

9 Conclusion— Beyond Transculturality

According to Frank Perlin’s meticulously argued study *City Intelligible: A Philosophical and Historical Anthropology of Global Commoditisation before Industrialisation* (2020), the historical situation described above can be understood as a Babel-like complexity. Perlin employs this metaphor to highlight the ultimately insurmountable cultural differences or, as others would argue, the deeply intertwined nature of transculturality.

As I (AM) have discussed in detail elsewhere,⁵³⁷ the concept of transculturality offers a valuable framework for moving beyond the notion of “pure” nations, cultures, religions, languages, social groups, objects and artefacts, images, concepts, or practices (rituals). This is because all these domains are intricately linked and entangled through transcultural interactions. There are specific contexts and individuals that serve as particularly fertile ground for observing and understanding these entangled forms of cultural exchange and interaction, which aligns with the situation described above. These contexts include frontiers, marketplaces, harbours, and metropolises, as well as individuals who act as cultural intermediaries or middlemen such as diplomats, missionaries, travellers, traders, interpreters, tricksters, or migrants. Even in the absence of such specialised locations, situations, or individuals, transculturality consistently reveals the interconnected aspects of cultural phenomena.

Indeed, transculturality allows us to move beyond essentialist perspectives and rigidly boxed classifications. However, it raises the question of how we can understand transculturality without treating “culture” as a fixed entity. The response to this question lies in adopting a methodological approach to transculturality that challenges the

537 Michaels 2019b, on which the following remarks on transculturality are based.

notion of culture as a separate and delineated entity. Instead of focusing on fixed boundaries, we explore the interplay of strategies and discourses that are conceptually intertwined. Cultures and cultural phenomena are understood to exist in a state of constant relationship, where the conceptual boundaries are porous, open, and fluid. This perspective acknowledges the dynamic and interconnected nature of cultural phenomena, emphasizing their ongoing process of interaction and mutual influence.

This approach inevitably presents a paradox: if all culture is transcultural, then transculturality becomes conceptually redundant. Alternatively, to analyse what is transcultural, one must separate units whose existence, from a methodological perspective, must be denied due to their transcultural contingency.

Perlin's intriguing theory may provide a key to resolving this paradox, which has been a central concern in transcultural studies. Transculturality as a default mode does not abandon the idea of uncovering the various cultural strands that contribute to transcultural entanglements. Rather, it recognises the complexity inherent in such interactions. Perlin takes this complexity seriously, viewing it as a research problem rather than something to be overcome. As a result, he suggests turning away from the

old ideal of 'simplicity' as knowledge and virtue, towards the idea of the complex: to complexity as problem and subject of description and comprehension in its own right, no longer then as the inconvenient contingency of a too detailed reality that must and can be avoided by science and method.⁵³⁸

According to Perlin's perspective, it would be inadequate to perceive the intricate complexity in Nepal, southwest China, and Tibet during the 1860s as a disorganised premodern state awaiting transformation through the imposition of "modern" economic, political, and administrative structures. Instead, he suggests transcending the traditional conceptual boundaries associated with territory, ethnicity, language, politics, and other prevailing notions.

The concepts of a tributary state, independence, sovereignty, subordination, suzerainty, and vassalage play a prominent role in the material discussed in this book. These categories have been extensively

utilised in fields such as political science, history, and other disciplines to establish theoretical frameworks. The primary focus has been on the stability and continuity of the tributary system as a concept that contributes to maintaining border stability, power equilibrium, principles of international law, diplomatic relations, and the prevention of conflicts or wars.

However, it needs more historical and cultural sensitivity in understanding international relations because they must be embedded in the respective cultural and historical worldviews without simply being juxtaposed to each other. Studies on international relations are often state-focused, Eurocentric, ahistorical and influenced by rational choice models. The political scientist Zhou Fangyin, for instance, sees states as rational actors driven by material interests and the tributary system of China as the “the result of rational choice and strategic interaction among China and its neighbouring states.”⁵³⁹ Likewise, the historian Tsiang T’ing-fu argues that the tributary system was based on a dogma of suzerainty that rules out any form of equality:

that national security could only be found in isolation and stipulates that whoever wished to enter into relations with China must do so as China’s vassal, acknowledging the supremacy of the Chinese Emperor and obeying his commands, thus ruling out all possibility of international intercourse on terms of equality. It must not be construed to be a dogma of conquest or universal dominion, for it imposed nothing on foreign peoples who chose to remain outside the Chinese world. It sought peace and security, with both of which international relations were held incompatible. If relations there had to be, they must be of the suzerain-vassal type, acceptance of which meant to the Chinese acceptance of the Chinese ethic on the part of the barbarian.... It must not be assumed that the Chinese Court made a profit out of ... tribute. The imperial gifts bestowed in return were usually more valuable than the tribute.⁵⁴⁰

A more nuanced understanding of international relations requires historical and cultural sensitivity, recognizing the need to situate them within their respective cultural and historical contexts rather than

539 Zhou 2011, 176.

540 Tsiang 1936, 3–4 quoted from Fairbank and Teng 1941, 140.

simply juxtaposing different concepts. Traditional studies on international relations have often been focused on the nation-state, influenced by Eurocentric perspectives, devoid of historical analysis, and driven by rational choice models.

However, to ascertain the endurance and adaptability of guiding worldviews and the institutions built upon them, it is essential to consider the specific (trans)cultural contexts. In the Han-Chinese understanding of the Qing dynasty, Nepal was indeed considered a tributary state, although it may not have occupied a prominent or regular position in the Tianxia or “all under heaven” concept (天下) rooted in the Confucian worldview of cultural and moral supremacy and political sovereignty, which perceives the universe as a harmonious whole. According to this ancient system, China and the Emperor, as the “son of heaven,” are positioned at the centre of the world. Other peoples and states are concentrically arranged around this centre as

“inner” barbarians (more sinicized) and ‘outer’ barbarians (less sinicized). All “uncivilized” barbarians could become ‘civilized’ barbarians, if they are willing to be ‘transformed’. (...) Evolving from this discourse is a rigid dichotomy in Imperial China’s conceptualization of its relationship with other peoples and political entities; a relationship of super-ordination and sub-ordination as a system of co-existence between the Chinese and the non-Chinese world in full compliance with the Confucian assumptions of cosmic harmony.⁵⁴¹

Meanwhile, The Qing tributary system of audience and tribute payment (*chao-jin* 朝覲 and *gong-shu* 貢輸) was manifold and cosmopolitan.⁵⁴² The Manchus used less often the term “barbarian” than the Chinese, as we can also see from the sources.⁵⁴³ For them, it was more complex than the traditional Han-Chinese Confucian model. The Manchu Dynasty combined the master-slave model of the Manchus under the Imperial Household Department,⁵⁴⁴ the Tibeto-Mongolian Buddhist worldview, the Manchu-Mongolian Steppe culture (in the ways of *hu-cong* 扈從 and *hui-meng* 會盟), the Central Asian Islamic tribes (Mnc. *hoise-i aiman*) and the Confucian ideals from the Han-Chinese. A “tribute” might mean

541 Zhang and Buzan 2012, 14.

542 Millward 1998, 201; Lin 2009.

543 Cp. the Aisin Gioros in 2.2.5 and 2.2.7 with Wei Yuan 2.2.8.

544 Cp. Swen 2021.

differently for different populations in the Qing Empire, preserved in documents of different languages and institutes. The tributary banquet was itself a polytropic cosmopolis as we have seen in the writings of the Korean ambassadors.⁵⁴⁵

Nepal, or Gorkha was indeed positioned in the outer circle as the “minor or external foreigners” (*xiao-fan* or *wai-fan* 小番/外番), along with the Tibetans and rGyalrongic people who were “western foreigners” (*xi-fan* 西番)⁵⁴⁶ different from the “raw foreigners” (Mnc. *eshun fandz*, Chin. *sheng-fan* 生番). They were managed by the Central Asian tribute managing institution, *Li-fan-yuan*.⁵⁴⁷ The Malla rulers were referred to as khans, while the title conferred to the Gorkha King was *erdeni wang*. Both shows that they were considered under the Tibeto-Mongolian Buddhist worldview, and thus listed along with the Tibetans in the Bureau of Dependencies of *Li-fan-yuan* (Li-fan-yuan Dian-shu Qing-li Si 理藩院典屬清吏司), managed by the ambans residing in Tibet.⁵⁴⁸ Their missions were not controlled by the Ministry for Rites (*libu*) as in the case of Siam (Thailand), Korea, Myanmar, or Annam (Vietnam), the traditional tributary states within the Sinitic cultural sphere and Confucian model. The Gorkhalis were received by the Imperial Household Department instead, which made it more intimate and flexible. It cannot be denied that for Emperor Qianlong, Gorkha was significant in many aspects. Qianlong continued to enact his understanding of the hierarchical relation between him and the Gorkha King by sending summons of instructions to Rana Bahadur Shah via the amban Sungyūn, while he translated the end of the Gorkha Campaign into various ideologies within the Empire, declaring it as a great success to the entire Empire,

Tibet, playing a central role in the Sino-Nepalese relations, was a Lamaist theocracy with a strong religious authority vested in the Dalai Lama, etc. The religious claim by the Dalai Lama played a significant role in the relationship with China. Qianlong, the Qing Emperor, was personally inclined to the Tibetan Buddhism and considered himself to be Mañjuśrī. He also used the title, Mañjuśrī, and acknowledged the former Panchen Lama as his spiritual Buddhist guru, connecting

545 Cp. Ge 2014.

546 This is different from *xi-yang* 西洋, the term for the western foreigners coming by maritime routes.

547 Schorkowitz and Chia 2016, 43. See also *Draft History of Qing*, vol. 91, *Compilation of the Statutes in the Qing Empire* JQ, vol. 52 *Lifanyuan*, 31b.5.

548 *Qin-ding Li-fan-bu Ze-li*, no. 46 通例下, 司屬職掌; vol. 61 no. 926 西藏通制上, 稽查外番差人來藏.

himself with the (Buddhist) dharma-politics (Tib. *chos srid*).⁵⁴⁹ He thus built a replica of Tashilhunpo in Jehol where the Mongolian rulers were received in a Steppe way of hunting (Mnc. Muran i aba, Chin. Mu-lan Wei-ban 木蘭圍班).⁵⁵⁰ It must have thus influenced his determination to punish the Gorkhalis upon hearing that the real Tashilhunpo was damaged. For the Tibetans, the recovery of the treasure of Tashilhunpo was a sign of the capability of the Emperor as the best protector-patron (*gong ma mchod yon*) in the Buddhist sense, as was articulated in Dalai, Tatsag and Tenzin Peljor's biographies. For the Manchu-Mongolians, it was thus not only related to Tibetan Buddhism, which was influential among them, but also to the martial glory.

Starting from 1720, Tibet was under the changing degree of suzerainty of the Qing dynasty, so as to make sure the Mongolian population were under control. The Qing Empire's entering Tibet must have further international influence as the first amban in Lhasa, Sengge, also received the requests from the Malla kings. Now that the Gorkhalis had subjugated, the Qing Emperor replaced former Tibetan ministers and installed powerful ambans to control Tibet, although the effort faded out gradually after the death of Emperor Qianlong and a series of rebellions in China that follows

From the eyes of the Han-Chinese under the rule of the Manchu Emperor., the remission of the Gorkha race and the tributary envoy from afar due to the admiration and fear appealed to them. The Emperor showed the Han-Chinese population that the case was operated in the classical Confucian ideal of the emission (*hu-mao* 怙冒) of civilising power (*hua* 化, corresponding to Sanskrit *ājñā*) from the Emperor, as he employed these canonical idioms. He tried to escape the time-honoured criticism of an emperor of excessive military mobilisation (*qiong-bing du-wu* 窮兵黷武) but praised the benevolent virtue of sparing lives (*hao-sheng zhi de* 好生之德). He emphasised his inheritance of the heavenly mission in the cabinet edict (2.2.3c) For the Chinese Buddhist, what was articulated also resembled the model of *cakravartin* described in Prajñā's translation of the *Avataṃsakasūtra*.⁵⁵¹ All these ideologies were

549 Ishihama 2004 and 2011.

550 See *Qin-ding Li-fan-bu Ze-li*, vol. 21 扈從事例中.

551 The *dharma* of a *cakravartin*: "The Great King (Anala) of our state established nine principles, being able to turn the kingly wheel. What are the nine? 1. His virtue subjugated the four neighbours who prepared tribute on their own. 2. When the tributary gift was not brought in, he used his grace and sincerity to move them. 3. When they were not moved but disobeyed, the [King] persuaded their monarchs and ministers to have suspicion in each other. 4. They

combined in the quadrilingual Potala Inscription that were issued and dispersed in multiple forms everywhere in the Empire. Meanwhile, the quadrilingual lyric by Rana Bahadur Shah also served the same function to accord all ideologies and canonical traditions (*tong-wen* 同文) within one tributary banquet. Towards the end of Qianlong Era, i.e., the last years of eighteenth century, the Emperor tried his best to create a polytrophy in his Empire with a variety of efforts starting from the reception of Torghuts, invitation of the Panchen Lama, and now the inclusion of Gorkha music in the imperial corpora.

Therefore, the Chinese-Manchu bilingually annotated *Painting of Tributary Bearers* was ordered to be revised. It was a multi-scroll or multi-volume work. The first volume was for vassals and foreigners, while the later ones were the minorities of Taiwan and then the Mainland, such as Canton, Yunnan, Sichuan, and Guizhou. The first few illustrations in vol. 1 were dedicated to traditional vassals within the Confucian model such as Korea. Then came the westerners from the maritime routes and Russians overland, which were often managed by the Jesuits. They might even skip the official imperial institutes by resorting to the Imperial Household Department to avoid the ritually asymmetrical structure of the tributary system.⁵⁵² Then came the various Bodic people. The Gorkhali ambassador together with his servant

might thus correct their mind while having discords between monarchs and ministers. The King thus sent ambassadors to arrange agreements among them and make them turn toward the sacred civilising power. 5. If they refused the good persuasion, the King sent his army to do a punitive expedition. 6. The King watched over the commanders for their merits. 7. The King investigated the demerits and argued the defence of the fortress of the enemies. 8. Having understood that the enemies had firmly fortified fortress, the King estimated the power of the army. 9. The King deemed that the people were harmonious, and the army was powerful in his own country. The Great King (Anala) of our state possesses these nine principles, luminously opens his eyes of wisdom, and shines upon everything. Therefore, the eight directions all paid allegiance to the true civilising power/righteous command. They required to be subordinates on themselves and never turned back, just as the rivers and tides all go to the ocean and become one taste without a different intention.” 大方廣佛華嚴經卷11入不思議解脫境界普賢行願品：「我國大王成就九法，能轉王輪。何等為九？一、德伏四隣，自修職貢；二、貢賦不入，恩信感之；三、感之不從，說其君臣，令相疑阻；四、彼或革心，君臣異議，說使和同，令歸聖化；五、善說不聽，王師討伐；六、觀彼主率，將德有無；七、審其寡德，議其城守；八、知彼牢城，料兵強弱；九、自揣國中人和兵銳；我國大王具此九法，慧眼常明，照矚一切。是故八表咸歸正化，自求臣屬，永不退還；譬如眾流潮宗於海，皆同一味，無有異心。」 (CBETA 2024.R3, Taishō 10, no. 293: 712c20–29). The model of *cakravartin* here echoes with Qianlong's self-display of his decisions in the two Gorkha Campaigns.

552 Swen 2021.

came after these Tibetan populations and before the Islamic people and the Torghuts.⁵⁵³ Even though the Gorkhals were painted in 1793, posterior to all others, it found its place in the Empire after Tibet.⁵⁵⁴

Despite Nepal's eighteen documented missions, only ten of them between 1792 and 1908 had their presents/tributes recorded in the Chinese Collected Statutes (*Qing Hui-dian*),⁵⁵⁵ indicating that Nepal did not hold significant importance for China after Qianlong's arduous endeavours. Within this system, status was determined by cultural-political adjacency or personal intimacy with the Emperor rather than "national" power. Therefore, they were highly valued by Qianlong as he considered it to be his great achievement. However, his successors had too many other concerns and thus were negligent to Nepal. A similar situation also happened to the Ladakhis.⁵⁵⁶

The Pax Sinica, founded on the complex of tributary structures, indeed exhibited inherent inequality. Nevertheless, some states within this system maintained their sovereignty and autonomy. Nepal was able to continue entering into treaties with British India and sending ambassadors to India, Burma, or Tibet. The Qing Empire also did not wish to change no customs of Nepal other than the ritual music played by the musicians at court.

It is also true that a critical examination of Chinese historical records demonstrates that the Chinese themselves found their assumptions of cultural superiority to be more myth than reality.⁵⁵⁷

Accordingly, "(t)he Nepalese saw in the missions no token of subordination and no recognition of Chinese suzerainty."⁵⁵⁸ They could well pay respect to the Great Emperor outwardly, using obedient, humble and submissive terms, while still declaring victory inwardly within the sacred Hindu kingdom.

Furthermore, Nepal was not obligated to remain in the tributary system indefinitely. Nepal did not send missions regularly every five years and eventually ceased doing so altogether in 1908 without facing

553 Chuang 1989, 127.

554 Chuang 1992, 240.

555 See Fairbank and Teng 1941, 198.

556 Cp. Mengbao, vol. 1; 2.2.8. Note D. See also Kung 2021.

557 Zhang and Buzan 2012, 16.

558 Petech 1996, 167, similarly Stiller 1975, 213; Regmi 1975, 462, 480.

any significant repercussions from China. For an external and remote country such as Nepal, “the tributary system, thus, has open access and is also inherently elastic.”⁵⁵⁹ Nepal, thus, was never truly a vassal state to China. One would not find it on the maps made by the Qing court (e.g., Huang-chao Yu-di Quan-tu), and thus the Chinese never thought about providing military aids, as they did for the Koreans.

Moreover, Nepal did not adhere to any of the Qing Empire’s worldviews by offering “tributes.” They did not convert to Buddhism as the Tibetan hagiographies claimed. The country had its own distinct agenda. It increasingly positioned itself as the last Hindu kingdom in the world, upholding Hindu concepts of purity such as reverence for Brahmins or the holy cow. In contrast to India, which had been influenced and impacted by Muslim and Christian invasions, Nepal presented itself as a nation that remained untainted by these external forces. Nepal put forth the notion of being a purer country than India, as astutely observed by Richard Burghart:

Throughout the eighteenth century, Nepal was thought by the Nepālese to be a Hindu realm uncontaminated by Muslim rule. Prithvi Narayan thought that the Kingdom of Gorkha could become a ‘true Hindustan’ (*asal hindustan*).⁵⁶⁰ Fifty years later, however, nearly all the South Asian subcontinent had been subjugated by the cow-eating Firangi [European] and, given the presence, as always, of the pig-eating Bhotiya of the Tibetan plateau ruled by the barbarous Celestial Emperor at Peking, the remaining Hindustan on the subcontinent and that its political isolation was necessary in order to safeguard its purity.⁵⁶¹

This concept of purity, manifested through social institutions like conubium (marriage) and commensality (shared meals), permeated Nepalese society and placed non-Hindus in an inferior position. As a result, *kājī* Jagatsera was unable to dine with the Emperor or Thomas Cooper, as noted in Cooper’s travel report. Additionally, upon their return, all members of the Nepalese missions, including Jagatsera, had to undergo a process of rehabilitation or purification ritual (*prāyaścitta*) before they could meet the king, Prime Minister, or be reintegrated into their

559 Zhang and Buzan 2012, 19.

560 See Stiller 1989, 44.

561 Burghart 1984, 115–16; cp. Michaels 1997 and 2005.

caste and family. This impurity was believed to be generated by crossing the ocean or leaving the sacred Indian subcontinent (*bharatavarṣa*), and even Jaṅga Bahādura experienced its effects when he travelled to London and Paris.

In sum, the historical context presents a complex interplay of various factors, including the involvement of local leaders, the presence of missionaries, the challenges posed by the highland regions, the activities of robbers and thieves,⁵⁶² the difficulties posed by the terrain and climate, the constant accusations of smuggling or committing espionage, and the personal economic interests of the Rana clan and the leaders of the missions. Within this complexity, the concepts of sovereignty, independence, and tributary state become inadequate in capturing the reality of the situation, as they tend to oversimplify perspectives. China employed diverse and adaptable methods of rule, including the granting and withdrawal of privileges, the conferral of titles and gifts (such as the *khitāpko parvānāra* in the Report of VS 1850), audiences with officials, and, regrettably, the use of violence. The Qing Empire generally tolerated cultural and religious peculiarities in the peripheries and did not seek to impose changes in local customs or forms of governance in the case of the Gorkha Kingdom. In some cases, it supplemented existing systems with the appointment of influential *ambans*, as was the case in Tibet.

The more interesting point, however, is the complexity of the situation that gives rise to a multitude of strategies with political, economic, societal, or religious objectives. These strategies are intricately intertwined with diverse cultural and transcultural environments, reflecting the diverse perspectives and worldviews at play. Zhou aptly remarks (as if he had read Perlin's study), that Top of Form Bottom of Form

the policies of China and peripheral states under the tributary system were constantly undergoing change, and that it was by no means a rigid mode of behaviour or a unilaterally imposed status quo, but instead a complex and dynamic diplomatic phenomenon.⁵⁶³

562 Sun Shi-yi and Heliyen both recorded cases of provisions or army equipment being stolen (KRKJL, vol. 36 passim; Heliyen, vol. 1, 32–33).

563 Zhou 2011, 178.

In addition, Zhang Yongyin, professor of International Politics, and Barry Buzan, Emeritus Professor of International Relations at the London School of Economics, rightly observe (as if they had been at the Heidelberg Centre of Transcultural Studies):

Variations in the institutional practices of the tributary system as a trans-cultural construct, therefore, are the norm rather than an exception or deviation.⁵⁶⁴

Nevertheless, the question still lingers: should we embrace this inherent variability as a fundamental mode rather than focusing solely on transculturality? For a long time, disciplines within the humanities, particularly those dealing with historical, textual, and anthropological material, or employing hermeneutic methods, have faced criticism for their perceived complexity. This complexity has often been portrayed as an intellectual or methodological flaw, suggesting that the humanities lack the ability to achieve rigorous and valid results compared to the sciences. However, according to Perlin's perspective, which is supported by the material presented in this article, there is another way to interpret this complexity. It is not merely a result of confusion or scholarly error, but rather a necessary aspect in dealing with diverse circumstances, locations, environments, institutions, constellations, and processes. In fact, it is this very complexity that enables the interchangeability and translatability of different taxonomies and world-views, as Perlin, influenced by Immanuel Kant, would argue, is a priori possible.

Regarding the manifold tributary systems, the insights provided by Zhang and Buzan strongly support this perspective in a noteworthy manner:

It is through long, tumultuous and never-ending historical and social processes of assertion, imposition, contention, contestation, rejection, acquiescence and acceptance that ideas, beliefs and metavalues constitutive of the constitutional structure of the tributary system become intersubjective, to varying degrees, between Imperial China and other constituent parties of the tributary system. Fundamental institutions defined and shaped by these processes, therefore, do not just reflect the hegemonic

564 Zhang and Buzan 2012, 24.

institutional preferences, but also represent a collective solution invented by, and consented to among, East Asian states to the perennial problem of inter-state conflict, co-existence and cooperation. The institutional innovations of the tributary system make the East Asian order appreciably different from other regional orders in world history, from Europe to the Middle East. (...) The malleability of the tributary system is, then, a necessary virtue, which is aimed at accommodating different challenges in institutional practices in Pax Sinica.⁵⁶⁵

Therefore, complexity should be recognised as the foundation for comprehending the comprehensibility and translatability of diverse (trans)cultural realms. The often-lamented absence of conceptual clarity should not be considered as an analytical blemish, but rather as an opportunity to explore additional and alternative paths beyond overarching yet oversimplifying theories and methods. This exploration leads us towards the subjective, the narrative, the non-verbal, the sensual, the visual, the arbitrary, and ultimately towards embracing complexity in its intrinsic nature.

565 *Ibid.*, 34–35.