

8 Detailing the Complexity

Given the evidence from the sources, Nepal did not lose the war despite its gradual retreats. On the contrary, it was China that failed to make a decisive victory as it did not reach Kathmandu. However, it is not only the fighting parties that decide on victory or defeat. Rather, the concepts of national integrity, borders, sovereignty, or suzerainty, diplomatic languages along with natural and topographical conditions, weather, and local factors, play a crucial role. These elements are particularly significant when considering the historical context. The VS 1850 report, as well as the reports by Tenzin Peljor, Yang Kui, Zhao-lian, etc., all highlight how factors such as soldier illness, natural hazards like snowfall, and hunger led to the withdrawal of Chinese troops.

The understanding of Betravati, thus, highlights the differing perspectives on China's suzerainty over Nepal (and Tibet). The absence of a clear victor in the war and the relatively limited significance of Nepal to China contributed to this disparity. In addition to border reordering and fortification through the construction of watchtowers,⁵³⁰ Nepal fulfilled minor obligations such as the restoration of plunder taken from the Tashilhunpo monastery. However, the quinquennial missions remained the most significant obligation for Nepal, even though the Gorkha government grew increasingly reluctant to undertake them.⁵³¹

In contrast, China did not provide any military assistance to Nepal, not even during the Anglo-Nepalese War of 1814–1816, despite the understanding of Nepal on agreement made in the understanding of Betravati. Hešen rejected the tributary envoys' request for any military assistance on behalf of the Emperor (2.2.3e). Later ambans, including Mengbao, followed the precedence. The impact of the war was more significant on Tibet, as it led to the presence of influential *ambans* like Sungyün (1752–1835) and a reduction in the power of the Tibetan Ministers.

530 Dabringhaus 1994, 188.

531 Manandar and Mishra 1986, 19.

Hence, both sides derived certain advantages, although the extent of these benefits varied. The Rana prime ministers, who had seized power and faced legitimacy issues, sent missions to China to seek recognition as legitimate rulers. The Emperors emphasised the importance of regular missions and placed Nepal on the outer periphery of their network of tributary states to guard the frontier for the Great Emperor (2.2.5), known as the Cefeng system (冊封體制), thereby asserting their claim of universal power. Additionally, the Qing court always desired these missions to be led by individuals of high status, and initially even contemplated the king or his regent personally leading them to enhance the imperial glory.

In this diplomatic environment, characterised by intricate rituals and pervasive distrust, concerns arose not only about the influence of missionaries but also about espionage and smuggling. Tibetan and Chinese authorities were frequently wary of foreigners attempting to blend in by wearing local attire, as exemplified by Thomas Cooper donning a Gorkhali dress and a Manchurian “pigtail”. To mitigate such suspicions, the missions were required to provide in advance notice to the ambans in Lhasa, specifying the number and names of their members. Rumours of foreigners infiltrating the country spread easily, further contributing to the atmosphere of suspicion and vigilance.

This xenophobic scepticism, particularly directed towards Western foreigners and missionaries, manifested in the imposition of travel restrictions. Tibet, for example, strictly prohibited the entry of any foreigner into the country. Treaties signed between China and France, England, the USA, and Russia during the period of 1844–1880 allowed citizens from these countries to freely travel within China’s “national territory,” which China interpreted as encompassing Tibet.⁵³² With the exception of the Capuchin monks who resided in Tibet from 1707 to 1745 before being expelled to Nepal/Gorkha and subsequently to India in 1768, in the eighteenth century most foreigners from the maritime routes were confined to the coastal regions and port cities of China under the Canton system, while overland trade was strictly managed by the Empire, especially when it comes to Chinese rhubarb. The Russians were allowed in Peking, while registered Jesuits might travel in Mainland but seemingly not to Tibet. It was only from around 1860 onwards that individual missionaries, primarily from France, attempted to enter Tibet. However, Tibet generally denied their entry,

532 Petech 1976, 219.

disregarding instructions, permissions, and travel documents issued by Chinese authorities, except for a few exceptional cases. Most of the missionaries stopped by Dartsemdo. The prevailing argument was that Tibet was a country where religion and the authority of the Dalai Lama were the sole concerns.

Of the two assertions, the first ('Tibet is a religious country') was regularly employed by the Lhasa authorities in their official communications to foreigners; the second ('imperial authority not acknowledged') was made, in more or less explicit terms, by the Tibetan officials on the spot, charged with preventing the entry of foreign travellers into Tibetan territory.⁵³³

Indeed, the political and religious reservations held by Tibet and its authorities help explain why individuals like Thomas Cooper, as well as previous travellers such as George Bogle in 1774 and Samuel Turner in 1783, had no opportunity to reach Lhasa. The presence of the 350 soldiers mentioned in the initial document of Jagatsera, as mentioned earlier, is likely not an exaggeration.

Meanwhile, the situation also shows that China's power and authority were not sufficient to enable access for foreigners to Tibet in the Late Qing period. In the nineteenth century, the Qing dynasty was severely challenged by uprisings and wars, including the Islamic rebellions everywhere, such as Dungan in the Northwest and Panthay in the Southwest, and the catastrophic Taiping Civil War (1850–1864) with 20–30 million victims, famines, natural calamities and a general impoverishment of major parts of the population. This made symbolic demonstrations of power all the more important and the sending of complimentary presents was a cheap means to uphold the claimed suzerainty and the 'middle of the world' without (much) military force, which China was anyway unable to afford. This view was also expressed in 1877 by Thomas Wade (1818–1895), the British Minister at Peking:

As a tributary state, Nepal might be classed with Burma ... in the habit of sending complementary tribute at intervals in token of amity and deference to a powerful neighbour, but the Chinese allow tribute missions to be made the opportunity of profitable

533 Ibid., 229.

transactions for the states which send them, otherwise the custom at present day would soon come to an end and it would be impossible now for the Chinese to enforce it afresh. The custom dates from time immemorial and has the effect of keeping an artificial importance for the Chinese throne which its military could never have gained for it.⁵³⁴

The designation of Nepal as a tributary state is particularly significant in this context. Wei Yuan expressed imperial nostalgia, as he remarked, “They still pay tribute unendingly till now” in 1846. In fact, Nepal was one of the last “tributary states” to be lost, as Ryukyu entered the Empire of Japan in 1879, and Korea ended the tributary relation after the Sino-Japanese War in 1894. Following the Sino-Nepalese War in 1792, both sides capitalised on the situation to their advantage. Despite declaring themselves victorious in the war, their relationship remained largely unchanged since the first mission led by Balabhadra Khavas (Figure 17) in 1790.

The endeavours of both Jagatsera and Cooper, despite their ultimate failure to reach their intended destinations, shed light on the complexity of the highland region of Asia (Haute Asie) in the second half of the nineteenth century. Their documents, along with Bishop Chauvean’s report, reveal that this mountainous area, which encompasses the east of Tibet, southwestern China,⁵³⁵ and to a lesser extent, Burma and north-eastern British India, was far from stable, challenging the assumptions of the nation-state model. The Emperor Qianlong and his troops encountered enormous hardships in his campaigns against the rGyalrongic rulers (in 1747–1749 and 1771–1774) and Myanmar for the dispute of the fluid feudatories in the region (starting from 1762 but mainly in 1765–1769).

The region, centring the Heng-duan Mountains, was characterised by rugged terrain, harsh climates, and a lack of infrastructure, making travel difficult. There were numerous travel restrictions imposed from all sides, fuelled by mutual mistrust and suspicion of espionage or missionary infiltration. The linguistic diversity in the area added to the complexity, making communication challenging. Additionally, there was a constant pursuit of recognition by political agents, hierarchical

534 Departmental Notes, Foreign Secret *Consultations*, 8 Oct. 1877, no.s 149–50 quoted from Dhanalaxmi 1981, 70.

535 *Alias* Tibeto-Ngwi corridor, see Shi 2018. The major force of the Sino-Nepalese War came from this region.

structures based on different criteria, the persistent threat of robbers and rebels, multiple insurgencies and wars, varied forms of trade and business with different taxonomies, and above all, significant religious, philosophical, and cultural diversity.

The intricate web of factors in this region highlights the need to move beyond simplistic categorizations and understand the nuanced dynamics at play. The challenges faced by Jagatsera and Cooper serve as a testament to the multifaceted nature of the large highland region of Asia (Haute-Asie), emphasizing the importance of considering political, environmental, social, and cultural dimensions in comprehending the complexities of the time.

In exploring the linguistic aspects of Haute-Asie, it is important to consider the nuances and interpretations of terminology used in historical documents. The understanding of *Betravati* mentioned earlier refers to the exchange of “products of their own country” between Nepal and Tibet, rather than simply “presents” or “gifts” as commonly interpreted by scholars.⁵³⁶ This indicates that there may have been a different understanding of the nature of the goods being exchanged.

536 Rana 1909, 8; Manandhar and Mishra 1986; Uprety 1980/1998, 41; Manandhar 2001; Michaels 2019a.