenarios, the statistic serves as a stark reminder of the human individuals represented by data.

Consider the 2008 financial crisis, when a collapse of the housing market and requisite Mortgage backed securities led to the United States’ ten percent unemployment rate in 2009. Analysis of market and unemployment trends don’t speak of increasing suicide rates, the opioid crisis, or the family made homeless by the repossession of their home. Indeed, it appears that the statistical and analytical methodology of academia and economics is often worlds apart from the day to day realities of the subjects upon which their scholarship is predicated.

The same may be said for the broader field of anthropology, with published works kept behind the steep paywalls of academic journals, written in a language not spoken by the referenced communities, and made inaccessible to the people upon which the academic field is built. While scholarly analysis indubitably builds upon critical fields of knowledge, how is it that anthropology, the term’s greek roots, *anthropos*, human, and *logia*, study, quite literally connoting the study of humanity, is so far removed from the humans who comprise the field?

In the article *Anthropology and Ableism*, published in the Journal of the American Anthropological Association, cultural anthropologist Erin L. Dubin recommends a “Shift [of]… professional practices and expectations to cultivate collective access,” altering common ivory tower practices typical to anthropological scholarship to reflect the communities studied. Perhaps such a shift would catalyze a better human-data relationship, one that genuinely represents the realities of subjects through its scholarship.

Visual anthropology, the use of photo and film for ethnographic means, may better rectify the scholar-subject divide. Indeed, a photograph knows no language, is limited by no vocabulary, and leaves less to the interpretation of the scholar. Yet, for its ability to demonstrate the inarticulable, the photographic medium is not without flaw.

Photo’s don’t *happen*, they require a photographer, or in the instance of visual anthropology, scholar, to take them. Indubitably, the image is a snapshot of the photographer’s perspective, including what they believe compelling, and excluding all else. The photographer’s gaze will frequently trend towards their notion of the aesthetic, certainly not all encompassing view. In short, while visual media is certainly capable of filling gaps left empty by the inhuman data common to both quantitative and qualitative scholarship, it is anything but a complete, objective *image*.

Perhaps a reconciliation of the two, scholarship with media, data with account, creates capability for humanized scholarship. Public relations consultant, TED speaker, and GE executive Karen Eber, alongside the center for Neuroeconomics, suggests the simultaneous reception of story and data facilitates emotional empathy associated with a cerebral release of Oxytocin.

Eber’s claim, corroborated with research conducted by Yayuan Geng, an Neuroscientist with *The Clinical Hospital of the Chengdu Brain Science Institute*, suggests that the dual representation of data with human narrative drives empathy development unseen with the isolated presentation of sole narrative or data.

I call this dual presentation *storytelling*.

It’s the morning of April 22, 2022, and I’m awoken by the sounds of conversation and smell of *pale* (ིྭ་) Himalayan flatbread, cooking over the Guesthouse’s wood fire. The morning sunshine streams through the window, casting rays of sunshine in the smoke. I’m excited and nervous: the previous afternoon, Kunang Nyamgam, 59, agreed to be interviewed that morning. My coreserarcher Pema Korchung tells me that Nyamgam, a trader and merchant, is well known across both Mustang and Upper Dolpo. As one of the earlier interviews in my fieldwork, I felt split between the technical approach of ethnography, and the sensationalist approach of photography. I conceded to, as Pema described, “go with the flow”.

As I begin the interview, conversation is stilted and awkward. Nyamgam’s body language mirrors my nervousness. When I open my bag, and remove the camera, the air of discomfort in the room disappears. Nyamgam tells me “My mother died when I was five. I don’t have any sisters, brothers, or family. When I die, I will be gone.”

Pema later tells me Nyamgam agreed to the interview to record his legacy, so that “something would remain when he dies.”

I take Nyamgam’s portrait, and I begin to understand my role in studying the route between Lower Mustang and Upper Dolpo. I was not there to write a lengthy ethnography, designed to be locked away in academia’s ivory tower, nor did I come to sell the image of profound adventure and exploration with my camera.
I resounded that my mission over my twenty days north of the region’s 8000 meter peaks would be spent walking the route, and hearing the story of the communities along the proposed road. To learn what is, what was, and what will be, and relay such information here, by image and by prose.

These are their stories.

I invite you to walk with me.

Kunang Nyamgam, 59, of Dolpo poses on the roof of Sangda’s Guesthouse. Nyamgam is waiting for the snow and ice on the trail’s high passes to melt before he crosses into Dolpo.
HISTORICAL UNDERPINNINGS
Mustang, Phelag, Sangda, and Chharka

In 2014 Nepal’s Beni-Jomsom-Korala project completed the motorable road connecting the lowland Terai to Tibet through “the plain of aspiration”, “himalayan shangrila”, or Mustang. The motorable road, a longtime petitioned request of Upper Mustang’s residents, is undoubtedly yet another avenue of change in the economically and geopolitically tense Mustang District.

The road, known as the Beni-Jomsom-Korla Road, or the “Kalphandaki Corridor”, in government documentation, functions as an avenue for supply and trade from the south. As a supply route for Mustang, the road draws from Nepal’s economic centers- Kathmandu, the Terai, and Pokhara- Indian manufacturing hubsand Chinese manufacturing from the North. The road mediated product supply and availability is immediately clear as I walk through central Jomsom, Mustang’s District Headquarters. Cafe chains such as Himalayan Java Coffee sell lates and offer high speed internet connection. Clothing resellers peddle items from H&M and UNIQLO. Multistory hotels have glass windows and solar waterheaters. Indeed, while in 2022, global capitalism’s presence is profoundly clear along the Kaligandaki corridor the road, and its requisite supply chains, are a recent development in Mustang’s history. Indeed, Mustang’s recent connection to western owned supply chains is yet another swing in the region’s ever oscillating connection to its northern and southern neighbors.
A Muktinath bound tour bus winds its way up the Beni-Jomsom-Korala road
Freezing a fluid border

In 1959 the CIA deemed Mustang’s northern kingdom, suzerain to Nepal’s monarchy, separate from “the Nepalese government’s extent of control”, largely due to limited transportation and communication networks. The CIA evidenced the region’s political and infrastructural separation, coupled with linguistic and cultural similarities between Tibetans and Lowas, as justification for utilizing Upper Mustang as a base for the American backed Khampa Resistance movement, or Chushi Gandruk. From 1959 to 1974, the Tibetan guerrilla fighters used Upper Mustang as their base for the assault on PLA forces in Tibet. Nixon’s reconciliation with the PRC coupled with limited results for US intelligence interests caused the CIA to drop support for Chushi Gandruk in 1974. The cessation of US support coupled with the 14th Dalai Lama’s call for the group’s peaceful surrender, and joint Sino-Nepali military operations led to the end of Guerilla resistance movements in Mustang.

Despite the CIA’s assertion of remoteness, Mustang is anything but removed from the global political or economic phenomena. Chushi Gandruk’s presence alone was enough for the region to become a geopolitical point of tension for the US, PRC, and Nepal. Nonetheless, the guerilla’s presence was not the first incidence of transborder conflict. On June 28, 1960, a regiment of one thousand Chinese troops, well within Nepali territory fired upon a group of Nepali police officers, killing one and detaining ten. The sole presence of Chinese troops within Nepal violated the states’ previous agreement for a demilitarized border zone. The clash, known as “The Mustang Incident,” in CIA documentation, caused an international debate on the border’s location, and each nation’s military policy regarding the border.

Alas, neither the diplomatic resolution of “The Mustang Incident” nor the surrender and defeat of Chushi Gandruk marked the end of Mustang’s border tension. In 1999, the only “high ranking reincarnated Tibetan Lama” recognized by both the Chinese government and Central Tibetan Administration escaped Tibet through Mustang. The fourteen year old Karmapa Lama, Ogyen Trinley Dorje, drove an SUV on the night of December 31, 1999 to Kora La Pass, the border crossing between Mustang and China. Author Amish Raj Mulmi summarizes the resulting border restrictions well in A Fence In The Himalayas:

“In Mustang, the effects of the escape were clear. A Nepali journalist, who reached the border a few months after the escape, told me the fence had not come up when he had visited; however, by the end of 2000, it was ready. Today, the fence stretches... a total distance of 22.2 km. Across pillar number 24 stands the two-storied concrete structure that is the customs office. Solar panels are arranged to the side, and a CCTV camera looks on into Nepal.”

While Mustang’s suzerain kingdom operated largely free of governmental oversight, the guerrilla movement, “The Mustang Incident”, and Dorje’s 1999 escape certainly brought the region into both Nepali and CCP focus as a region of geopolitical interest. It was only in 1992 that Nepal allowed foreigners to travel into Upper Mustang, with a hefty five hundred dollar permit fee and guide requirement. In April 2022, an American friend of mine first hand experienced the region’s geopolitical tension. Offered free transport to Korala pass by a group of Nepali tourists, my friend entered a jeep bound for the border. Alarmed at the presence of an American, Nepali police at a checkpoint twenty minutes south of Korala forced my friend to exit the vehicle, and walk back to their accommodation in Lomanthang. In summary, despite CIA claims, and the embellishments of the occasional tourist blogger, the region of Mustang is anything but “remote” from global significance.

Salt, sand, and sea

Just as Mustang shaped Sino-Nepali-American relations, its northern neighbors’ political and military phenomena, namely the PLA’s 1950 invasion of Tibet, radically redefined south Asia’s economic corridor of the Kaligandaki gorge, observed through the decline of the Thakali mediated salt trade. In his ethnography, “Trans Himalayan Traders in Transition”, Austrian anthropologist Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf provides recount of the rise and fall of the trans himalayan salt trade.

Critically, Fürer-Haimendorf identifies the key resource surpluses and deficits that gave way to a centuries long flourishing trade partnership: the Tibetan plateau had a surplus of salt and a deficit of rice, whereas the Terai and Gangetic plains of Nepal and India were the inverse. Thus, Newars of Nepal traded rice for Tibetan rock salt, using Himalayan passes as an avenue. Via the Kaligandaki trade route, the Lowas Carried Tibetan salt to Thai Kholo, where the Thakalis, historically attributed with mediating such a trade, sold the salt in Pokhara and Kathmandu, a lucrative endeavor. However, the shift in Tibetan governance, resulting from the PLA’s invasion of the plateau in 1950, saw the decline in the region’s salt trade. The 1959 escape of the Dalai Lama and repeal of the 17 Point Agreement saw harsh regulations and repression over Tibet, while escalating tensions from “The Mustang Incident” and Khampa led Guerilla warfare saw the once fluid border locked down.
Indeed, an improving airport and road infrastructure in Nepal’s south occurred simultaneously to the 1963 establishment of the Nepali Salt Trading Company, sourcing sea salt from the Indian Ocean. As such, Indian sea salt quickly became more readily available and cheaper than Tibetan rock salt, making the efforts of the Thakali, Lowa, and other Himalayan salt traders economically redundant in Nepal and India’s lowland markets.\textsuperscript{xv}

In his Nepali Times article, \textit{The Salt of the Earth}, anthropologist, and journalist Jag Bahadur Budha asserts the end of the Tibet-Nepal salt trade led to the “decline of himalayan communities.” With the lockdown of the northern border, and the more cheaply available sea salt, the Tibetan salt trade, and derivative industries (guesthouses, stores, restaurants, transport) quickly dwindled. Budha notes that the end of the salt trade did not simply mark the end of a business enterprise, but also the death of a shared sense community and gift giving between Tibetans, Lowas, and Thakalis, friendships bound by generations of travel and trade. It is further worth noting that herders who once relied on grasslands north of Mustang’s borders suddenly became unable to access the natural resources their livelihoods depended on. Budha argues that this near totalitarian economic decline resulted in a mass outmigration from Himalayan regions. Indeed, according to both Nepali Government Census Data, independent university studies, such as \textit{Depopulating the Himalayan Highlands}, and my interviews during my time in Mustang, the outmigration is an ongoing phenomenon.\textsuperscript{xvi}

As I bounce along the Beni-Jomsom-Korala road in the back of a jeep, I am mindful that the recently connected road project holds deep significance to bring Mustang back from Nepal’s economic periphery. Even without deep investigation, evidence of novel road mediated business is clear. Busses full of pilgrims and tourists wind their way up the paved road to the Hindu and Buddhist pilgrimage site, Muktinath. Painted and decaled trucks full of rice, cooking fuel, oil, and other goods make their way up the road from Beni to buy and sell goods in Jomsom, Kagbeni, Phelag, Muktinath, and Lo Manthang. My Mustangi friends’ social media have pictures posing with motorbikes at Korala and other high mountain passes and landmarks.

As the Tibetan Salt trade defined community and identity for centuries, it appears the road fulfills a similar niche, establishing and re-establishing forms of community and identity. In 2016, China completed the twenty kilometer stretch of road leading to the Korala border in preparation for the opening of Korala as an official dry port, or border crossing.\textsuperscript{xvii} In 2012, China and Nepal agreed upon six official border crossings, including Korala.\textsuperscript{xviii} While stalled by pandemic-driven lockdowns, especially lengthy and restrictive in China relative to its Nepali neighbors, the reopening of trade through Mustang’s northern border may hold promise for Mustang’s economic revitalization through the restoration of old routes.
Sultan Subedi’s truck sits in Phelag, a hillside village in Lower Mustang. From Beni, Subedi sells cooking fuel and household items to Mustang’s hotels and villages. Dealers like Beni purchase potatoes from Phelag and Dagarjong to sell in Nepal’s lowland markets.
**Accessing access**

It’s the morning of April 17, 2022, and Pema and I are hiking from Jomsom to the hillside town of Phelag. Pema and I ascend a network of trails and incomplete road towards a hilltop cell tower, 400 meters above Phelag, and 800 meters above Jomsom. Near the top, Pema spots two foreign trekkers winding their way down an incomplete road. From above, its clear the road dead-ends on a cliffside, and the trekkers would likely have to backtrack almost all the way to the top of the hill. Pema whistles loudly to grab their attention, but the noise is lost in the wind. “This is why its good to go with a local” Pema tells me. I concur; aside from the exceedingly clear complete road running through Jomsom, my time in mustang would be characterized by disorientation without Pema’s guidance.

Indeed, the plight of the two trekkers make it clear that Mustang exists beyond its history, and possible future, as a trade and vehicle corridor. Numerous towns, villages, and communities exist on the periphery of the Beni-Jomsom-Korala sphere of economics and politics. Some towns, such as Phelag and Sangda, lie along alterior, domestic trade routes like the Jomsom-Chharka corridor.

Such towns hold varying degrees of connectedness to Mustang’s motorable corridor most holding their own motorable segments, yet routinely cut off via snow, landslide, avalanche, or even the seasonal rise and fall of the Kaligandaki River. Others are separated by class; in his article *Bordering Spaces, Practising Borders: Fences, Roads and Reorientations across a Nepal–China Borderland*, Professor Galen Murton of the University of Colorado Boulder asserts

> “Transportation requires cash, and for communities historically dependent on subsistence agriculture, highland pastoralism and regional trade, access to transport requires connections to capital, and those connections are largely predicated on the tourism industry and remittance economies...is unevenness of landscape and mobility as experienced in Mustang resonates strongly with Harvey and Knox’s analysis of the Interoceanic Highway in Peru, in that ‘far from creating a homogeneous and integrated territory, these early road construction projects had entrenched a sense of discontinuous space and differential capacities for moving around.’”

In summary, Murton identifies socioeconomic barriers to benefitting from road development. Quite simply, Murton claims many in Mustang’s herding and subsistence agriculture don’t have enough capital to afford vehicles or the access thereof, thoroughly curtailing any potential benefit from road construction.

The accounts of my interlocutors don’t align with Murton’s criticisms. While Phelag, Dangarjong, and Sangda collectively share one vehicle, newly constructed roads afford access to markets in Pokhara and Kathmandu, promoting an observed shift from substance agriculture to a for-profit model, often mediated by truck drivers who buy crops to resell in lower cities. Such drivers, or “dealers,” as many interviewees called them, often bring household and agricultural tools to sell to villagers. Sultan Subedi, a truck driver and vendor from Beni, allowed me to see the contents of his truck. Inside was cooking fuel, pressure cookers, pots, pans, rice, soda, and noodles. Satteleal Bikash, a construction foreman who lived in Phelag for ten years, tells me the increased availability of manufactured household items marks a notable improvement in the quality of life in the hillside village.

An interviewee in Dangarjong tells me, “now, money matters. In the past, even if you were rich, you couldn’t do anything with your money.” Indeed, access to industrially produced goods such as soda, noodles, cigarettes, and shoes appears to revitalize domestic trade networks. Phelag, previously reliant on subsistence agriculture, became a significant hub on the Jomsom-Chharka trade route due to its ability to sell such supplies in bulk. Were the road to extend through to Chharka, in Upper Dolpo Phelag and Sangda’s trade utility would likely become redundant, eliminating their growing roles as regional grocer hubs.

In conclusion, roads fulfill a multifaceted role in community change. While such avenues certainly afford broader market access for both vendors and consumers, they also hold the possibility of eliminating older methods of production, trade, transit, and community. As anticipation for the Korala border crossing’s official opening rises in light of China’s Zero Covid policy and the Sangda-Chharka road nears connection, Mustang and its neighbors in Upper Dolpo sit at an economic tipping point amidst the restoration of old avenues and roadbuilding along those which never faltered.
AVENUES OF FLOW

Phelag

Late March. My eyes fill with tears as they meet the himalayan wind. I’m bouncing around the open bed of a 4x4 Mahindra Thar jeep as it navigates an afternoon crossing of the Kaligandaki river. After basking in the day’s sunlight, the region’s snowpack melts rapidly, making the river highest in the afternoon, consequently when I was attempting to cross.

The driver exits the jeep and throws a stone into a river braid to gauge its depth. After some contemplation, he deems it safe to cross and drives forward into the water. The tires entirely submerge, and the jeep’s body becomes flush with the flowing glacial water. Revving the engine, the driver accelerates in an attempt to exit onto the opposite bank, but the tires spin hopelessly against the slick rocks below. For a moment, I worry that the bed, with sacks of aloo, bags of rice, and myself, will flood with the ice cold water. I briefly contemplate climbing onto the vehicle’s roof. But the driver shifts into reverse and backs onto the safe, dry land of the Kaligandaki’s east bank.

I resign to walking across the pedestrian suspension bridge to reach my destination, Mustang’s Phelag. Indeed, amidst Mustang’s positionally as a Sino-Nepali geopolitical focal, and the excitement surrounding the completion of the Beni-Jomsom-Korala motorable corridor, access to some of Mustang’s villages, such as Phelag, is predicated upon the daily and seasonal ebb and flow of the Kaligandaki river.

An excavator cuts the route for the new road, the pedestrian suspension bridge visible in the foreground.
The bridge shakes and sways in the wind which, on a daily basis, howls into Mustang through the gorge between Annapurna and Dhaulagiri. But, to my surprise, a jeep waits on the other side and offers to drive me the two miles uphill to Phelag, for a fee, of course.

I arrive in Phelag at 4:30 PM, when the sun cast rays of afternoon light over the jagged peaks of Saddache Himal, illuminating the fields of buckwheat, apples, and potatoes below. The mud homes, some concrete due to increasing rainfall, look east over Kagbeni and the Kaligandaki River. Two days later, Anjan Gurung, the owner of Phelag’s only jeep, details that most farmers in Phelag, and its neighboring village Dagarjong, switched to potatoes from a buckwheat dominant crop rotation with the advent of roads in the area:

“Before, there was no road, we wouldn’t harvest the potato. Now, we do because it is easy money. Because of the road, it can easily sell, so we grow potatoes.”

Gurung profited 100,000 “dollars” off of potatoes alone last year. Sattelal Bika, a construction foreman who moved to Phelag to work on the road project, corroborates both motivation and means for such a shift. He tells me when Phelag residents primarily
relied upon subsistence agriculture, growing potatoes in bulk was not nutritionally sustainable. However, with access to broader markets in Beni, Pokhara, and Kathmandu, farmers have an incentive to grow the in-demand potatoes. Gurung and Bikash both tell me that potatoes require far less effort to grow relative to buckwheat, especially on a commercial scale.

I ask Gurung if his jeep catalyzed the village’s noted agricultural shift from buckwheat to potatoes. Gurung tells me that beyond his own personal use, he only uses his jeep as a means of transportation, both for himself and other villagers. Gurung’s jeep is largely unavailable to Phelag’s villagers as a source of commercial transport of potatoes and crops. Rather, residents of Phelag and neighboring village Dagarjong rely on the transport mediation of “dealers” to facilitate transactions between the villages and larger markets in the south.

Indeed, dealers, such as Sultan Subedi, a truck driver from Beni, bring cooking fuel, furniture, food, and other household items to sell in Phelag, often purchasing potatoes to resell in Beni. Therefore, even though the majority of villagers don’t own or hold regular access to transport capable vehicles, Subedi and other dealers mediate both access to more profitable markets, and opportunities to purchase industrially manufactured household items, such as toilets, pressure cookers, and lightbulbs.

Sattelal Bikash, the construction foreman for the Phelag-Sangda road project, details a marked improvement in Phelag’s quality of living over the past decade, largely mediated by access to such goods and facilities.

“Ten years ago, most houses didn’t even have toilets. Now? Almost every home has one.” Indeed, interviewees from Dagarjong corroborate Bikash’s account. Largely, they say, access to “facilities”, such as electricity, lightbulbs, cooking fuel, chemical pesticides, and the internet mark a decided improvement in the ease of living.
Powerlines run alongside the road towards Phelag and Dagarjong. Hydropower projects in Mustang supply villages with electricity.

Yak meat hangs to dry next to a wifi router in Phelag. Internet connection is one of the newly available "facilities" that residents of Phelag and Dagarjong say mark an improvement in the quality of life.

With such a marked living improvement catalyzed by the road, I was left curious about the road to Chharka, incomplete and undulating up the hillside above Phelag. I ask Anjan Gurung and the SIT staff member accompanying me if it would be possible to drive to where the road ends, the border town of Sangda. The staff member tells me, “Sure, but it will take four hours, and nothing is really there. But we can go if you would like.”

For the sake of time, money, and academic efficiency, I declined what I assumed to be a four-hour drive to nowhere. But, there is a well-known saying about assumptions.
Sangda

Late April. After a brief return to Kathmandu, I’m back in Phelag, this time with intent to not only follow the road to Sangda but continue to Upper Dolpa’s Chharka village. My hope is to gain a more complete picture of the trade route and economically mediated community between Phelag, Sangda, and Chharka amidst a local and governmental push toward road development.

After delivering photo prints to interview subjects in Phelag and asking questions to Dagarjong residents, I find myself planning to travel to Sangda, not a simple task considering Dagarjong, Phelag, and Sangda all collectively have one jeep. Faced with a steep transport cost and hoping to acclimate for our trek to Dolpo, Pema and I decide to walk the twenty-six kilometers from Phelag to Sangda while our porter, Kancho Dai, hitches a ride with Gurung in his jeep.

The route on foot to Sangda is a mix of new road and old trail, the trail cutting up the steep hillside where the road, slaved to the needs of four-wheeled vehicles, slowly switchbacks up the mountain slopes. After twelve hours of walking, Pema and I reach Sangda.

Sangda sits on a steep hillside of a river valley. As the last road accessible point on the road to Dolpo, Sangda’s residents mediate significant trade between Upper Dolpo’s villages, namely Chharka, and Mustang.

I notice the silence, precisely, the absence of the yells, shouts, and chorus of voices particular to children. Pema tells me that most of Sangda’s school-age children were likely at the hostel and school in Lubrak. As we approach the guesthouse, I hear a yell in Tibetan, but unmistakable for the sound of a familiar greeting.

*Tashi delek* (བྲསྟི་བདེ་ལེགས) Pema yells to a long haired middle-aged man wearing traditional Himalayan clothes.

“He’s practically famous in Jomsom,” Pema tells me. “He’s a trader from Dolpo. He buys and sells all sorts of things in Lomanthang and Jomsom.” I ask, “do you think I could interview him?” the excitement clear in my voice.

Kunang Nyamgam was the first “trader” I encountered during my fieldwork, the truck drivers excluded. I was eager to learn from the facilitators of the trade network I had come to study.

Indeed, as the evening progressed, more travelers and traders arrived at the guesthouse, the only one in Sangda. Two women came around dinner time, having left Chharka that morning, completing a typically three day journey in just one. As the sun sets, a caravan of horses arrives, sacks of Chinese rice and horse feed strapped to their backs.
I spent the evening sitting around the guesthouse’s wood stove sipping butter tea (བོད་ཇ) with Pema, Kunang Nyamgam, the trader, the two women from Chharka, Kuncho Dhoma, the owner of the guesthouse, and her father. Dhoma later tells me that, having been open for only two weeks that season, the first time operating since the onset of the COVID pandemic, customer flow is pleasingly heavy, with ten to fifteen guests per night. She’s sure, however, that the number of guests will increase with the start of Yartsa Gunbu harvesting season in mid-May.

Right now, Dhoma tells me, most of the travers staying in her guesthouse are Dolpoans, buying food and supplies from the grocery shop she simultaneously runs. Unlike interviewees from Phealg, Dhoma travels to Beni or Jomsom four times per year to supply her guesthouse and grocery shop. The dealers whom mediate such profound economic change in Dagarjong and Phelag don’t service Sangda - the town’s twelve families don’t warrant the time and fuel cost of the drive, a dealer tells me. Thus, Dhoma and the five other grocers, comprising half of Sangda’s households, mediate trade for not only Sangda, but serve as merchants for Chharka’s traders. Some, such as Dhoma, own tractors, allowing them to make the journey to Jomsom or Beni without relying upon Anjang Gurung’s jeep and transport fees, or livestock. The tractors, unlike the jeep, are also able to cross the Kaligandaki at high water, granting Dhoma greater travel flexibility on her journey to Jomsom.

Indeed, Sangda’s positionally as a frontier town, both on the Kaligandaki road network, KRN, and on the Mustang-Dolpo border, allows grocers such as Dhoma to cash in Chharka’s demand for manufactured goods and bulk foodstuffs, especially with the COVID era closure of China’s border. Sangda’s grocers purchase goods accessible to those on motorable networks connected to Jomsom, Beni, Pokhara, Kathmandu, and the Terai. The village’s position as the first town encountered by Dolpoans from Chharka traveling to the KRN leave’s the village with a high demand for both lodging and vending, a demand the locals of Sangda lucratively fulfill.

**Chharka**

Reaching Chharka from Sangda involves a forty-three-kilometer trek typically undertaken over three days’ walk, crossing two five thousand meter la’s (ལ), and the boundary between Lower Mustang and Upper Dolpo. While crossing the stream, a tributary of the Kaligandaki, adjacent to Sangda marks the border between Mustang and Dolpo, the change becomes geologically notable after crossing the second la (ལ), and descending 700 meters onto Niwar La pass, an expansive high valley with sweeping plains curving into dominating peaks. There, the arid desert landscape and loose rock of Mustang transition to green pastures and snow-covered mountains.
The stone hut used as shelter at Yak Kharka

Shown from the road, the old walking trail to Chharka runs along the hillside opposite the river.
Arrival - The village of Chharka as seen from the guesthouse’s roof.

Soda and noodles for sale sit on a shelf inside a trader’s home. Chharka’s traders travel to Mustang to sell yaks, goats, and sheep, and return with soda, noodles, and cigarettes to sell within their village.
After ascending to nearly 6000 meters twice in a day, I’m delirious as I make the descent onto Niwar La pass, yet the transition is notable. I’m in Dolpo now. An hour’s walk leads to my campsite for the night, Yak Kharka, a yak pasture where most stay on their second night on the journey between Sangda and Chharka. Yak Kharka, rather than the name of a specific place, connotes a place where yak are kept. If one examines a trekking map, they will likely find multiple Yak Kharka’s dotting Mustang and Dolpo’s landscape. This “yak kharka” is one hour walk into Dolpo from Niwarla pass.

As the name implies, I arrive to a pasture full of yaks. The herder’s tent is in the distance, billowing smoke from a yak dung fire. A stone hut lies in the meadow’s center, providing travelers and herders with shelter from the wind, animals, and elements. Inside, there are instant noodle wrappers and cigarette cartons, yet a distinct lack of firewood especially compared to the previous night’s site on the other side of the la. I ask Pema where the firewood is, and he responds, “right here,” pointing to a pile of dried yak dung. “It’s smoky at first, but it can burn for a long time.”

From Yak Kharka, the road begins, ending the road free twenty kilometers on the route between Chharka and Sangda. Eager to not spend the day walking along the roadside, I enquire with the herders how much transport to Chharka would cost on the motorbike they use to access their various yak herds. After being offered transport for 10,000 rupees, I decide to walk.

The road to Chharka intertwines with the old walking trail, not unlike the road between Phelag and Sangda. After plunging into a gorge and crossing a river, my bare feet breaking through the thin ice into the frigid water below, the road and trail run on opposite sides of the river, barely visible lines of bare rock and sand weaving along the Himalayan hillsides. At 9 AM, I have a burst of excitement as I notice buildings on the far end of the valley- Chharka. I fantasize about effortlessly closing the distance at seventy kilometers an hour in a jeep. It would take Pema, Kancho Dai, and I another three hours to reach the village.

Tseyoung Wangmo, the owner of the guesthouse, offers me both hard cider and coca cola, much to my surprise. After the three-day journey to Chharka and firsthand witnessing the expense and scarcity of vehicles in Phelag and Sangda, I was surprised to see availability of soda, commercially produced alcohol, and cigarettes. I would come to learn that not only did Chharka and other Dolpoan villages have access, before covid, to such goods through the Chinese border, but their trade constitutes an essential aspect of Chharka’s economy.

Over the course of my fifteen interviews in Chharka proper, I became accustomed to the same answer when I inquired about the subject's sources of sustenance and income: trade, herding, and agriculture. Most subjects in Chharka, as opposed to Phelag, only farm for subsistence. Duckta Gurung of Sangda tells me high crop yields are uncommon in both Sangda and Chharka on account of their high elevations, 3700 and 4100 meters, respectively. The only interviewee in Chharka not engaging in trade as a for-profit endeavor were the three government-employed paramedics staffing the village’s healthpost.

Indeed, on the periphery of Nepal’s largest district, the decline of the salt trade mandated most in an already pastoral community take to herding and domestic trade for survival. Like many Himalayan regions, Dolpo existed as a corridor and network for the trans-Himalayan salt trade. Extensive sweeping plains, such as Tibet’s Changthang plateau, once ocean floor, hold great quantities of rocksalt. Dolpo’s proximity to such salt deposits led to a fluid northern border with Tibet for not only trade, but pastoralism and community as well. As with Mustang, China’s conquest of Tibet saw the border, and trade practices, locked down relative to its pre-1959 state. The emerging availability of cheap sea salt saw the mineral’s trading corridors shift through the south, thus ending the region’s once flourishing salt trade.

Compared to their Mustang counterparts the village of Chharka does not have a major road corridor and military base to supplement the local economy. The vacancy of a major trade corridor is not a novel absence for Chharka or Dolpo. According to anthropologist Kenneth M Bauer in “High Frontiers: Dolpo and the Changing World of Himalayan Pastoralists,” Dolpo’s geography and limited population hindered the cultivation of major trade relations or political influence over the Himalayan region. His claim merits being included in full:

“Dolpo was always too rugged, sparsely populated, and distant from the major passes over the Himalayas to become a significant political entity: it was instead a pawn in the power struggles of competing kingdoms like Lo and Jumla, which sought control of trade routes across the Himalayas. Thus, Dolpo was for centuries a relatively independent region in constant economic and cultural interaction with the greater rival political powers that surrounded it.”

Dolpo’s higher and more rugged geography relative to its Himalayan neighbors prevented its dominance or control over any major trade corridors. Despite all the restrictions posed by Dolpo’s highland geography, the region found an economic niche as pastoralists raising yaks, goats, sheep, and horses. Not unlike its northern neighbor, Tibet, Dolpo’s altitude and landscape necessitates such livestock pastoralism. The harsh climate limits food production and variety, thus making livestock pastoralism a necessity for nutrition.
As I learn from a herder in Chharka, Dolpo’s water supply is limited and inconsistent, with irrigation canals often running for kilometers to reach fields. The region receives heavy snowfall, and the sun’s rays are intense at higher elevation. The resource and climate limitations limit harvesting to once per year, and travel is risky and uncommon during the winter. Yaks, however, thrive in Dolpo’s high altitude conditions, their thick coats shielding from the sun’s rays and insulating during the harsh winters. The domesticated animals can carry over two hundred pounds and are often used to plow fields with the manual steel tipped plows common to Dolpo. The yaks provide wool, milk, butter, and for the willing herder, meat. The highland pastures non-conducive to large agricultural yield provide ample grass for the yaks to graze during the spring, summer, and fall; Dolpoan yaks only require supplemental feed during the winter, when there is deep snow on the ground.

Mustang, however, faces a decline in viable grazing lands for yak, especially with “the fence in the Himalayas,” barring pastoralists from their traditional grasslands north of the Tibetan border. Mustang’s residents still need wool, meat, milk, and butter, only recently available via the newly completed Beni-Jomsom-Korala road for a high price premium, a hole in the market Dolpo’s herders fill.

Goats and sheep also have their niche in the Dolpoan pastoral trade economy. Prior to the COVID-driven closure of the Chinese border, some herders supplemented their herds with Tibetan-raised goats and sheep—Tibetan yaks are prohibitively expensive for most of Dolpo’s herders. xxiv

Yaks from Chharka stand beneath apple trees in Phelag. Farmer Tung Karpo, 32, tells me he plans on raising the young yaks to adulthood, then selling them in Jomsom.
Sonam Kusum, a herder from Chharka, occasionally sells to the Chharka’s traders. Otherwise Kusum, along with others who raise and trade goats and sheep, wait for the annual Dashain festival, an annual Hindu festival involving the sacrifice of hundreds of thousands of buffaloes, goats, and sheep. During Dashain, Kusum tells me, she can charge up to double the standard price for goats and sheep. To cash in on the Dashain-driven demand, however, a herder must navigate accessing the markets of Nepal’s middle hills, no small task when Dashain in the Himalayan highlands. Each year, holding most of his goats and sheep for the occasion, Kusum sells her goats and sheep in Jomsom. Others, with time limitations, sell their goats and sheep to traders making the journey.

Most traders I speak with use their earnings to purchase household supplies, consumables, and groceries while in Phelag, Sangda, Jomsom, or Beni. Otherwise, accessing markets connected to industrial manufacturing involves a five-day walk to Dunai or trade across the northern border with Tibet, closed since 2020. Thus, the traders sell on two fronts: in Mustang, traders sell livestock and their milk, butter, wool, and meat, in Chharka, traders function as grocers, selling food, rice, dal, noodles, soda, alcohol, and cigarettes.

While sharing a cup of butter tea with Tashi Chembol, a Dolpoan horse trader, I notice a walkie talkie in the corner of the room, charging from a car battery. I ask if he bought the items while in Jomsom, and he laughs. In Chharka, as Chembol informs me, villagers purchase most of their electronics, cell phones, radios, batteries, and even motorbikes, at the annual border fair hosted inside Tibet. While the border remains closed due to COVID, most Chharkans I visit still power their homes off of Chinese car batteries. The walkie-talkie, Chembol tells me, was an idea inspired by Tibetan herders who use the radios to communicate between their home villages and the high pastures. Chharka adopted a similar practice seven years prior, in 2015, with herders communicating between the village and pastureland, or even between households, using the walkie-talkies. The devices, Chembol tells me, and as I observe, are of great convenience. During my time in Chharka, the government funded healthpost administered booster shots for the AstraZeneca COVID vaccination. As Chembol, Pema, and I sip our tea and discuss, the sound of motorbikes and horses as herders come from the pasturelands into the village is apparent.

Chembol recounts, “before, we would have to go to the pastures to inform the herders. Now, we use the walkie talkies.” I later learn that the intrahousehold precursor to the two-way radios was shouting from rooftops. Noticing the smartphone Chembol has charging next to the walkie-talkie, I inquire about the extent of cell service in Chharka, more specifically, why most use the walkie-talkie when many villagers have cell phones. As I learn, the cell tower in Chharka is limited in range, and seldom functional. The tower is powered by a battery, which lacks a backup, leaving the village without service on many, if not most, days. Regardless, the phone offers an opportunity to expand Chharka’s domestic trade network.

Prior to the advent of phones in Chharka, traders would often have to send advance parties to place and take orders with vendors in Sangda. With Chharka’s connection to the NTC phone network, however, traders are able to not only place orders and reserve spots at Sangda’s guesthouse, but receive orders for their livestock and derivative products.

Chharka’s emerging digital connection to the rest of Nepal, however, is quite new to the region. As a village five days from the district capital, many interlocutors claim abandonment by the Nepali government. Indeed, an examination of Chharka’s health and educational infrastructure don’t entirely refute their claims. Despite the vaccine rollout efforts by the local healthpost, the nearest hospital to Chharka is in Jomsom, four days away on foot, and in an entirely different district. While the local healthpost receives government funding, its imported workers often take extended holidays during the harsh winter season.

The impact of the region’s medical neglect is apparent. I hear from a couple who lost their six-year-old son to dysentery in 2018. A woman I share a cup of tea with tells me her husband died of lung cancer after receiving little to no treatment. She speculates that he would still be alive if he received treatment in a hospital. The brother of the trader who sells goats and sheep during Dashain, Sonam Kumsum, died from blood loss after being struck by a rockfall. In the absence of a hospital and the healthpost during the winter, Chharka residents rely upon Amchi Kunsang, the local Amchi, or practitioner of Tibetan Medicine. Otherwise, locals must walk or ride the four days to Jomsom or five days to Dunai to reach a hospital, a tall order for a sick or injured individual.

The sense of self-reliance and governmental abandonment expressed by interviewees persists in the educational context. With a complete absence of government funding, Chharka’s school relies entirely on the financial support of NGO Dolpo Tomorrow and foreign donors to house, feed, clothe, and educate its sixty students for ten months per year. The seven teachers and one cook, locals from Chharka, run the school, hostel, and kitchen while simultaneously sourcing donors, supplies, food, and uniforms. Teachers also must coordinate shipping supplies from Kathmandu to Chharka. Despite the seemingly endless responsibilities of teachers and lack of governmental support, the impact of the school is clear. Teacher and guesthouse owner Tseyang Wangmo notes a marked increase in Chharka’s literacy rates.

A teacher I interviewed complains that, while the government is absent in funding Chharka’s school, it demands compliance with a litany of permits, certificates, and regulations that must be renewed annually. Such regulation is a rarity in Chharka. Interviewed traders report little to no imposed taxes or regulations, and local businesses, while permit compliant, claim
there is absolutely no enforcement. Locals of both Chharka and Mustang would frequently remark that the steep permit fee I paid to enter Upper Dolpo for ten days would be “completely in vain,” as the absence of governmental presence would leave my permit unchecked. However, as Chharka becomes more connected to the Kaligandaki corridor and Dunai, the district capital, one could soundly assume the Himalayan village may soon leave the governmental periphery, both in terms of support and regulation.

**FRIENDS OVER THE LA**

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared the widespread proliferation of COVID-19 to be a pandemic. State-level responses to the emergence and spread of the respiratory infection varied, reflecting both the individual nation’s capacity for sweeping public health measures and the population’s degree of compliance. The lockdowns, restrictions, and border limitations particular to China’s “Zero Covid Policy” mark both a state's capability and willingness to limit movement, and therefore markets, in curtailing the spread of the Coronavirus.xxv

While China’s closed borders certainly hold pertinence to Nepal’s northern communities in Dolpo and Mustang, accustomed to purchasing cheap Chinese rice, electronics, and vehicles, Nepal’s COVID experience is marked by two near totalitarian “lockdowns,” restricting movement, business, and both public and private gatherings. Indeed, the economic ramifications of the lockdowns is clear. Hindered supply chains coupled with a decimated tourism industry left much of the country, and world, far short of typical income and normative food access. A rickshaw driver in Lumbini reports shifting to subsistence agriculture as the complete absence of customers coupled with the collapse of local supply chains left him and his family unable to access sufficient food via the market economy. In Chharka, residents had to seek out new sources of supplies and food as the Chinese border closed, diverting nearly all trade through the Sangda-Chharka route post lockdown in Nepal.

Indeed, the typical neoliberal political and social analysis of Covid and the requisite public health initiatives, such as lockdown and social distancing, regard society and its derivative networks and “the economy” as completely separate entities. It is particularly interesting that in American political discourse, economy and its function are relegated into a completely different entity than the social networks upon which it is clearly predicated.

Economic sociologist Mark Granovetter asserts that contrary to common abstraction in the neoclassical field of economics, economic relations are predicated upon social relationships and their requisite networks and don’t exist in “the market” as a demarcated entity.xxvi In his paper, “Economic Action and Social Structure: The Problem of Embeddedness,” Granovetter popularized this notion under “embeddedness,” initially coined by economist Karl Polanyi. This notion is well illustrated by the COVID pandemic, where restrictions upon social networks and function caused sharp market decline, which in turn led to further social and societal distress via hindered supply chains and increased unemployment. In summary, the abstract notion of “the economy” depends entirely on sociosocietal networks.

Excluding the seemingly all encompassing literal and social spread of COVID, the trade network between Chharka and Sangda provides an instance of the embedded notion of economics. The trade between the two communities not only functions as a market with item and currency exchange but community through seller loyalty, hospitality, and acquired familiarity as well. Through this section, I demonstrate that Granovetter’s notion of embeddedness is dialectically applicable with community mediated economy, and economy mediated community. I begin by discussing interaction and community driven by shared spaces along the trade route, such as guesthouses and campsites. I touch upon unspoken obligations of hospitality and reciprocity. I then discuss the development of familiarity and trust, and the subsequent development of credit systems between the two villages. I further elaborate upon such familiarity and trust through the phenomena of seller loyalty, and the conditions upon which it can be broken, namely cheaper and more convenient options. I conclude by discussing community prospects in the light of road development, and include insights from interlocutors that the trade mediated community between the villages will disappear with the advent of a motorable road connecting Chharka to the Kaligandaki corridor.

As I travel from Sangda to Chharka, it becomes clear the journey requires accommodation and shelter. The afternoon brings high wind, often lasting until dawn’s first light. The high passes and pastures the route traverses receive snow year round. The two nights spent in transit are cold, windy, and exposed. Thus, travelers, traders, and tourists rely upon the intermittent stone shelters along the route, as well as guesthouses and willing hosts in each village.

In total, there are four shelters distributed among three “campsites” one of which only sees routine use by tourists. The shelter locations are as follows: Ghaldan Ghuldun, Ihanhimar, Yak Kharka, and Molumn Sumna. On the typical three day journey traders take to reach Chharka from Sangda, the first night is spent at Ghaldan Ghuldun, a mountainside shelter less than five hours walk from Sangda. Ghaldan Ghuldun sits beneath a five thousand meter la, or pass, after which firewood becomes a scarce commodity on Dolpo’s high plains. Ghaldan Ghuldun, however, surrounded by brush, has ample firewood, with remnants of old campfires scarring the shelter and its surroundings.
On the second day, traders pass Ilanimar, a shelter between the two five thousand meter la’s along the route, sometimes using the col to have a meal while sheltered from the wind and snow. Traders take shelter the second night in Yak Kharka or Molumn Sumna, depending upon space and availability. The two shelters are less than a kilometer apart over flat ground. Given that the fields surrounding Yak Kharka are active yak pastures, the shelter is littered with yak dung on top of the typical horse droppings, giving travelers a suitable replacement for the absent firewood, but making Yak Kharka the less preferred of the two sites.

From Yak Kharka and Molumn Sumna, travelers reach Chharka in roughly six to eight hours, descending one thousand meters, from 5100 to 4100 respectively. Upon reaching Chharka, most return to their homes, being Dolpoans themselves, or stay in one of the village’s guesthouses. Chharka has two to three licensed guesthouses, yet other villagers host guests as part of the network of reciprocity of hospitality between Chharka and Sangda.

It is worth noting the skewed directionality of the travel flow. In most seasons, traders from Chharka travel to Sangda to purchase supplies, or Jomsom to sell livestock. Therefore, Sangda routinely hosts more travelers from Chharka than Chharka from Sangda. This dynamic, however, changes during the *Yartsa Gunbu*, or caterpillar fungus harvesting season in May and June, when individuals from Mustang and other regions in Nepal flock to Dolpo to collect the lucrative caterpillar fungus. Indeed, guesthouses in both Chharka and Sangda report being beyond capacity during the pre covid Yartsa Gunbu seasons.

The high volume of travel coupled with limited shelter and accommodation, both within and outside the Yartsa Gunbu harvesting season, necessitates that tourists, traders, travelers, and Yartsa’ prospectors alike share accommodations in both guesthouses and shelters. It is within these shared communal spaces that interaction and proximity critical to forming a community occur.

Old building materials lie beneath the shelter of Ghaldan Ghuldun. A 5170 meter pass enroute can be seen in the background. Typically, travelers & traders spend a night in the Ghaldan Ghuldun shelter before undertaking the pass the next day. On a busy night, the shelter, free of cost, will be shared by multiple groups of traders & travelers.
Tseyoung Wangmo, 32, cooks dinner for her guests while they work on a Sudoku puzzle. The guests are from multiple groups: a Dutch trekking group and their Sherpa guide, healthpost staff, traders, and my fieldwork team.
On our return from Chharka, Pema, Kancho Daï, and I share the Yak Kharka shelter with a group of traders, a small tourist trekking group, and four teachers traveling to Chharka to work at the NGO funded Chharka Bhot School. The yak herders tending to the herd grazing in Yak Kharka reside in a tent approximately one hundred meters from the stone shelter. In the open field, there is little shelter beside the small stone building, leaving the site exposed to the high wind. As a late afternoon storm rolls in, bringing gales and snow, the groups scramble to construct yak dung fires for warmth, and to boil water for tea.

Inside the small shelter, smoke-filled yet warm, the groups huddle around the fire, discussing the route, upcoming elections, and the Chharka Bhot School. Indeed, such fireside conversations mediate exchange of critical information as well. It was during a similar conversation in a crowded Sangda guesthouse that Pema, Kancho Dai, and I learned that the second pass on the route towards Chharka, the higher of the two, was covered by thick snow and ice. While safe for travel on foot, such conditions would pose substantial risk to horses, especially if carrying heavy loads.

Thus, the shared space of the shelter functions not only to shield occupants from the gales and snowstorms, but as a place of exchange for route and weather forecasts, as well as communication networks between Mustang and Dolpo, with intersecting travelers carrying messages and information to their destinations.

The singular guesthouse in Sangda fulfills a similar role. As the only guesthouse in the village, most travelers and traders spend at least one night in the guesthouse. Kancho Dhoma, a grocer and the owner of Sangda’s guesthouse, hosts eight to ten guests per night outside of the Yartsa Gunbu harvesting season. During the harvest, however, Dhoma hosts approximately thirty guests per night, sometimes sleeping outside to accommodate more travelers. After running the guesthouse for ten years, Dhoma is familiar with most guests, saying most are friends or relatives.

In light of the regular and routine hospitality integral to the region’s trade economy, Dhoma’s reverence amongst Chharka’s traders is understandable. During the COVID pandemic and Nepal’s lockdowns, travelers still journeyed to and through Sangda, dependent upon Mustang’s food and fuel, especially so after the closure of China’s borders. While Dhoma did not host guests, she routinely left food on the road for travelers, citing her belief that “no one should die of hunger.”

Indeed, with guesthouses and hospitality playing a critical role in sustaining trade for and between Sangda and Chharka, many traders and hosts develop a system of reciprocity in which Sangda and Chharka residents can stay in one another’s homes free of charge. Such familiarity and reciprocity also lends itself to the development of a credit system, in which buyers, largely from Chharka, can run tabs with grocers in Sangda.

“In business, trust is needed,” Dhoma explains. Indeed, such trust and familiarity extends to the relationships between Sangda’s grocers. Given extended transport times and high costs, most grocers, even those with tractors and motorbikes, cannot easily and regularly resupply from Jomsom or Beni whilst maintaining profits. The six grocers in Sangda hold an unspoken agreement in which they restock at cost from one another, especially if a given grocer lacks an item requested from an incoming order. Through this mechanism, grocers are able to field the entirety of their customers’ orders despite challenges in accessing their supply hubs in Beni and Jomsom.

Indeed, with consistent supply, reciprocity, and credit, many traders, such as Tashi Chembol, a goat and sheep trader from Chharka, remain loyal to one grocer in Sangda. Chembol reports that since China’s 1959 invasion of Tibet, his family trades with the same family from Sangda, an instance of a multi generation relationship of buyer-seller loyalty between the villages. Such sustained business and familiarity, as Chembol explains, leads to the development of trust, and thus the discussed systems of credit and reciprocity.

The vendor loyalty practiced by many of Chharka’s residents, however, is far from totalitarian. Rather than operating as a contract of hardline exclusivity, the practice of seller loyalty is largely predicted upon the conveniences, such as credit and reciprocity, mediated by long term relation and trust. Indeed, both vendors in Sangda and traders from Chharka view selecting a seller, whether in Sangda or not, on the basis of price, product quality & availability, and convenience as a perfectly acceptable practice. Many of Chharka’s residents plan on switching their food purchases from grocers in Sangda to Chinese and Tibetan traders when the border reopens. The border is only half a day away, and the entire journey can be made via motorbike, reducing cost and risk by eliminating the need for horses or load bearing livestock.

Traders in Chharka hope reaching Jomsom will be of similar convenience when the road is completed. Chembol, however, believes he’ll lose his horse selling business when the road is complete, as the convenience and low cost of motorbike transport will make horses expensive and redundant. Despite the threats posed to his livelihood, Chembol says “I have no regrets [about the road]. Horses are expensive, can die on the way, and take a long time.”
Horses coming from Dunai make their way down the final hill towards Chharka. The future of horses in Chharka is unknown, with some speculating the motorbike will soon be a suitable replacement, ands other believing a complete road is decades away.

Tseyoung Wangmo, Chharka’s science teacher, a guesthouse owner, and my host, believes horses will remain critical to Chharka’s traders and herders for “at least ten to twenty years,” citing the avalanches, landslides, floods, and snowpack that inhibit regular travel along roads. “The road is not sustainable for motorbikes.”

Despite disagreement on the long term viability of motorbikes and horses for Chharka’s trade economy, it remains clear that Chharka residents predicate their purchasing methods and decisions upon cost and convenience, a seemingly obvious statement, yet salient nonetheless in the context of longstanding community and trade relations with Sangda. Indeed, the success of Sangda’s grocers and guesthouses remains predicated upon necessity and convenience. Located far from neighboring Phelag and Jomsom, travelers from Chharka cannot access other villages in Mustang without adding multiple days to their journey, and are, at the very least, compelled to spend at least one night in Sangda’s guest house due to travel times and distances.

Such a cost-convenience predicate, however, spells the decline of Sangda’s grocers with the development of the road to Chharka. Kuncho Dhoma predicts that the completion of the Chharka-Sangda road would spell the end of both her guesthouse and grocery business, as traders from Chharka would pass straight through Sangda in favor of cheaper markets in Jomsom and Beni; a shift made possible by the speed and efficiency of motorbikes relative to their livestock counterparts. “Up until now, Sangda is a midpoint, buyers have to stop over.”

Chharka’s residents concur with Dhoma’s assessment. Upon road completion, interviewees in Chharka state they would choose Jomsom over Sangda to supply and sell on account of cheaper prices and greater product availability. However, most traders operate with the hope of a reopened Chinese border.

Kunang Nyamgam, the Dolpoan trader I met in Sangda’s guest house, says he prefers to buy groceries and goods from China due to its cheaper price. He cites the cost of butter, claiming markets supplied through Koral sell Chinese butter for 200 rupees per kilo, whereas Nepali butter sells for 600 rupees per kilo in Kathmandu. Tseyoung Wangmo corroborates Nyamgam’s perspective, saying “of course” she’ll supply with Chinese goods when available. Chembol concurs, planning to purchase Chinese rice until the road to Mustang is completed. An anonymous interlocutor hopes to supply from China indefinitely.

All interviewed traders tell me they would prefer to purchase supplies in Jomsom or Beni if the road is completed, but are unsure of its timeline. Nepal’s election saw many of the domestically foreign construction workers return to their home.
districts to cast their votes, putting a pause on the road’s progress. The route also lies in two districts, Mustang and Dolpo, meaning the funding, planning, and construction occurs on two fronts. Even locally informed residents in both Mustang and Dolpo are unsure of the road’s completion timeline because of their separation from the local politic in the other district. An interviewee in Dolpo has little faith in the government’s willingness and ability to complete such a project, citing a lack of support for other public services in Chharka, namely the school and health post. The interviewee suspects completing the road will take the volunteer efforts of locals independent of government support.

Such a suspicion is reminiscent of claims made by village leadership in Upper Mustang, referenced by geography professor Galen Murton in his article *Bordering Spaces, Practising Borders: Fences, Roads and Reorientations across a Nepal–China Borderland*. Murton’s recount is worth including in whole:

> For decades, residents and leaders from Mustang appealed to the Nepali government to build the district a road to better connect their communities with the rest of the country and facilitate improved access to commerce, education and health facilities. Controversy exists as to who actually constructed the road. Although many informants report that it was a grass-roots initiative, others say that financial support came from the Government of Nepal and/or international donors such as the Asian Development Bank, and even the People’s Republic of China. According to the district’s political leaders, it was in fact a local effort that financed and constructed the road (Murton 13).

Indeed, the motives behind petitions for a motorable road to Chharka are nearly identical to those of Upper Mustang: “improved access to commerce, education, and health facilities.” However, given motorable access to the commerce on the Chinese border, local willingness to volunteer for the road project is unclear. Additionally, Chharka’s available funds and manpower is far less than that of Lo Manthang. Nevertheless, improved access to commerce and markets, whether Chinese or Nepali, via the completion road networks, such as the Chharka-Sangda road, will likely shift Chharka’s trade commerce from Sangda to lower markets in Jomsom and Beni.

The relationships of economic convenience formed between Chharka and Sangda residents, coupled with their predicted dissolution upon the making available of more convenient means of trade, evidences trade predicated community, rather than community predicated trade. Indeed, the communal spaces of guesthouses and shelters which form the basis of familiarity, reciprocity, and trust, are shared not by choice, but by necessity. However, as transport networks improve, residents of primarily Chharka and Sangda move between villages with the change of seasons to escape the harsh winters of the higher elevations. Interviewees in Sangda and Phelag report moving from their village of origin, primarily Chharka or Snagda, to Phelag for the winter. Indeed, the road connected Phelag has routine electricity, cell service, running water, concrete buildings, and gas powered stove, all contributing to what interviewees note as a marked higher quality of living in the Mustangi village compared to its frontier and Dolpoan counterparts. As such Phelag, especially in the winter, exists as a non-trade mediated communal space, with Dolpoans, Sangda residents, and Phelag residents co-living in the village. Sonam Wongi, a farmer from Dagarjong, tells me the completion of the road will make visiting family and friends in Dolpo easier. Thus, community and familiarity will likely persist beyond the completion of the Sangda-Chharka road.

Despite trends of outmigration and the anticipated disappearance of trade with Chharka, interviewees such as Kuncho Dhma plan on remaining in Sangda, only traveling to Phelag or Jomsom for the winter. Despite her seasonal residence, Dhma still considers herself to be from Sangda, only traveling to Jomsom during the winter for the welfare of her son. Otherwise, Dhma says she would remain in Sangda or Ghok, Sangda’s winter settlement, year round. I ask Dhma if she would ever consider leaving Sangda for business opportunities or better facilities.

> “I will stay in Sangda until the day I die.”
HEALING THE HIGHLAND

I sit in Sonam Kusum’s home, sipping butter tea (བོད་ཇ) around a wood fire. Kusum is a trader, selling primarily yaks and goats to customers in Mustang and Nepal’s middle hills. Since the death of her husband, Kusum made her living through livestock trade while maintaining her household. Kusum’s husband died from lung cancer six years prior and received no hospitalized treatment. Kusum speculates that had her husband been able to access a hospital, he would still be alive.

Indeed, Dolpo’s nearest hospital, in Dunai, is a five-day walk from Chharka, crossing multiple 5000 meter la’s (ལ) which receive snow year round. The other, closer, hospital is in Jomsom, a three to four-day walk, yet likely more for a patient seeking hospital treatment. Thus, most locals seeking higher treatment than Chharka’s Amchi or intermittently staffed health post make the journey to Jomsom on foot, horseback, or, if they can afford the 700,000 rupee charge, by helicopter.

Kusum and other Dolpoan interviewees lament the absence of a hospital in Chharka. An interviewee attributes the lack of a hospital to the government’s abandonment of Chharka and other Dolpoan villages, citing the incomplete road and the independently funded school. Indeed, Chharka’s healthpost is a recent development, only founded within the last decade. Rokya Rokya, a paramedic and the Substitute in Charge of Chharka’s healthpost, has worked at the post for four years. Indeed, Rokya concurs government support for Chharka’s medical facilities is insufficient. Rokya details that each municipality receives equal funding independent of operating cost and need. Given the high transport costs of supplying Chharka, especially with medical equipment and medicine not available from Sangda’s grocers, the healthpost operates under a much tighter budget than its counterparts in other municipalities where supplies come easily and, relative to Chharka, cheaply. Despite the high operational costs, the healthpost does not charge its patients, instead accepting voluntary donations from locals, former patients, and travelers. Rokya tells me there’s “not enough [funding], but we’re surviving.”

Locals, however, give an explicit accusation as to why the healthpost can “survive” despite insufficient funding and high operating costs; an interviewee says the healthpost is only open for four to six months per year, with staff taking extended holidays during the winter. Another interviewee tells me the healthpost is not open year round; but gives a more conservative estimate/accusation of the time taken on holiday – two months. The three interviewed healthpost staff declined to comment on such allegations or provide an estimate of the healthpost’s nonoperational months.

Indeed, the healthpost staff, four in total, lament the region’s harsh winters, lack of “facilities,” and linguistic differences between their Nepali and the Dolpoan’s Tibetic language. Bikas hopes the development of the road will bring facilities such as consistent cell service, electricity, and cheaper supplies, improving Chharka’s living conditions and the healthpost’s operational hurdles. Both Bikas and Chharka residents tell me the completion of the road would have clear ramifications for Chharka’s healthpost: cheaper supplies with greater availability, easier evacuation to centers of higher care, and perhaps even trained doctors willing to work in Chharka, given the improved living conditions many assume to be synonymous to a completed road.

Hopes for trained doctors coming with the road aren’t unfounded. In Jomsom, Manda Patna, a civil engineer with the Beni-Jomsom-Korala project, tells me Jomsom’s hospital largely owes its operation to the road. With connectivity to supply hubs in Beni, Pokhara, and Kathmandu, Patna asserts the quality of living in Jomsom has markedly improved. Indeed, the presence of concrete buildings, solar water heaters, consistent electricity, and multi-network cell service evidences such a shift. With improved facilities, trained doctors, nurses, and pharmacists were more willing to work in Jomsom. Both the healthpost staff and Chharka residents hope that a complete Sangda-Chharka road could bring about similar phenomena. Some, such as Sonam Kusum, hope the road development would bring not only trained health workers, cheaper supplies, and easier medical extraction, but the construction of a hospital.

Another source of medical care in Chharka, operating long before the government-funded healthpost, is Amchi, the title for a healer practicing Tibetan medicine, Kunsang. Amchi Kunsang’s fiscal modus operandi is not unlike that of the healthpost. Amchi Kunsang does not charge the patients. While I was in the healer’s home, a patient seeking treatment attempted to hand Amchi Kunsang cash, which he immediately refused to take. Instead, Amchi Kunsang receives a mix of government funding and voluntary donations.

Showing me a book of herbs and their applications, Amchi Kunsang tells me a complete road would allow him to supply his practice more efficiently both through accessing further and higher plants via motorbike and having a direct motorable route to Pokhara and Kathmandu, where Amchi Kunsang purchases supplies unavailable in Chharka. In a similar manner to Chharka’s traders, Amchi Kunsang purchases his nonmedicinal supplies, namely groceries, in Sangda. As a longtime Chharka resident, having run his Chharka practice for twenty years, Amchi Kunsang stands to feel the road’s impact outside of his practice as well. Amchi Kunsang names cheaper, more widely available groceries as a notable befit to the supposed eventual completion of the Sangda-Chharka road.

The road, however, does have its drawbacks for the region’s medical practices. Kunsang reports being the busiest in the spring. With snow melting from high passes, traders begin their travel after a winter in the village, tending to livestock in lower, a
relative term in Chharka, pastures. Additionally, the influx of Yartsa Gunbu prospectors each spring sees a significant increase in the region’s population and thus medical needs. Interviewed Chharka residents speculate the quick transport mediated by the road would bring even more significant quantities of prospectors seeking the caterpillar fungus. With resources limited by funds, workers, and supplies, the healthpost and Amchi could face more straining patient loads with a road-driven influx each spring.

Despite such speculation, both residents and medical practitioners remain optimistic about the impact a road would have on Chharka’s medical facilities, especially the capacity for evacuation to hospitals in Pokhara and Kathmandu. With the incomplete road, critically ill or injured patients often depend upon a rescue helicopter to bring them to higher care centers. The associated seven lakh, 700,000, rupee charge remains prohibitively expensive for the vast majority of Chharka’s residents. Thus, a heli evac often relies upon donated funds, but more frequently, sponsorship by the Municipality Chief.

With the Municipality Chief’s candidacy in Nepal’s elections on May 13, 2022, the chief allegedly hired a rescue helicopter for a villager with blood cancer to curry favor with the region’s voters. During my five days in Chharka, the helicopter is a frequent topic of conversation. Interviewees tell me the aircraft is sure to come in the morning of my second day in Chharka. When the helicopter failed to arrive each morning, certainty and hope regarding its incoming arrival increased. When I left Chharka after five days, the helicopter had yet to come. On my day of departure, Tseyoung Wangmo, my host, warned me to be careful as the noise from the incoming helicopter would likely scare the horse I was riding. My first hours on horseback were filled with trepidation. As an inexperienced horseback rider, I was terrified that the horse would buck me off upon the helicopter's passing, throwing me into the river below. However, as I rode and the day wore on, it became clear; the helicopter was not coming.

Three of Chharka’s four healthpost staff pose for a portrait on the roof of the guesthouse. The Nepali speaking healthpost staff say their linguistic differences between themselves and the villagers, who speak Dolpoan, a Tibetic language, pose significant challenges in administering care.
Amchi Kunsang flips through a book containing Himalayan plants and their medicinal uses. With emerging access to roads via his Chinese manufactured motorbike, Amchi Kunsang says vehicle use allows him to access further and higher plants more quickly.

Framed by his motorcycle helmet, Amchi Kunsang gathers medicine for a patient.
Amchi Kunsang evaluates a patient. Sowa Rigpa, the system of Tibetan medicine, involves immense training for Amchis to be precisely attuned to their patient's bodies.
A jeep sits by a braid of the Kaligandaki River as the driver judges its depth.

The dominating landscape of Lower Mustang
Afternoon light casts rays upon the fields separating Phelag from neighboring Dagarjong. Recently connected by road to markets in Pokhara and Beni, farmers of both villages switched to a potato dominant crop rotation, citing greater demand and lower production effort relative to the previously grown Buckwheat.

Women from Phelag ride in the back of Anjan Gurung’s Jomsom bound jeep. As the only jeep in Phelag, Dagarjong, and Sangda, many villager’s depend on Gurung’s vehicle for personal transport.
An excavator cuts a new road near a suspension bridge across the Kaligandaki river.
Tung Karpo, 32, a farmer from Phelag, poses in his fields. Karpo says that recently increased rainfall is worrisome for apple and buckwheat production. Karpo, and other interviewees in Mustang, blame the increasing rainfall on vehicle traffic brought by the road.

Looking out over the Kaligandaki valley from Phelag.
Sultan Subedi’s, a salesman and truck driver from Beni, sits in Phelag. Subedi sells cooking fuel, household goods, and agricultural equipment to villagers in Mustang.
Villagers negotiate for lower prices, complaining about the increased cost of fuel in past months. Subedi cites inflated gasoline, and therefore transfer costs, driven by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, as reason for higher prices.
Anjan Gurung sits in the bed of his jeep as it descends from Phelag. Gurung is the owner of Phelag’s only jeep.
Lights from Phelag glow amidst the darkness of the Himalayan night. The night sky above evidences a lack of light pollution. Electricity is an example of "facilities" made recently accessible to villagers in Phelag.

A Chorten silhouetted against Mustang’s vast desert landscape.
The road winds up towards Phelag. Nilgiri Himal, a subpeak of Annapurna Massif, is seen in the background.

The hillside village of Sangda.
Goat pens near terraced fields across the valley from Sangda.

End of the line. The road from Sangda winds up a hillside. The top of the hill is the road’s endpoint. Chharka lies over the mountains visible in the background.
Sangda: A trader from Chharka brings his horses straw as the sun sets.
THE JOURNEY EAST
From Chharka to Sangda

Day 1-Chharka to Yak Khark
Day 2 - Yak Kharka to Ghaldan Ghuldun, Snow and High Passes
Taking refuge in a stone shelter between two 5000 meter passes.
The long, steep descent towards Ghaldan Ghulden from 5700 meters.
Day 3 - Ghyaltan Ghulden to Sangda, Arrival In Mustang
CONCLUSION – TO DRAW A LINE

“These roads are ruining trekking.” A Dutch tourist I meet in Chharka complains development ruins her sense of adventure in the Himalayan highland. I struggle to hide my anger. While roads may present vectors for climate change, pollution, and the collapse of community, they offer new forms of business, healthcare, education, and connection to the rest of Nepal.

Indeed, over my time in Mustang and Dolpo, I learn the story of new roads is quite old, although through different facets. As seen through the past salt trade, and current route from Chharka to Sangda, trade and community persist, regardless of vehicles or pavement. Shifting border dynamics and community needs continuously define and redefine systems of connection and transport. In short, the only novel aspect about new roads is the pavement and vehicle. The story of trade, connection, and trans district/national community is the story of Upper Dolpo and Mustang.

When I first walked the route to Chharka, I expected to find a stagnant route vitalized by the prospect of roads. My findings indicate that such an assumption is anything but close to reality. In summary, Phelag’s newfound connection to the Kaligandaki road networks affords access to lower markets and industrially manufactured goods. To connect to markets is to make “money matter,” as an interviewee in Dagarjong explains.

Chharka and Sangda have a longstanding trade relationship. Chharka supplies Mustang with livestock, primarily yaks, goats, and sheep; Sangda sells noodles, soda, cigarettes, and miscellaneous groceries to traders, who return to Chharka to sell such products. The limited accommodations enroute promote shared spaces and cooperation, which in turn leads to trust, systems of credit, unspoken reciprocity, and seller loyalty. However, as road development continues, the prospect of access to Beni and Pokhara lead residents of both Chharka and Sangda to believe their trade relationship will soon conclude in favor of more lucrative endeavors for the Dolpoan herders. Finally, the emergence of roads and new forms of connection allows improved access to medical facilities. While no known plans exist, residents of Chharka hope a complete road would lead to the construction of a hospital.
APPENDIX

Methodology

Interview, observation, informal conversation with interlocutors, time enroute, and photography of willing participants were all critical to the completion of this project. This independent study was conducted over two segments. The first, a brief excursion to Phelag in March 2022, granted background and understanding necessary to launch a longer expedition. The second, in April and May 2022, was split between Lower Mustang and Upper Dolpa. Time spent on trail between Sangda and Chharka was especially critical to documenting and understanding the evolving corridor of domestic trade. On the three day journey from Chharka back to Sangda, I accompanied a group of traders on their mission to resupply Tseyoung Wangmo’s guesthouse. Interviews were primarily conducted in Tibetan, with the translation aid of Pema Korchung. Generally, I asked interviewees about the method of their livelihoods, and after let conversation take its course.

Suggestions for further research

As regions experiencing profound change, Mustang and Upper Dolpo are excellent locations for research. In Mustang, the popularization of mobile gaming and social media creates new forms of community and information sharing, particularly among youth. The mobile game PUBG, Player Unknown’s Battlegrounds, is particularly popular. Lower Mustang holds an annual PUBG tournaments, which would be beyond fascinating to document.

As Mustang receives increasing rainfall, agricultural and architectural techniques are changing to accomate for precipitation in the Himalayan rain shadow. Research on responses to climate change would undoubtely be fruitful.

7061 meter Nilgiri Himal stands stall over Jomsom. While wikipedia alleges multiple past ascents, most interviewees claim the peak has never been summited. The role of high peaks in locational identity would indeed be interesting.

In Chharka, many use Chinese manufactured motorbikes and electronics in day-to-day life, with most interviewees expressing a preference for trade with their northern neighbors over markets in Nepal. Documenting the Dolpoan relationship, both economic and political, with China and Tibet would undoubtably be salient, especially as the border dividing the two seemingly perpetually opens and closes.
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