

# 1 Introduction

The Sino-Nepalese War of 1791–1792, also called the Sino-Gorkha War or, seen from the Peking court, the “Second Pacification of Gorkha”,<sup>1</sup> is an extraordinary event in world history. Within a span of just 25 years, from 1791 to 1816, the small country of Nepal—then commonly known as Gorkha and hardly larger than New York State—challenged two of the world’s largest powers: China with Tibet and British India. This occurred during a period when the rule in Kathmandu was unstable. The royal Shah dynasty was weakened by infant kings, rival regents, and powerful aristocratic families. Despite this internal turmoil, Nepal embarked on campaigns of conquest, expanding westward into Garhwal and eastward into Sikkim, as well as subjugating southern regions such as Butwal, Palpa, and other little kingdoms.

For centuries, China including Tibet and Nepal had limited interaction with each other. The geographical barrier of the Himalayas, along with challenging trade routes, made it difficult for substantial contact to occur. However, there were some trade exchanges and the presence of monks from both regions.<sup>2</sup> The most famous early encounters are: from the fifth to the seventh century onwards, Chinese pilgrims travelling to the land of the Buddha, even though it probably was only Wang Xuan-ce who first visited the Kathmandu Valley;<sup>3</sup> in the seventh century, the marriage of the earliest known ruler of Tibet, Songtsan Gampo (Tib. Srong btsan sgam po), to the Nepalese princess Bhrikuti (Tib. Khrid btsun, titled *Bal mo bza’*, literally, “the queen/lady from Nepal”); in the Tang Dynasty, the visit of the envoy Wang Xuan-ce with troops advancing as far as Magadha; in 1260, during the Yuan

1 More precise would be Qing-Gorkha War but since the war is best known as Sino-Nepalese War, we also follow this convention. In modern Chinese sources the Gorkha-Tibet War and the Sino-Nepalese War are often called First Gorkha Campaign (1788) and Second Gorkha Campaign (1791–1792) (Dai 1994; Deng 2007a and 2007b); cp. Theobald 2020, 114.

2 For the early reports, see Deeg 2016. For a more recent description of the trade route, s. Tuladhar 2004.

3 Michaels 2024, 89.

dynasty, the journey of Nepali craftsmen Araniko (Chin. A-ni-ge 阿尼哥), to Khanbaliq (Chin. Da-du “The great capital”, later Peking) where he built the White Stupa of Miao-ying Temple in Beijing; and in the Ming dynasty, Chinese delegations visiting Nepal during the reigns of the king Sthitimalla and Jyotirmalla. Nepal did not exist as a state at that time and so it is not surprising that even Emperor Qianlong knew little about Balbu, as Gorkha was called.

It was only with King Prithvi Narayana Shah (r. 1769–1775), the visionary founder of unified Nepal, that something resembling a political doctrine emerged. He started what the historian Mayura Jang Kunwar called a “forcible amalgamation” of the many feudal states in the Himalayas.<sup>4</sup> He imparted a significant instruction to his people in his *Divyopadeśa* (“Holy Instruction”). He metaphorically referred to Nepal as a “gourd between two rocks”<sup>5</sup>, symbolizing the landlocked positioning of Nepal amidst China and (British) India. In this context, he offered the following advice to his people:

Maintain a treaty of friendship with the Emperor of China. Keep also a treaty of friendship with the Emperor of the southern sea [i.e., the Viceroy in Calcutta].<sup>6</sup>

But already Bahadur Shah, the second son of Prithvi Narayana Shah and regent between 1778 to 1779 and 1785 to 1794, disregarded the king’s instruction and started wars with the northern neighbours, Tibet and thus, the Great Emperor of China. Until today, Nepal’s geographical position offers limited opportunities for independent growth and exposes it to the constant risk of being overshadowed or absorbed by either of its more powerful neighbours.

In this situation, it is reasonable to analyse the relationships between these countries by adopting a methodological nationalism approach, which considers the nation-state as the primary analytical unit. However, it is important to recognise that such a reductive perspective oversimplifies the complexities and entanglements that exist in the spaces in between—the fluid and contested borders, and the diverse range of people, institutions, cultures, religions, polities, and natural as well as climatic conditions in the trans-Himalayan region.

4 Kunwar 1962, 285.

5 Stiller 1989, 42; cp. Mulmi 2021, ch. 7.

6 Stiller 1989, 42.

It is within this complex reality that we must strive to understand and navigate, avoiding the limitations imposed by rigid conceptual or theoretical frameworks.

To truly comprehend and embrace this intricate web of interactions, we must acknowledge complexity as an inherent research problem that raises fundamental questions about the concept of transculturality. By transculturality, we mean the concept that cultures are fundamentally not to be understood as closed entities, but as entities interwoven with each other in various forms. If this concept is understood as the default mode of approaching political, social and cultural developments, it usually reveals unnoticed or hidden agents whose influence should not be underestimated. These issues will be addressed in the conclusion, as we strive to grapple with the dense and multifaceted nature of the concept of region and its interconnected dynamics.

We therefore will delve into the theoretical implications stemming from the semantic complexity of the sources. We argue—with Frank Perlin<sup>7</sup>—that this complexity should be recognised as the foundation for comprehending the comprehensibility and translatability of diverse (trans)cultural realms. The lack of conceptual clarity in Humanities is, thus, not a flaw but a chance to explore diverse paths beyond oversimplified, often Western-centric ideas. This journey leads us to embrace complexity through subjective, narrative, non-verbal, sensual, visual, and arbitrary dimensions and, above all, the intrinsic misunderstanding inherent in languages, which, as we hope to show, can sometimes be an advantage.

Moreover, reports on the course of the conflicts and wars vary in length and completeness. While some contradict each other, most generally agree. However, the unclear situation regarding the origin and course of the Sino-Nepalese War, and who emerged victorious, which is the focus of this book, is largely because most sources have not or only partly been edited and translated. Most accounts of the Sino-Nepalese War were based on translations of Chinese and Tibetan sources. This has been deplored by Mayura Jang Kunwar: “Due to the difficulty of obtaining authentic Nepalese material, scholars, both Eastern and Western, have used the prolific, well-documented and pompously worded Chinese accounts of the campaign.”<sup>8</sup> We therefore endeavoured to assemble, for the first time, the key texts in Nepali,

7 Perlin 2020.

8 Kunwar 1962, 292.

Chinese, to a lesser extent in Manchu, and Tibetan, presenting them in their original languages along with predominantly new translations. Based on these and other sources, we attempt to provide an overview of the various perspectives on the events and outcomes of the war, especially to answer the basic question of this book: Who won the war?