



Himalayan border citizens: Sovereignty and mobility in the Nepal–Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) of China border zone



Sara B. Shneiderman

Department of Anthropology, Yale University, 10 Sachem Street, Room 126, New Haven, CT 06511, USA

ABSTRACT

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For over half a century, a border zone mandated by bilateral treaty has existed along the full length of the international border between Nepal and China's Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR). Since 2002, people classified as "border inhabitants" who live within 30 km of the border on both sides have been issued "border citizen cards" which allow them to cross the border without a passport or a visa, and travel up to 30 km on the other side. This article explores historical and contemporary experiences of life in the Nepal–TAR border zone for such border citizens. Their state-sanctioned cross-border mobility complicates existing work on Tibetan refugee citizenship, and expands previous models for understanding ethno-political identities and sovereignty in the Himalayan region. The legally recognized category of border citizenship between Nepal and China's TAR provides a compelling example of how states may create alternative categories of citizenship in response to practices from below, while further shaping such practices through regimes of differentiated citizenship. I argue that this form of border citizenship emerges out of non-postcolonial trajectories of state formation in the Himalayan region, which offer important contrasts with other parts of South Asia.

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Introduction

"We did not know what a border was or where it should be. We could not understand the language of the Chinese officials. They made us walk and walk and we just stopped when we got tired. That is where the border is now."

Karma Tenzin, elderly resident of the Sino–Nepali border town of Dram, as stated in an interview with the author in 2005

Karma Tenzin's recollection of the 1960–1961 border demarcation process evokes the complexities and contingencies of lived experience in the Himalayan border zone that runs the length of the 1400 km long international border between Nepal and what is now China's Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR). Since 1956—three years before the Dalai Lama's flight from the Tibetan capital of Lhasa in 1959—this border zone has been defined by treaty as a special territorial entity that exceeds the sovereignty of either Nepal or China alone.¹ Most recently renewed in 2002, the bilateral agreement between China and Nepal creates a border zone that includes portions of both countries' territory, extending between 20 miles and 30 km on each side of the border in various iterations

of the treaty (Fig. 1). In this zone, people whom the treaties term "border inhabitants" are granted special rights. Since 2002, people living within 30 km of the border on both sides have been issued identity documents known as "border citizen cards", which accord the right to cross the border without a passport or visa, and travel up to 30 km on the other side.

This article builds upon Thomas Wilson and Hastings Donnan's call for an empirically rich "anthropology of borders" (1998), as well as recent work in political geography which advocates a shift from "border narratives" (Newman, 2006) to "boundary biographies" (Megoran, 2012) as a means of regrounding the burgeoning interdisciplinary field of border studies in not only the discourses, but the individual and institutional practices, of "social bordering" (Sidaway, 2011). Such approaches illuminate borderlands as a set of "social processes" (Zartman, 2010: p. 2) that are co-constituted by states and citizens, nuancing our understandings of how sovereign power and agency (Jones, 2012) are produced through the everyday processes of state formation (Eilenberg, 2012: p. 4) at international borders. I join these scholarly trajectories by exploring ethnographically how individuals like Karma Tenzin engage with multiple states in an agentic process of negotiation to co-produce the category of border citizenship. Building upon scholarship that details the affective impact of identity document regimes elsewhere in the world (Bakewell, 2007; Caplan & Torpey, 2001; Gordillo, 2006), I suggest that the 2002 introduction of border citizen

E-mail address: sara.shneiderman@yale.edu.



Fig. 1. Map of the Nepal–Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) of China border zone and surrounding areas.

cards along the Nepal–TAR border demonstrates on the one hand an assertion of sovereignty by both China and Nepal through the regulation of mobility across their shared border, but on the other hand, a tacit acknowledgment by both states that sovereignty is always constrained by the actions of citizens themselves in the border zone. Border citizenship cards work at once to validate the lived reality of border citizenship, and bring it within the purview of state regulation, in the process creating new definitions of citizenship and sovereignty for all involved.

Although acting from a geographical location peripheral to any state center, the Himalayan border citizens under consideration here challenge the assertion that “border citizens” are “people whose rights of belonging [are] in question, leaving them on the margins of the national territory” (Meeks, 2007: p. 11). Instead, the legally recognized category of border citizenship for those resident within 30 km of the Nepal–TAR border provides a compelling example of how states may act to create alternative categories of citizenship that recognize and regularize “blurred membership” (Sadiq, 2009) as a natural state of affairs, rather than always erecting exclusionary borders that define the boundaries of legitimate citizenship as allegiance to a single state. I argue that this particular form of border citizenship emerges out of the crucible of what Mary Des Chene has called “non-postcolonial” (2007) state formation in the Himalaya, a context which offers many important contrasts with the better-known processes of postcolonial state formation—and their attendant regimes of citizenship—elsewhere in South Asia.

The case presented here might be treated as an exception, as it falls outside the purview of the postcolonial partition histories that have provided a key framework for scholarship on South Asian borders (Chatterji, 2007; Zamindar, 2007). Building upon recent ethnographic work which attests to the incomplete nature of

sovereignty in many corners of South Asia (Cons, 2013; Ghosh, 2011; Jones, 2012; Robinson, 2013), I contend instead that close attention to Himalayan border zones compels a reconceptualization of “South Asia” itself, by situating the production of stateness and regionality not only vis-à-vis engagement with European colonialism over time, but also in relation to other imperial powers such as China, and in the dynamics between polities that remained independent throughout the colonial era, such as Nepal, Tibet, Bhutan and Sikkim. This is not to suggest that these Himalayan states remained unaffected by British colonial rule (see Anand, 2009; Michael, 2012 for arguments to the contrary), but rather that their borders, and attendant citizenship regimes, were produced not in the postcolonial moment of rupture at partition, but rather through long-standing processes of negotiation between mobility, territoriality, and sovereignty (Ludden, 2003). Attending to the historical trajectories and contemporary experiences of life in such Himalayan border zones, then, refigures received notions of how states and citizens are constituted in South Asia, there by expanding the boundaries of “South Asia” itself. This shift in perspective takes up the recent call to rethink area studies that has emerged at the borders between South and Southeast Asian scholarship, resulting in propositions for new units of analysis such as “Zomia” (Scott, 2009; Van Schendel, 2002), a concept centered around precisely the kinds of high altitude border zones which I discuss here.

The arguments presented here therefore contribute to broader social scientific debates over the nature of borders by bringing concerns about the mechanics of citizenship, the production of sovereignty, and the construction of regionality into conversation with each other in a manner that illuminates the nature of the state itself. By focusing on a state-legitimated category of cross-border citizenship, I challenge the assertion that it is primarily “during

times of crisis” that “the very geography of the state expands” (Mountz, 2010: p. xxxi). Rather, I show how from the perspective of the Nepal–TAR border zone, the expanding and contracting of the state is part of everyday lived experience in a manner that encourages economic, religious, and political mobility. Such regularized cross-border mobility also complicates the notion that Tibetans crossing the Chinese border necessarily seek to claim “refugee citizenship” (McConnell, 2011). The ethnographic material presented here articulates the category of “border citizen” as an alternative mode of belonging for some Tibetan citizens of China, as well as some citizens of Nepal, whose shared positionality as residents of the border zone enables a different set of opportunities than those experienced by their counterparts residing elsewhere in either country. This demonstrates well how “the same boundary can rematerialize and dematerialize in different spaces in different ways at the same time” (Megoran, 2012: p. 477), and further how the same boundary may appear as a site of closure and one of opportunity for different citizens at the same time. In so doing, the ethnography presented here expands emerging bodies of literature on both transnational Tibetan identities (Hess, 2009; McConnell, 2011; McGranahan, 2010; Yeh, 2007), and Nepali national and ethnic identities (Gellner, Pfaff-Czarnecka, & Whelpton, 1997; Lawoti & Hangen, 2012), suggesting how we might develop modes of scholarly border citizenship between the sometimes surprisingly distinct area studies communities of Tibetan Studies and Nepal Studies.

Geopolitical contexts

In December 2011, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao canceled a planned trip to the Nepali capital of Kathmandu. Sending national and regional media into a flurry of speculation, this (non) event highlighted both the strategic importance of Nepal–China relations from a geopolitical perspective, and the impact of China’s actions on the Nepali national psyche. Various Nepali readers commented on media coverage of the debacle with despair, stating that the cancellation was “sad news for Nepal” because the Chinese leader’s “visit could create an environment of trust and friendship in South Asia” (eKantipur, 2011). Just a few months earlier, in September 2011, Nepal had found itself in a diplomatic quagmire when China demanded the repatriation of 21 Tibetan refugees who had made their way across the Himalayas into the far-Western Nepali district of Bajura. Instead, yielding to international pressure, the Nepali government handed the refugees over to the UN human rights office in Kathmandu, who facilitated their passage to India. Many observers interpreted the cancellation of Wen’s December 2011 visit as an indication of Chinese displeasure over this incident, and related “security concerns” over Nepal’s potential inability to curb Tibetan protests during the Chinese state visit (Upadhyay, 2011). Indian commentators gloated over China’s snub of Nepal, while raising long-term concerns over the apparent growth of Chinese influence in Nepal through a series of recent bilateral trade and development agreements. At the same time, a US congressman threatened to cut off all US aid to Nepal over the country’s treatment of Tibetan refugees (AFP, 2011), a position supported by celebrity critics (Krakauer, 2011).

These events demonstrate that political relations between Nepal and China, and more specifically the management of mobility across the two countries’ Himalayan borders, play a powerful role in constituting contemporary imaginaries of the Nepali nation-state and its geopolitical importance. This has been the case for Nepalis themselves, as well as outside observers, at least since the first king of the modern nation-state, Prithvi Narayan Shah, described his country as a “yam between two boulders” in the late 18th century. Richard Burghart (1984) convincingly argued that

Nepali national identity was constructed in large part vis-à-vis the Indian other, but much less has been said about the geopolitical and historical impact of Nepal’s relationships with its northern neighbor. Some scholars have gone so far as to assert that, “It is impossible to understand how Nepalis view themselves, unless one first realizes that their self-image has nothing to do with Tibet, not even as a point of contrast. Tibet, for most Nepalis, is a faraway country of which they know nothing” (Gellner, 2003: p. 5). To the contrary, I suggest that despite the relatively small number of Nepal’s population who are technically classified as border citizens living within 30 km of the border with China’s TAR, their very existence, and the fact that the border zone itself constitutes approximately one quarter of Nepal’s geographical landmass, possesses significance disproportionate to its demographic weight.

Conversely, although struggles over sovereignty between China and historical Tibet occupy a prominent place in both scholarly and political debates (see Chang, 2011 for a recent summary), we have limited insight into how state-making in both Nepal and China has been affected by the two countries’ border negotiations. The existing material on the political and legal dimensions of this particular border post-1959 emerges largely from the domains of security analysis and international relations (Adhikari, 2010; Rose, 1971; Shrestha, 2003; Upadhyay, 2012). There is little understanding of how life in the border zone itself articulates with diplomatic assertions of sovereignty, or how mobility in and out of Tibetan regions may be understood beyond the tropes of exile and escape. We may also ask how such cross-border mobility sits within a broader regional framework that considers Indian assertions of sovereignty vis-à-vis both China and Nepal. Indeed, India and Nepal maintain a treaty-mandated open border, which, coupled with the border citizen policy at the Sino–Nepali border, enables access to much broader swathes of South Asia for border citizens originating in China than the officially recognized 30 km into Nepal’s territory. These realities provoke important questions about the comparative nature of borders and citizens across South Asia, to which I can only offer partial, locally-situated answers here.

An ethnographic exploration of daily lives in this border zone provides an alternative standpoint from which to interpret the historical and contemporary significance of Nepal’s relationships with Tibet and China, revealing the limits of a postcolonial vision of South Asian boundaries that locates India at the normative center, and refiguring Nepal’s place within such regional discourses. Toward that end, I describe how individuals possessing a complex range of ethnic and national identities navigate what is for them a real, but permeable, border, by claiming the shared identity of border citizen. These details of everyday life in the Nepal–TAR border zone complicate its image as a militarized site where Tibetan aspirations for refugee citizenship hang in the balance, as in the case of the 21 Tibetans described in the narrative above. My intention is not to delegitimize this narrative, but rather to suggest that is only one of several possible modes in which self-identified Tibetans experience the border. Other narratives, like those presented here, constitute the border as a site of agency in economic, political, cultural, and religious terms. In so doing, their narrators come to inhabit the category of border citizen, whose very presence compels the two states in question to formally recognize their overlapping sovereignty in the border zone.

Ethnographic contexts

My discussion is based upon ongoing ethnographic engagement in several border districts of Nepal (especially Mustang, Dolakha and Sindhupalchok) that began in 1994, and a more discrete period of research in the TAR (Shigatse Prefecture, Nyalam County) conducted in 2005 (under the auspices of the Tibetan Academy of

Social Sciences in collaboration with co-researcher Pema Lhamo). The material presented here emerges from the empirical situation I encountered at that time. Dynamics in the border zone may well have changed since then, in relation to political transformations in both Nepal and China. In Nepal, these include the ongoing state restructuring process, which began with the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2006, continued through the Maoist victory in the 2008 Constituent Assembly elections, and remains as yet unfinished. China asserted stricter controls on movement in the TAR and other Tibetan regions in the lead up to, and wake of, the 2008 Beijing Olympics. More recently, there has been a security crack-down in response to the spate of Tibetan self-immolations in 2009–2012 (see Buffetrille & Robin, 2012; McGranahan & Litzinger, 2012 for scholarly reflections on these political dynamics). The description here may therefore stand as a “period piece” in the recent history of the Nepal–TAR border zone, but as such offers insights into its larger trajectory over time.

In the TAR, I conducted research in two towns, each of which has three names, in Tibetan, Nepali and Chinese respectively: Dram/Khasa/Zhangmu and Nyalam/Kuti/Tshongdu. All of these names are in current use by some contingent of the population, and many narratives I recorded entailed regular code-switching between at least two, if not three of these place names, as well as between the languages with which they were associated. This multivocality intimates the ways in which the border zone is produced through linguistic and cultural practice. In this article, I use the Tibetan place names, “Dram” and “Nyalam”, which are perhaps the most widely recognized by speakers of all of the languages in question.

The Friendship Bridge across the Bhote Kosi river marks the actual border crossing between Nepal and the TAR. Below it are the Nepali border towns of Tatopani and Kodari in the district of Sindhupalchok. Above the bridge, travelers encounter 8 km of road that traverses steep, hairpin turns before arriving in Dram, the first (or last, depending upon one’s perspective) roadside town inside China. Nyalam lies 30 km further north, and was once the regional seat of power, as well as the primary trading center.

The contemporary town of Dram sprawls along approximately 4 km of road, which are all now squarely inside China (Fig. 2). But before the border was officially delineated by the 1961 Nepal–China Boundary Treaty (Adhikari, 2010: Appendix 11) the commonly understood crossing point between the polities of Nepal and Tibet fell somewhere above the current settlement, which was only developed in the 1950s.

Although the border zone runs along the full length of the Nepal–TAR boundary from east to west, the Friendship Bridge remains the only official vehicular crossing between the two

countries. This may change soon with the November 2011 agreement between Nepal and China to construct another “Friendship Bridge” further to the west between the Nepali district of Rasuwa and Kyirong County in the TAR (Giri, 2011). Regular cross-border movement already occurs along a makeshift unpaved road in that region (Campbell, 2010), which was also an important historical border-crossing point before the 19th century Gurkha wars between Tibet and Nepal (Childs, 2004). Still further west, there is another cross-border road under development to link Nepal’s Mustang district with China, which is unofficially already in use. Trekkers and pilgrims to Mt Kailash may cross the border on foot near Simikot, the district headquarters of Nepal’s Humla district.

All of these official border points taken together still indicate only a portion of the geographically passable border crossings, many of which continue to be used on a regular basis by pastoralists (Bauer, 2004). The centrality of such informal border crossing to local livelihoods on both sides of the border was recognized in the 1956 Sino–Nepali treaty, which states repeatedly that “border inhabitants” may continue their “customary” cross-border movement for mercantile, pastoral, and religious purposes (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2000). Although subsequent agreements articulate both countries’ desires to eventually stop such cross-border movement, officials on both sides whom I interviewed acknowledged in private the impossibility of doing so. It is toward this end, in a move that both asserts the regulatory power of the state and acknowledges its limits by recognizing the *de facto* reality of border citizenship, that in 2002 the “border citizen card” scheme was introduced.

Scholarly contexts

Here I further develop an argument introduced elsewhere (Shneiderman, 2010) regarding the value of “Zomia”, or more precisely, what I call “Zomia-thinking”, for scholarship in the Himalayan region. In popularizing the idea of “Zomia”, James Scott (2009) builds upon the work of Willem Van Schendel (2002), who first proposed this concept as an alternative area studies rubric that envisioned the border regions of High Asia as a continuous region, rather than as disconnected spaces at the peripheries of individual nation-states. Scott suggests further that such high altitude border zones constitute important zones of refuge where marginalized populations have retreated over time in self-conscious efforts to evade the state.

I argue that while the Zomia framework opens productive avenues of inquiry across the Himalayan region, the Nepal–TAR border zone should not be seen as a “non-state space” full of “state evaders” (Scott, 2009). Rather we may view it as a “multiple-state space”, comprised of the territory of all of the nations and states in question, yet transcending the individual sovereignty of any single state. For several generations, border citizens have engaged with the policies of both Nepal and China, as well as the prerogatives of the Tibetan polity, to make claims on—not evade—the multiple states that constitute the border zone in which they live. Border citizens seek to negotiate the terms of their recognition strategically vis-à-vis all of the administrative entities involved, compelling the states in question to recognize modalities of border citizenship as enacted from below. Far from a non-state space, the Nepal–TAR border zone instead exemplifies Wilson and Donnan’s notion of the border zone as a space of overlapping sovereignties, “within which people negotiate a variety of behaviors and meanings associated with their membership in nations and states” (1998: p. 9).

This framing of the “border zone” as an agentive site of political consciousness adds the crucial dimensions of political history, citizenship and governance to more culturally-oriented thematizations of “the border” and “the frontier” that have long been key tropes in Himalayan Studies. These ideas were crystallized



Fig. 2. View into Nepal from Dram.

influentially in the 1978 volume *Himalayan Anthropology: the Indo–Tibetan Interface*. Editor James Fisher describes the erstwhile “Indo–Tibetan interface” of the Himalayan region with a series of colorful metaphors: it is a “fringe region”, and a “neither fish-nor-fowl contact zone” (Fisher, 1978: p. 1). Most intriguing is the assertion that, “the Himalayas, thus are not so much a boundary, border, or buffer, as a zipper which stitches together these two densely textured cultural fabrics” (Fisher, 1978: p. 2). These descriptions invoke the density of geographical, linguistic, racial, and religious border crossing that characterize the region. However, the histories of state formation that have served as the impetus for such processes of migration and mixture remain under-theorized, a lacuna that obscures the importance of nationally-specific political histories in analyses of the region (Shneiderman, 2010: p. 298). For this reason—as well as the fact that it sets “the Indic” and “the Tibetan” in opposition instead of focusing on the third space that unfolds through their engagement—this model for understanding border dynamics in the Himalayan region leaves much to be desired (Samuel, 2005: p. 198).

One of the problems with this mode of analysis is that it emphasizes cultural similarity at the expense of exploring the political differences that have historically constituted the idea of the border between Nepal and Tibet, and later China. The political reality of the border was often deliberately understated by scholars who sought to work in Tibet but could not gain access, and therefore conducted research on so-called “Tibetan societies” in Himalayan Nepal and India (cf. Aziz, 1978; Mumford, 1989). Much early anthropological work on “Tibetan societies” deemphasized the political influence of both the Nepali and Chinese, as well as Indian, nation-states, on Tibetan identities over time. For this reason, Himalayan borderland populations often continue to be described in essentialist terms that assume the culturally Tibetan to be a primary category of self-identification, regardless of their citizenship or other identity practices.

Concomitantly, the process of “Tibetanization” has been portrayed in both scholarly and political discourses as a largely positive expression of Tibetan cultural values (Huber, 1999: p. 4; Samuel, 1993: p. 148). Tibetanization is usually described as a process of ethnicization that entails the promotion of Buddhist religiosity and other Tibetan cultural practices in border areas of Himalayan Nepal and India (as well as in other areas of Inner and Central Asia, such as Mongolia) (Goldstein, 1998: p. 6), rather than as a civilizing project that promotes its own unequal power relations. Contrast this with the scholarly representation of the process of Sanskritization in South Asia, which is largely cast in negative terms as the hegemonic project of dominant religio-cultural elites.

The fact of China’s incorporation of Tibet has also made it difficult to speak about its international boundary with Nepal in empirical terms. Most relevant scholarship has defined its area of inquiry as the “Tibetan borderlands” (Klieger, 2006) or “Tibetan border worlds” (Van Spengen, 2000), but in political reality, it has been the “Nepal–China border” since 1956. China’s control of Tibet is highly visible in its control of Tibet’s erstwhile international boundary with Nepal; when I have presented this material at Tibetan Studies conferences, several exile Tibetan and foreign scholars have spoken disparagingly about Dram and Nyalam as unpleasant places that they attempt to transit through as quickly as possible en route to central Tibet due to their heightened awareness of the Chinese state at the border. Indeed, one of the putative Tibetan etymologies for Nyalam is “The Road to Hell” (or “Gate to Hell”). Although the Tibetan cultural world is by no means circumscribed by the Chinese border post at the Friendship Bridge, Tibetan aspirations to statehood in many ways are.

Here I seek to recast such discussions within a framework that takes the historical and political particularity of international

boundaries seriously, yet simultaneously recognizes the social characteristics of the more expansive border zones that may pre-date and post-date the creation of such boundaries themselves. The boundary biography of the Nepal–TAR border zone, then, reveals a site in which multiple citizenships and overlapping sovereignties operate, rather than a non-state space where Tibetanization can be seen as a primary mode of producing hegemonic allegiances in the absence of other forms of citizenship. Citizenship in this border zone is often a multiple, rather than singular concept, with families and individuals making claims on, and maintaining allegiances to, both the Nepali and Chinese states, while simultaneously possessing a sense of Tibetanness. Tibetanization is not a uni-directional process, nor an apolitical one, but rather one of many mutually influencing processes of cultural and political subject formation that intertwine in this border zone.

For all of the reasons outlined here, describing the Himalayan region in terms of “the border” is therefore neither a new, nor value-neutral, endeavor. The challenge is rather to combine the promise of the “border zone” as a socio-politically constituted category of analysis with both an astute examination of the contingencies of political history and its nationally-specific trajectories in the Himalayan region, as well as a recognition of the cultural, linguistic and religious fluidity that defines the lived experience of many border citizens. Such a project is aided by the promise of “Zomia-thinking”, which articulates a regional vision that locates national political histories at its center, but is not limited by them in conceptualizing the breadth of the regional frame that the erstwhile citizens of each state in question may encounter.

Trading identities over time

Understanding the contemporary shape of citizenship in the Nepal–TAR border zone requires a brief historical foray into the nature of the religious links (Ehrhard, 1997) and trading relationships (Bista, 1979; Harris, 2013; Kansakar Hilker, 2005; Lall, 2002; Lewis, 1993) between Nepal and Tibet before the 1950s. The border post now located at the Friendship Bridge only took on central importance for trans-Himalayan trade and cultural interaction after construction on the Arniko Highway began in 1960. Previously the Kyirong route to the west had seen more north-south trading volume, along with the well-known routes through Mustang and Manang, and the Nathu-la through Sikkim.

From at least the mid-1800s onwards, there was substantial trading activity through Nyalam, dominated by the Tibeto-Newar *kazara* community. The Tibetan term *kazara* derives from the Nepali *khacchar*, meaning “mule”.² It refers to an extended kin network within which male Newar traders from Kathmandu generally married Tibetan women (although occasionally the opposite occurred). These families maintained both Nepali and Tibetan citizenship and property documents, paid tax to both governments, and spoke at least three languages: Newar, Nepali and Tibetan. Historian Sulmaan Khan writes of the extensive appearances such individuals make as *hunxue'er* (Ch: individual of mixed descent) in official Chinese documents throughout the 1950s, as the Chinese state sought to make sense of the complex ethnic landscape it encountered in its newly expanded border area (Khan, 2012). Before the 1950s, these traders operated within the political framework of the 1856 treaty between Nepal and Tibet which ended the Gorkha wars, and stipulated an annual tribute payment from the Tibetan state to Nepal (Adhikari, 2010: Appendix 3). Nepali traders brought up rice, flour, and ghee (clarified butter) to trade for wool and salt in Nyalam, as has been well-documented along other parts of the Nepal–Tibet border.

However, unlike along other trade routes, where the border served primarily as a nominal waypoint between the centers of

Kathmandu and Lhasa, the town of Nyalam and its surrounding region appears to have been experienced as a self-standing border zone from very early on. Rather than continuing to Lhasa, many Nepali traders saw Nyalam itself as the destination, and spent substantial periods of time there. Older informants in Nyalam stated that there were usually between 500 and 1000 seasonal traders from Nepal resident in the region each year, with 35–40 permanently established Nepali shopfronts in the town before 1959. These shops were primarily owned by syndicates dominated by the well-established *kazara* families, but they served a much larger group of petty traders who came from a range of Himalayan ethnic communities, including Sherpa, Tamang and Thangmi, as well as Newar.

Departing from the classic image of large groups of trans-Himalayan traders traveling with long yak caravans, most traders in the Nyalam area traveled by foot alone or in small groups. They spent several days to several weeks each year selling their wares and procuring necessities (especially salt) in Nyalam before returning to their home villages or towns in Nepal. Almost every male villager over the age of 60 from a range of ethnic groups whom I interviewed in border areas of Nepal's Sindhupalchok and Dolakha districts had traveled to Nyalam multiple times before 1959. They often described their travel in glowing terms as an opportunity to experience a place where the caste-based hierarchies and exploitative land tenure arrangements that made life difficult for them inside Nepal did not exist. Indeed, although informants I interviewed in Dram and Nyalam grouped people from Nepal into ethnic categories, these labels did not appear to connote status in a hierarchical sense for Tibetan speakers in the same way that they did for Nepali speakers. The primary categories of identification were: *kazara*, *balpo*, *gorkha*, and *rongba*, meaning mixed Nepali–Tibetan, Newar, Nepali hill-dweller, and plains-dweller respectively. People recognized their counterparts from all of these categories as fellow border citizens, demonstrating that this was historically a multi-ethnic category, where membership was defined by territorial belonging to the border zone itself, rather than by specific ethnic identification.

Traders from all ethnic backgrounds who entered Nyalam from Nepal were required to deposit their knives, or *khukuri* (Nep), with the *nyemo* (Tib), or lady of the house, in which they stayed. When they had concluded their business, the *nyemo* would accompany her guests to the border, and could only return the *khukuri* after the required customs duties had been paid. At that time, Tibetan border officials would also collect a tax payment from the *nyemo* based on the room and board fees she had received from the Nepali traders. Only once all of these transactions were completed could she return the *khukuri* to her guests, and send them on their way south. In this sense, Nepali traders left not only their weapon at their border, but their national identity, in the form of the *khukuri*.

Building a border

In late 1960, Chinese officers first arrived in the Dram–Nyalam region. They were deputed as part of a Joint Committee to delineate the border following the China–Nepal Boundary Agreement of March 1960 (Adhikari, 2010: Appendix 7, Shrestha, 2003: chap. 2). Chinese officials asked elders from the region to help map the traditional border. As Karma Tenzin, who was in his 80s at the time of my research, explained in the epigraph with which this article began, the “customary border” (as the treaties called it) between Nepal and Tibet was a fuzzy one. The impetus for border demarcation at this particular historical moment emerged first from China, which understood this border as a key site at which to address assert its newly expansive interpretation of sovereignty (Chang, 2011) as it moved from “empire-lite to a harder, heavier

imperial formation” (Khan, 2012: p. 2). However, China's invitation to establish a joint border demarcation committee suited the nationalist agenda of Nepal's King Mahendra well (Whelpton, 2005: chap. 4), and while the demarcation process was diplomatically delicate, both states believed the project to be in their sovereign interests (Khan, 2012).

During this process, two primarily Sherpa villages previously understood to be in Nepal, Lishing and Syolbugang, were traded to China in exchange for the villages of Lapchi and Lamabagar (Shrestha, 2003: pp. 70–71). The former two villages thereafter became part of China, while the latter two became part of Nepal. Residents of these villages were told to make a decision: they could stay in their home villages, but trade citizenship, or resettle in other villages across the newly defined border and maintain their initial allegiance. Until this time, residents of all of these villages had paid both what was known as the “head tax” to the Nepali state, and property taxes to the Tibetan polity, both of which maintained collection offices in Dram and Nyalam. The imperative to choose a singular citizenship was new.

According to Tsering Wangdu, a resident of Dram whose parents had lived in Lishing before the border demarcation:

The people of Lishing did not feel unhappy when they became part of China because they felt Tibetan, and their temple, Gunsa Gumpa, had belonged to the Tibetan government before, so they wanted to remain part of Tibet even if it was now part of China. They did not want to be part of Nepal if it meant separating from the rest of Tibet. From the early 1960s the Lishing Sherpa had many contacts with the Chinese.

For many such people in this border region—at least those who chose to become Chinese citizens and their descendants—the fact of Tibet's incorporation in China was not accompanied by directly experienced violence, nor was there explicit resistance. Rather, such people considered the options and consciously accepted a new form of citizenship. In the narratives that were shared with me, this was represented as an agentive choice that resulted in positive economic and social benefits over time. These benefits were not limited to families who relied on “Chinese contacts”, like those that Tsering Wangdu mentioned, but in fact were linked to the assurance from the outset that *in addition* to holding primary Nepali or Chinese citizenship, they would also be recognized as border citizens, who could continue with their “customary” cross-border activities. Many such border citizens proceeded to capitalize on relationships with family and friends who had chosen Nepali citizenship to create partnerships in economic, cultural and religious domains, therefore taking advantage of the border zone's special privileges.

Building a road to reach the border from Lhasa, let alone making it traversable for vehicles, was a daunting task. From the Chinese perspective, building the vehicular road to Dram was an infrastructural key to the political project of incorporating Tibet, as it would lessen the “friction of distance” (Scott, 2009: pp. 45–47) that hindered the transportation of Nepali and Indian goods to Lhasa, and also assert Chinese hegemony through control of its international boundaries (Khan, 2012). Indeed, the border road project was imbued with Chinese nationalist fervor, as attested by a monument in Dram that commemorates the hundreds of road workers who died on the job (Fig. 3).

From the Nepali perspective, the Chinese pledge to fund construction of the road not only to the border, but onwards from the Nepali border town of Kodari to the capital of Kathmandu was an offer too good to pass up. Designated as “The Arniko Highway”, in reference to a famous Newar artisan of the 13th century from Kathmandu whose work adorns many Buddhist sites in Tibet, the road was completed in 1966. It provided access for many border



Fig. 3. Chinese monument to those who died building the road to Dram.

citizens in Nepal not only northwards into the TAR, but southwards to their own capital. Indeed, many elder residents of Nepali border villages with whom I worked recalled how the opening of the road transformed their relationship with the border not primarily by affording them greater access to the TAR—which they could already reach relatively easily over well-trodden footpaths—but rather by shifting the locus of much of their economic activity to Kathmandu. These travels to Kathmandu in turn brought them into closer communication with the Nepali state, compelling both border citizens and state actors to rethink the criteria and boundaries of citizenship. In this way, the effects of border road construction in fact extended far beyond the territorial limits of that zone itself to reframe relationships between border citizens and state centers. Such shifting dynamics in the border zone reveal new ways of understanding citizenship and “researching the structures and agencies of the state” (Wilson & Donnan, 1998: p. 26) at large.

The finished road directly benefited residents of Dram in particular. The route that it carved through the mountains, slightly to the west of the old foot trails, and the establishment of the official border post in Dram after 1961, were key in shifting the economic center of the region away from Nyalam. Before the road was built, Dram had only 10–15 families in residence, and as of 1964, there were still only about 100 residents. By 2005, the population had grown to approximately 5000.

The road was finished and the political apparatus at the border firmly entrenched just in time for China’s Cultural Revolution,

during most of which the border was theoretically closed. Many residents of Nyalam and Dram crossed the border secretly to spend time in Nepal during the worst periods of political turmoil. Several older people with whom I spoke—who had long since returned to their homes and become Chinese citizens—were especially incensed about the fact that during the Cultural Revolution they were forced to sell herds of livestock to the Chinese government at a low price as part of collectivization. While temporarily resident in Nepal, many of these individuals bought land and livestock, and paid Nepali land taxes. As Karma Tenzin said of the several years he spent in Nepal, “it didn’t feel like a different country” in the geographical sense, since he was accustomed to crossing the border through unpoliced back passes. Yet he never applied for Nepali citizenship documents, as some of his contemporaries did, and in his conversations with me he still referred to passing to Nepal as *chi gyal* (Tib)—literally an “outside realm”—at the political level, which reflects well the ambivalence that many border citizens feel. Many people from Nyalam and Dram were enticed back to the TAR by Chinese government incentives as part of decollectivization policies in the 1980s. Karma Tenzin “received” his own house for free from the government in 1984, and thereafter settled in the TAR.

Making border citizens

From 1956 through 2002, the category of “border inhabitant” was tacitly acknowledged to exist by the state-level treaties governing border relations between China and Nepal. The customary rights of these people to access resources on the other side of the border were repeatedly reaffirmed. However, no individual identity document was issued to people recognized as members of this category. Instead, regulation of their mobility was left to networks of local knowledge. The only mechanism in place to ensure that rights to cross-border mobility were respected was the assumption that border officials from both countries could accurately distinguish legitimate border inhabitants from other citizens of either country. Some border inhabitants carried official citizenship cards from either Nepal or China, which stated their place of residence—but even in such cases, as border officials from both sides told me in interviews, they could easily make errors, since they had no official maps showing which villages were within the border zone. Moreover, many legitimate citizens who were border inhabitants of both countries did not possess a primary citizenship document from either side, so documentary evidence of their place of residence was not available.

From the border officials’ perspective, the geopolitical concerns surrounding the mobility of Tibetans from beyond the border zone who intended to exit China permanently to claim refugee citizenship in Nepal or India, made every person who appeared to be ethnically Tibetan a possible illegitimate border crosser who should be stopped. From the perspective of legitimate border inhabitants, this situation led to great frustration, since they were often stopped and questioned, if not turned back, when they attempted to cross the border for the legally allowed purposes of economic, religious, pastoral or familial activity. Rather than compelling border inhabitants to stay on one side of the border, however, attempts to regulate their mobility only drove them to use secondary routes of transit through the mountains. Both Nepal and China sought to discourage such behavior in an effort to more clearly distinguish between licit and illicit border crossing in order to regulate cross-border commercial traffic.

This state of confusion led eventually to the 2002 agreement between the two countries, which introduced for the first time the idea of “exit-entry passes of the border districts” (Adhikari, 2010: p. 242). This was implemented through the “border citizen” cards, which I began to see in use in 2003.

To apply for a border citizen card, one had to present evidence of existing citizenship to the appropriate local authorities at the district or township level in Nepal or China respectively. This presented a challenge for many erstwhile border citizens, who although accustomed to crossing the border informally, did not already possess documentation of citizenship in one or the other country. This was particularly an issue in Nepal, where identity documents have only very recently become understood as a requisite marker of citizenship (Caplan & Torpey, 2001). Nepali citizenship must literally be “made” (Nep: *nagarikta banaune*) at the age of 16 or older, and requires presenting landownership documents and evidence of parental citizenship. At the time of my research in 2005, citizenship could only be passed through the paternal line, which resulted in substantial numbers of stateless children in cases where paternity could not be documented, as well as when evidence of landownership was lacking (Varughese & Abrahams, 2012). For many Nepali border inhabitants, the incentive to formally “make citizenship” was minimal before 2002, since it afforded little access to state benefits within Nepal. Unlike China, Nepal had no system of preferential treatment for recognized minorities, and state sector domains like education and health were neither well-resourced nor regulated. The impetus to declare citizenship, then, was often lacking, and the process onerous—especially for those from the ethnic communities prevalent in the border zone who had long experienced the caste Hindu dominated Nepali state predominantly as an agent of oppression (Lawoti & Hangen, 2012). “Why should I have bothered with *nagarikta*?” one elderly resident of Nepal’s Dolakha district declared. “It would just bring me closer to the oppressors”.

The 2002 introduction of the border citizen cards presented an important new incentive to formalize Nepali citizenship. Since access to the Chinese side of the border zone constituted an important part of livelihood strategies for many Nepali border citizens, and this access was now to be regulated more rigorously through these new cards, many individuals for the first time embarked upon the process of making Nepali citizenship.

This history demonstrates well the mutually constitutive nature of erstwhile citizens and their states in this border zone. In private interviews, officials told me that the border citizen card was perceived as a practical necessity by both states, due to the fact that even 40 years after border demarcation, neither side was any closer to curtailing the cross-border activities of its citizens. Both states, however, intentionally sought to minimize public knowledge of this arrangement outside of the border zone. I concomitantly found it extremely difficult to procure any official documentation of the scheme’s introduction or regulations (beyond the actual treaty itself), despite extensive attempts in governmental offices on both sides of the border itself, and in Kathmandu and Lhasa. The blurred membership of border citizens challenged both countries’ sense of sovereign security. The two states responded to the practices of border citizens from below with a pragmatic agreement, while downplaying this move in diplomatic terms. At the same time, the introduction of the border citizen scheme actually compelled many citizens to formally assert their primary allegiance to one state or the other for the first time, as a means of maintaining continued access to the third space of the border zone itself.

Differentiated citizenship in the border zone

Establishing regimes of “differentiated citizenship” (Young, 1989: p. 258)—according special rights to marginalized groups who are legally entitled to preferential treatment—is arguably one of the most effective techniques at the disposal of contemporary states to assert control over marginalized populations (Rose, 2006). In the Nepal–TAR border zone, Chinese preferential policies for the

group known as Xiaerba (Ch), or Sherpa (Nep) are part of what attract many border citizens from Nepal to make use of their border citizen privileges by spending time in China.

Recognized as one of 59 indigenous nationalities (*adivasi jana-jati*) by the Nepali state since 2002, the Sherpa are the only ethnic community of Nepali heritage who are also recognized as a distinct demographic group by the Chinese government. I use “Sherpa” when referring to the ethnic category in general, but follow Chinese documents in using “Xiaerba” when referring to the legally recognized ethnic category inside China. Unlike Tibetans, Xiaerba are not one of China’s 56 recognized *minzu* (Ch) or “nationality” populations. However, the TAR census designates them in a special “border inhabitant” category. According to 2004 figures, the Sherpa population of the TAR is approximately 2000.

For all practical purposes, Xiaerba can pass as Tibetan in day-to-day life, and intermarriage rates are high. But for the most part, the Xiaerba I interviewed choose to maintain an ethnic identity distinct from the general category of “Tibetan”, in large part due to the benefits that the Chinese state offers to those belonging to “border populations”. These benefits are perceived to be even greater than those offered to members of *minzu* groups, such as Tibetan, because being a “border inhabitant” carries within it the connotation of being less economically and socially developed within the evolutionary communist view of ethnicity. Xiaerba are therefore entitled to additional educational and job quotas within China, which they benefit from greatly because their numbers are so low. Many Xiaerba residents of Dram and Nyalam whom I interviewed had received scholarships to study in Beijing, Chengdu or other large cities.

In 2004, the Xiaerba villages along the border—Lishing and Syolbugang, which were part of Nepal prior to 1961—became the targets of a new central Chinese policy for the “development of border peoples”. Under this rubric, the central Chinese government had allotted the Nyalam county minority office several million yuan to improve livelihoods in the year preceding my research. These funds were earmarked exclusively for Xiaerba residents of the border villages, and were to be used for infrastructural improvement, livestock breeding and income generation projects. Beneficiaries of this program had bought female yak to produce milk and cheese, all of which was exported to Nepal for profit—making use of their border citizen status. Twelve new Xiaerba houses were built with these funds. Officials also spoke of developing Lishing as an “indigenous tourism site”, but political concerns had impeded this plan.

Being Xiaerba, therefore, was a desirable lot in the border zone. Many people who could claim to be either Tibetan or Xiaerba because they had one parent in each category officially used the Xiaerba name (unlike in Nepal, as described above, the Chinese state has long recognized both maternal and paternal descent). Since the Chinese government did not officially recognize any other groups of Nepali heritage, Xiaerba had become the default category of identification for many border citizens. It included individuals who would identify themselves as Tamang, Newar, or Thangmi inside Nepal—and would not under any circumstances be recognizable as Sherpa within Nepali national framings of social, linguistic or legal identity—but called themselves Xiaerba upon entering the TAR. Xiaerba had become a catchall phrase in China for citizens with some kind of historical connection to Nepal—yet with a Tibetan affinity—and other ethnic differences were collapsed into this one officially recognized category.

The socio-economic benefits that Xiaerba described as an important factor in creating a sense of belonging for them in China are also important reasons for increased migration by Nepali “Sherpa” (in quotes because this also includes people who would identify with a different ethnic group in Nepal, but call themselves

Xiaerba in China) into the TAR. Although most such individuals are already border citizens by Nepali reckoning, settling in the TAR permanently can afford them access to the resources of the Chinese state in a more fulsome manner. For Nepali border citizens, the attraction is not the area's Tibetanness, but rather its Chineseness, and the promise of economic improvement that they perceive it to hold. Clearly the old balance of power has shifted, and the prospects for Nepalis in China are now more attractive than the other way around. As one Nepali Sherpa seeking to claim Chinese citizenship through marriage to a Xiaerba told me, "When the border zone was first established, Chinese would come down to our Nepali towns like Bahrabise to look at all of the goods from India. Now all of the goods in Nepal are from China, and Nepalis want to live here if we can since the facilities are so much better". Indeed, employment was easily available on the Chinese side of the border. From bus boys to porters to restaurant owners to laborers, all of the Nepali border citizens working in the TAR whom I interviewed spoke of the prosperous economic environment as a positive alternative to the ongoing political instability and economic stagnation on the Nepali side of the border.

People who have migrated to the TAR from Nepal, including both those who were already Sherpa in Nepal, and those who claimed Xiaerba identity after arriving in China, draw upon Nepali national symbols to assert their identity, such as pictures of the royal family hanging in their restaurants (generally pre-2001 royal massacre images of King Birendra and his family, not King Gyanendra), and Hindi-inspired Nepali music blaring from their homes. Nepali food is popular among Chinese officials stationed in these border towns—tasty, cheap, and novel—as several of those I interviewed over dinner told me. Ironically, such photos, music and food are exactly the markers of dominant caste Hindu Nepali culture that ethno-politically active Sherpa within Nepal would usually distance themselves from. However, within China they provide Xiaerba with a distinctive identity marker vis-à-vis Tibetans, an identity which when assumed effectively, both legitimizes claims to Chinese citizenship, and affords access to a range of preferential treatments within that broader category.

To a significant extent, then, the ethnic category of Xiaerba/Sherpa has become conflated with that of border citizen, at least from the perspective of those looking north. Many Nepali citizens feel that they must belong to this ethnic category in order to avail themselves of the most desirable benefits of border citizenship. Although border citizenship is intended to be a comprehensive category offered to individuals on the basis of their residence, rather than their ethnic identity, a process of ethnicization is occurring. In contrast to the narrative of Tibetanization, then, we might view Xiaerba-ization (ultimately a mode of Sinicization), as an emergent trajectory of transformation in the border zone, as people from the full range of ethnic backgrounds historically recognized as legitimate border citizens originating in Nepal (recall the discussion of *kazara*, *balpo*, *gorkha*, and *rongba* above) now claim Xiaerbaness in order to access entitlements from the Chinese state. In this way, although we have seen how the category of border citizen itself emerged out of practices from below, it is further qualified by state regimes of differentiated citizenship from above, demonstrating how the border zone is indeed "the place where state meets society" (Zartman, 2010: p. 1). In other words, the border zone is a space of articulation, where the categorical imperatives of two different states intersect with agentive manipulations of identity to yield new ethnic formulations. These emerge in relation to the specific policies of ethnic classification employed by both of the two nation-states in question, while transcending the terms of either state system alone to yield new, self-consciously hybrid ethnic forms.

Border crossing strategies

Being a border citizen affords a range of benefits which extend beyond the border zone itself, in both the geographical and conceptual senses. Whether one originates in Nepal or China, possessing a "border citizen card" enables one to cross to the other side legally without a passport or visa. However, the specific motivations and techniques of border crossing employed vary depending upon which direction one is moving.

According to the border police department in Dram, approximately 120 Nepalis were registered as resident there in 2005. Nepali border citizens may in fact stay on the Chinese side of the border for up to one month with no permit. After that, they can apply for a 6-month residence permit, which may be extended up to one year, and then renewed on an annual basis. Many Nepali border citizens who spend time in the TAR are interested in settling permanently and claiming Chinese citizenship. The only sure way to do this is to marry someone who already has it. A Chinese official I interviewed acknowledged that many Nepalis seek citizenship through marriage, although the Chinese government frowns upon this practice. He affirmed that there had been about 40 such marriages in Dram over the preceding five years. One pragmatic reason for such transnational marriage is that everyone is somehow related in the two small Xiaerba villages on the Chinese side of the border, so it is difficult to find marriage partners due to clan endogamy proscriptions. Xiaerba from the region therefore commonly marry either Nepali Sherpa or non-Xiaerba Tibetans.

I encountered many such families with cross-border connections in both directions. Some families who were split by their citizenship decisions in the 1960s have stayed in close contact and own joint ventures. As one member of such a family told me, the mix of Nepali and Chinese citizenship within a single kin network, "is the perfect business combination", which the family in question had used successfully since the mid-1960s to trade a range of key commodities (see Harris, 2013 on how the specifics of these shifted over time) in both directions across the border.

No official statistics were available for Chinese citizens crossing into Nepal. Almost everyone I interviewed in Dram and Nyalam had done so regularly throughout their lives. The two primary motivations cited for traveling to Nepal were religious pilgrimage and medical treatment. Although there are several minor Buddhist sites within the 30 km border zone inside Nepal, the most important pilgrimage destinations are closer to Kathmandu. There are also many private hospitals in Kathmandu which provide greater access to specialist care than is available in Dram or Nyalam, and in fact are much closer to residents of these towns than the nearest comparable services inside the TAR.

Yet to travel to Kathmandu or elsewhere in Nepal beyond the 30 km zone that ends at the town of Bahrabise, border citizens from China in theory need a passport with a visa for Nepal. Most people find the visa application process impractical, given that the journey to Lhasa takes 3–4 days overland, while the journey across the border into Nepal takes only a few hours. They therefore maintain the border identity card as their primary form of internationally recognized documentary citizenship, using it in ingenious ways that extend its real remit far beyond the stipulated 30 km.

Due to the facts that most Chinese border citizens of Tibetan or Xiaerba ethnicity can speak at least functional Nepali, and that many bona fide Nepali citizens from the northern Himalayan regions of the country look and sound just like Tibetans or Xiaerba from China, many Chinese border citizens can "pass" as Nepali citizens. The challenge is simply entering the country, which they can do legally with their border citizen card alone. Many then just hide their card after they pass through Bahrabise, and continue to Kathmandu and beyond as if they were Nepali citizens. This

technique became more difficult during the state-Maoist civil conflict in Nepal, when the border was more rigorously monitored, and all travelers were asked to produce identity cards at regular security checkpoints. Nonetheless, many Chinese border citizens told stories inflected with humor and pride about managing to talk their way through such checkpoints. Once through to Kathmandu, many of them even continued on to India, for instance to attend the Dalai Lama's annual teachings in Bodh Gaya—and then returned, overland via the same route, to their homes in the TAR. Such stories suggest the far-reaching implications of the Nepal–TAR border citizen regime for broader regional conceptualizations of citizenship, territoriality and mobility in South Asia, and complicate the dominant image of the Sino–Nepali border as one that is hostile to Tibetans. While it indeed may be so for those who originate from locations elsewhere in the TAR, or other Tibetan areas of China—those who cannot legitimately claim to be border citizens—for Tibetans and Xiaerba who inhabit the latter category, the border is a much more flexible entity which can be creatively manipulated for personal purposes.

Conclusion: producing non-postcolonial border citizenship

Following the work of Caplan and Torpey (2001) on the development of individual identity regimes, Kamal Sadiq notes that the traditional literature on citizenship emerges from the developed Euro-American world and rests on “the distinguishability assumption”—the idea that “states have the capacity to actively distinguish between citizens and noncitizens” (Sadiq, 2009: p. 7, see also Bakewell, 2007: p. 2). Sadiq positions his own work as opening the frontier of citizenship scholarship in the developing world, by arguing that many developing countries tacitly recognize what he calls “documentary citizenship” (Sadiq, 2009), or the production of citizenship through documentary practices from below. He cites cases from India, Pakistan and Malaysia to demonstrate how the citizenship regimes in the rest of the world are often fundamentally different from those in Europe and the US, both because the administrative mechanisms for recognizing individual identity are not as sophisticated, and because, in many parts of the developing world, citizens of one country are not categorically different from those of the next in ethno-racial terms. Yet all of his case studies come from the postcolonial world, where, as Sadiq describes it, state borders and their attendant regimes of citizenship were forged in the moment of independence. New states strove to demonstrate their modernity and regulatory effectiveness by introducing—at least in theory—rigid definitions of citizenship. Oliver Bakewell similarly suggests that citizenship emerged as a “major concern for African states after independence, when they had to establish a national identity within colonial borders” (2007: p. 16). Whether in Africa or Asia, in all of these cases the theoretical boundaries of citizenship were delimited and fastened to geopolitical borders as part of the process of post-colonial state formation.

Himalayan histories of state formation tell a different story. Nepal was never colonized, a fact which remains a central plank of contemporary Nepali nationalism. The country was shaped significantly by its engagement with the British Raj, but never had to struggle for independence, and remains defined in both political and scholarly terms by its experience of “non-postcoloniality” (Des Chene, 2007). Carole McGranahan has similarly argued that, “Tibetan imperial stories ... are not composed of familiar categories of empire. Instead, they depart from colonialism, capitalism, and European moorings, and thus from the primary foci of colonial studies and postcolonial theory” (McGranahan, 2007: p. 173). China may be viewed as a colonial power in Tibet, but historical evidence shows that in its relations with Nepal since the mid-1950s, China has

sought to assert itself as a well-behaved, if muscular, neighbor, rather than as an imperial threat (Khan, 2012).

The point here is that borders in the Himalayan region have been produced through long-term processes of negotiation between sovereignty, mobility, and territoriality (Ludden, 2003) in tacitly acknowledged border zones, rather than in a specific historical moment of postcolonial boundary formation characterized by the nationalist assertion of territorial boundedness in places where it did not previously exist. Examining how citizenship categories have been defined in Himalayan border zones like the one described here nuances existing efforts to understand practices of citizenship in the developing world. Moreover, such inquiries provide new perspectives on the category of “South Asia” itself, which is often presumed to be an exclusively postcolonial one. I do not seek to assert an ideal “non-postcolonial form” of border-making or cross-border mobility here, but rather to suggest that South Asia is replete with a variety of border relations (cf. Zartman, 2010: pp. 7–8) and boundary formations, which may materialize, dematerialize and rematerialize (Megoran, 2012) simultaneously in different places for different people. Careful attention to these multiple boundary biographies yields insight into locally specific understandings of sovereignty and citizenship, which nonetheless have important implications for conceptualizing the region as a whole.

Understanding South Asia from the edges of the region itself—for example from the vantage point of the Himalayan border zone that I have described here—further advances the promise of “Zomia-thinking” by reframing this seemingly peripheral part of Asia as a central site of state-making. In so doing, it brings the relations of power and negotiation that have long obtained between polities in the Himalayan region into focus, moving beyond the representation of states like Nepal and historical Tibet as subaltern spaces on the periphery of South and East Asia. This reframing opens up new ways of understanding identities like “Tibetan”, “Nepali”, “Sherpa”, or “Xiaerba” as at once shaped by multiple state systems of classification, and constitutive of them. Finally, we can see how individual border citizens use these categories and the border-crossing techniques available to them in an agentic manner to make claims on multiple states.

Here I have argued that the long *durée* process of boundary negotiation between Nepal and China as non-postcolonial sovereign states is much of what makes the category of border citizen possible. Both the oral histories presented here about the processes of border demarcation, and the terms of the early bilateral treaties demonstrate that Himalayan boundaries were historically fluid, making the application of standard, singular citizenship categories challenging. Each successive treaty renewal between Nepal and China states that while it would have been preferable to close the border, asserting such control has simply been impossible due to customary economic, religious and kinship practices—which taken together constitute the bulk of everyday sociality in the border zone. Instead, therefore, the two countries eventually established the principle of border citizenship, in a *de facto* acknowledgment of its production from below. The biography of the international boundary between Nepal and China that I have presented here demonstrates further that alternative conceptualizations of sovereignty may exist not only “in the minds” of individual citizens (Jones, 2012: p. 696), but may in some cases come to be actualized in the “categories of state subjectivity” (Jones, 2012: p. 698) itself.

As the category of border citizen is realized through the distribution of border citizen cards—identity documents which make explicit the mutual entanglement of citizens and multiple states—it comes to shape discourses and practices of both national and ethnic identity for those whom it encompasses. Border citizen is therefore a category co-produced between states and citizens, where people

who are often perceived as marginal enact alternative forms of citizenship, using its mechanisms to make strategic claims on both of the states whose overlapping sovereignty constitutes the non-postcolonial third space of Nepal–Tibetan Autonomous Region of China border zone.

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Endnotes

¹ From the 1956 treaty onwards, the Chinese government recognizes that these agreements are specific to what was initially called "The Tibet Region of China" and is now referred to as "The Tibetan Autonomous Region of China". I use "TAR" to refer to the latter, recognizing that this does not include the full range of culturally, ethnically and linguistically "Tibetan regions".

² I have rendered Nepali, Tibetan and Chinese terms phonetically for ease of reading, using the abbreviations (Nep), (Tib), and (Ch).

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