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## **Wool, Toothbrushes, and Beards: Kalimpong and the “Golden Era” of Cross-Border Trade**

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**Abstract** In the first issues of the *Himalayan Times*, a locally produced newspaper, Kalimpong is described as having a high potential for development, due to the caravans of wool making their way from Tibet through Kalimpong and on to India, the US, and beyond. In the years to follow, the Kalimpong trading scene became a well-known locus for the sharing of geopolitical knowledge and the forging of new economic networks from far-flung locations. From a mule staging ground to a retail hub for commodities such as Santa Claus beards, this paper argues that an examination of the changes in mid-twentieth century Kalimpong-based trade is a good starting point from which to investigate larger scale geopolitical shifts and the restructuring of social and economic inequalities in the Himalayas.

## Introduction

During its run from 1947 to 1963, the first few pages of the Kalimpong-based newspaper *Himalayan Times* nearly always featured articles concerning the political and economic state of the small town nestled in the foothills of the Himalayas. In one of the first available issues from December 25, 1949, the editorial stated the following:

It is true that Kalimpong is a locked place and that it has very difficult access to rail heads and has no transport facilities but it has high industrial potential [...]. [It was] unplanned and unintegrated which twin defects never allowed the locality to flourish. [...] since August 1947, however, conditions have vitally changed [...]. With the present supply of raw wool from Tibet which till now has been feeding the U.S.A. carpet factories and some factories in India, there is no reason why Kalimpong cannot be developed into an area buzzing with cottage industries (*Himalayan Times*, December 25, 1949, 4).<sup>1</sup>

These sorts of articles demonstrate how Suresh Chandra Jain, the newspaper's main editor—as well as his staff members—were acutely aware of Kalimpong's peculiar geopolitical vantage point in the border areas of north-east India, Tibet, and Bhutan at the beginning of the tumultuous second half of the twentieth century. Although the narrative of the twentieth-century economic boom brought in by the wool trade with Tibet has been referred to by many traders and local inhabitants as the golden era of Kalimpong's existence, it was more often extreme fluctuations that characterised local economic and material life in the town—such as prosperity followed by sudden loss, or the rapid growth of cross-border transportation infrastructure paired with border closures. These ups and downs have received far less acknowledgement. Transnational trade through Kalimpong was precarious, risky, and profoundly affected by immediate and material changes to the landscape, as I wish to demonstrate in the following pages.

Kalimpong's reputation as a hill town for missionaries and educators, a centre for Buddhist knowledge, the Nepali diaspora, a “nest of spies” during the 1950s, and as the main staging ground for Tibetan wool bound for North America and India, remains at the forefront of much of the historical and anthropological literature on this region of the Himalayas (see for example Cammann 1970; Hackett 2012; Huber and Blackburn 2012; McGranahan 2010; McKay 1997; Shakya 1999; Subba 2008; and van Spengen 2000). But in addition to emphasising the importance of Kalimpong as an entrepot for the Tibet trade, narratives of economic life expose much more than a

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1 “Cottage Industry,” *Himalayan Times*, December 25, 1949, 4. [http://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/himalayan\\_times](http://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/himalayan_times); accessed October 28, 2015. Many thanks to Markus Viehbeck, Sandip Jain, and Heidelberg University for making the *Himalayan Times* accessible online.

straightforward continuous growth in wealth, followed by a linear decline after Chinese troops arrived in Tibetan-speaking areas in the 1950s. People's everyday lives in Kalimpong were greatly affected by a range of significant political, economic, and environmental events between 1949–1962 which led to uneven fluctuations in the value and availability of goods.

In the case of Kalimpong, the entry of China into Tibet was not the only event that led to changes in the economic and social landscape along the cross-border trade route: a combination of landslides, the availability of pack animals, improvements to road infrastructure, and changes in vehicular transport were more immediate, material factors that significantly affected economic life in the town. These ups and downs were also marked by serious efforts by those in the town—but not as victims of economic decline—to maintain Kalimpong as a Himalayan economic hub despite infighting, geopolitical tensions, changes in transport and technology, and even natural disasters beyond their control. Taking as its basis articles on trade in the *Himalayan Times* and the *Tibet Mirror* (Tibetan, *yul phyogs so so'i gsar 'gyur me long*), and supplemented by oral narratives from Tibetan, Marwari, and Tibetan Muslim traders who were involved in the Kalimpong-Lhasa trade and interviewed between 2005–2006, this essay is thus a short narrative of trade during the turbulent—though prosperous, for some—years of 1949–1963.<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, I hope to expose a material and more-than-human history of the Kalimpong-based trade in the twentieth century. By more than-human I refer here to an approach that forces us to look beyond the landscape as a neutral or static backdrop to activities that happen on or with it (Braun 2005; Ingold 1993, 152). This kind of contemporary history of Kalimpong should thus incorporate not only the turbulent socio-political transformation of the Himalayan region, but also events that are not centred on humans—such as landslides and even the availability of mules as pack animals—in shaping its future.

## Geopolitical, economic, and environmental fluctuations in trade

The history of trade through Kalimpong—in particular the Lhasa-Kalimpong wool trade in the twentieth century—has been documented by several historians, and captured in old video footage, fictional accounts, and important oral histories from Tibetan, Marwari, Newar, Tibetan Muslim and several other groups of traders in Lhasa and Kalimpong (see for example Dhondrup 2000; Hilker 2005; Tuladhar 2004). The specific route between Lhasa and Kalimpong, forced open by the British entry into the Chumbi Valley in 1904 is often illustrated by harrowing stories and images of mule

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2 The *Tibet Mirror* is available online from Columbia University: [http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/digital/collections/cul/texts/ldpd\\_6981643\\_000/](http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/digital/collections/cul/texts/ldpd_6981643_000/); accessed October 28, 2015.



Figure 1: Advertisement for language classes in Kalimpong, December 1952.

caravans and their muleteers braving blizzards in Phari, or porters lugging bundles of musk and boxes of imported commodities along the bustling 10<sup>th</sup> Mile in Kalimpong. Wool, one of the most ubiquitous commodities in Kalimpong during the twentieth century, was piled in bales onto mules and yak in Tibet, making the month-long (give or take, depending on time of year and road conditions) journey over the Himalayas to Kalimpong. Animal skins, silver coins, jaggery, yak tails, and medicinal herbs also travelled the route, while clothing, pens, household items, and electrical appliances headed in the opposite direction up from the port of Calcutta by rail and mule caravans to Kalimpong, the staging ground for mules travelling up to Tibet (Harris 2013; van Spengen 2013).

Kalimpong's geographical, social, and economic position as a contact zone provided the stage for the "spatial and temporal co-presence of people whose geographic and historical trajectories now intersect," such as Marwari and Newar traders, Chinese shopkeepers, the Tibetan elite, and British missionaries (Pratt 2003, 7). This co-presence is marked strikingly by advertisements in the town's English- and Tibetan-language newspapers during this era, for instance in the *Himalayan Times* and the *Tibet Mirror*. Take for example a 1952 announcement from the Kalimpong Youth for Christ, inviting locals to attend a talk by medical missionary Dr. Joe Church from Rwanda and his "African Christian Colleague," or an advertisement for language classes in Tibetan, Chinese, Hindi, and Bengali (figure 1). There were also articles reporting on global infrastructure expansion, such as the news that the Dutch airline KLM was increasing its routes in Europe, and that it had been transporting baby elephants, pythons, tigers, and bears from Calcutta to Milan (*Himalayan Times*, May 18, 1952, 10; December 7, 1952, 7; March 29, 1953, 3; May 3, 1953, 4).<sup>3</sup> In the *Tibet Mirror*, similar advertisements—for European-made pens, electrical items of

3 "Kalimpong Youth For Christ," May 18, 1952, 10; "Language Classes," December 7, 1952, 7; "KLM's World-Wide Network," March 29, 1953, 3; "KLM's Flying Ark," May 3, 1953, 4.

all kinds, but also wool carders, and butter churns—give an indication of the diverse groups and dissimilar backgrounds of traders, missionaries, teachers, nobles, and local inhabitants who comprised the far-flung networks that converged in this region during the twentieth century. But as outlined in the introduction to this volume, Mary Louise Pratt’s term “contact” zone refers not only to the co-presence of groups that embody large scale asymmetries of power, such as those between coloniser and colonised. The term also opens up space for more flexible relations of power from a more micro-level perspective, such as between local Tibetan and Indian trading syndicates. I would add that global trade, although mostly affected by political relations between India, Tibet, and China, were equally subject to local developments that affected the flows of people, goods and ideas through Kalimpong, and that these developments were not necessarily always human-centred. One such example is the susceptibility of the eastern Himalayas to landslides and flooding, as I will describe below.

In addition to advertisements, lists of commodity prices were featured in most issues of the *Tibet Mirror* (figure 2). The graph in Figure 2 is a very rough rendering of the ups and downs of the costs of Tibetan black and white yak tails, just one of the many commodities that were brought from Lhasa to Kalimpong in mule caravans (Harris 2014).<sup>4</sup> While black yak tails

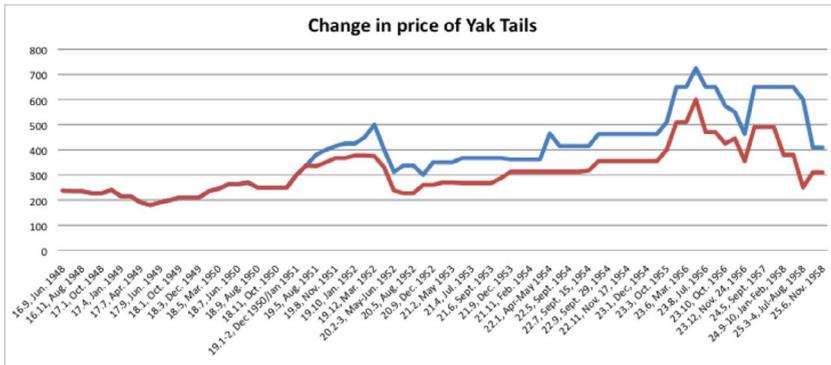


Figure 2: Fluctuations in yak tail prices (in Rupees), 1948–1958.

were used as flywhisks and ritual implements in Tibet and South Asia, white yak tails were coveted in North America for their sturdy, waterproof hair for making Santa Claus beards, as the figure of Santa Claus became increasingly popular in American shopping malls during the consumer boom of the post-war 1950s. Taking this graph with a grain of salt—it is important to note that several issues of the newspaper are missing and that the figures provided are sometimes inconsistent—it is possible to see that the economic lives of the yak tails were subject to many of the

4 Many thanks to Nazly Dehganiazar for the graph and for help in preparing data based on the commodity listings in the *Tibet Mirror*.

same changes that affected the wool trade. Such vacillations in availability and price are significant; a closer look at archival and oral sources shows that these fluctuations were not based simply on supply and demand, and severely impacted the life of the town.

As an example, one might take a look at the small dip that the graph depicts towards the end of 1950. During the summer months of 1950, severe flooding and subsequent landslides had washed out many parts of the Darjeeling Himalayas. Along the Lhasa-Kalimpong trade route, Yatung in Tibet had become inundated with water and its inhabitants had been evacuated, and all road traffic was suspended between Kalimpong and Siliguri. The Darjeeling Railway had been severely damaged by landslides, with the warning that it might never function again. The nearby Ropeway over the Teesta River, which was used to bring goods—mostly bales of wool—from Durpin to the railhead at Siliguri, snapped. Because the roads and transport networks were such a lifeline for the sustainability of the transnational economic connection between Kalimpong and Tibet, an article in the *Himalayan Times* suggested repairing the local infrastructure immediately after the disasters, lest delicate relations with Tibet continue to be exacerbated:

Our present relation with the Government of Tibet is rather delicate and the Tista Valley road along with the D. H. Railway is the main trade route to Tibet. What would happen to the entire wool trade of Tibet if heavy bails [sic] of wool do not move from Kalimpong for months together? The entire economy of Tibet will be subjected to very severe tests and we are sure the Government of India would not like at the present moment that Tibet should face any economic upheaval (*Himalayan Times*, June 25, 1950, 4).<sup>5</sup>

The inextricable economic links between Kalimpong and Tibet are clear here; when a landslide disrupts the smooth transportation of commodities along the roads from Kalimpong, repercussions are felt in Lhasa, and vice versa. Although histories of the tumultuous twentieth century in the Himalayan region are often set against political tensions at the national level, it is here that more immediate problems, such as environmental disasters and the resulting breakdown of infrastructure, come to the fore. Two recent pieces in *Political Geography* have called for more creativity in thinking about geopolitics by paying attention to “the capacity of nonhumans (along with humans) to both facilitate and contest inscriptions of space” (Depledge 2015, 91; Grundy-Warr et al. 2015). In other words, it can be useful to think of the fluctuations in the Lhasa-Kalimpong trade through a more-than-human approach to geopolitics (Braun 2005). Here, physical and environmental processes such as landslides, the availability of pack animals such as mules and yak, and objects on the landscape such

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5 “Wool Trade Threatened With Dislocation,” June 25, 1950, 4.

as collapsed bridges, should all be considered as agents in influencing major changes in larger-scale geopolitical histories of the region.

Of course, increasing tensions between nation-states seriously impacted the economy and livelihoods of the inhabitants of Kalimpong. But rather than see these tensions as global tensions that impacted the local life of Kalimpong in a top-down manner, traders in the town themselves were profoundly linked to and contributed to large-scale global politics. These contributions, however, were complex in the sense that traders all had stakes in the transnational trade through the town, but “the range and kind of stakes varied widely” (Pratt 1991, 39). For instance, the Export Ban on Wool transpired immediately after the landslides of 1950 and the subsequent failure of road and rail infrastructure in the hill area. The Export Ban on Wool was a directive from the Indian Government that was announced after the United States embargo against products from (newly-communist) China. As Tibet was considered part of China, all products from Tibet were considered Chinese and therefore subject to the ban. This brought a sense of panic amongst the traders of Kalimpong who profited from selling Tibetan wool abroad. An article in September of 1950 stated that:

The wool tangle at Kalimpong remains unsolved. The warehouses have limited stocks of Wool, mostly baled and ready for shipping, but there is the export ban, [and] the ropeway still fails to function though assurances on this point are many. Parties blame each other for machiavellian manoeuvres and the Government think they have acted wisely and to the best of their knowledge. Now we hear that the Railway line connecting the Rilli ropeway station and Riyang has been removed thus creating further difficulties of carriage. Confusion couldn't be worse confounded than in this instance (*Himalayan Times*, September 17, 1950, 6).<sup>6</sup>

The confusion could not have been worse indeed. The Export Ban would be applied to all Tibetan wool and yak tails that were not already in India by December 17, 1950 (*Himalayan Times*, April 20, 1952, 6).<sup>7</sup> At this point, 50,000 maunds of wool already lay dormant in the godowns (warehouses) of Kalimpong.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the corresponding dip in Figure 2 during spring of 1952 reflects that “the prices at the time of the [Export Ban] announcement had fallen from 120 cents to 50 cents per lb. (cost and freight paid) [...] further tightening of regulation has resulted in the American announcement that all other wool ([...] without any Tibet interest) must be shipped by March 1, 1952 [and] that all Bills of Landing must reach U.S. by March 1” (*Himalayan Times*, April 20, 1952, 8).<sup>9</sup> For the traders at this time, frantically

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6 Spy Glass, “Durpin to Deolo,” September 17, 1950, 6.

7 Suresh Chandra Jain, “Crisis in Wool Trade in Kalimpong,” April 20, 1952, 6.

8 A maund is a bulk weight of approximately 40-80 kg.

9 “Crisis in Wool Trade in Kalimpong,” April 20, 1952, 8.

trying to get rid of the wool revealed the global dimension of the wool trade; merchants began to argue with purchasers about the “real” national origin of the wool in order to dispose of their wares as quickly as possible. For some, it was not Chinese but Indian wool; for others, it belonged to both India and the US, having already been purchased by buyers in the United States. For still others, it was Bhutanese wool, since Tibetan sheep had mixed with sheep on the borders of Bhutan. With traders and buyers placing a nationality on sheep, the sheep themselves became entangled in the traders’ economic and geopolitical decision-making—yet another kind of more-than-human dimension to the Kalimpong trade.

Now that wool from Tibet/China/Bhutan/India—wherever it was “originally” from— could no longer be exported to the United States, those involved in the wool trade in Kalimpong needed to search for new markets. The biggest trading families—Pangdatsang, Sadhustang, and Reting—were the ones who faced the greatest losses and who most needed to take their chances if they were to survive and remain monopolies in Kalimpong, but where could the wool go now?

Representatives of the three principal Tibetan Wool Merchants, Messrs. Pangda Tshang, Sadu Tshang and Rading La-brag and the Secretary of the Tibet Traders’ Association Kalimpong has left for Calcutta to see the Chinese Counsel there in connection with wool trade. They have gone with samples of Tibet Wool and are expected to finalise some big deal for sale of their large holdings with the Communist Block of Wool Traders in Russia and China (*Himalayan Times*, March 16, 1952, 5).<sup>10</sup>

Reports in late March 1952 were hopeful: apparently, a number of inquiries for purchasing Tibetan wool had come in from Japan, Germany, and Russia, with Russia being the most promising buyer. After a lengthy silence from Russia, the representatives of the three main trading families were able to get the Chinese government to purchase 80,000 maunds of wool towards the end of May 1952. Out of this, stocks held by 114 Tibetan traders “including the large business houses of Pandatsang, Sandutsang, and Retting, amounted to about 60,000 maunds. A further balance of 20,000 maunds were lying at Phari trade mart and at places between Lhasa and Phari” (*Himalayan Times*, June 1, 1952, 11).<sup>11</sup> The fact that the Tibetan traders were able to secure these deals threw the larger Kalimpong trading community into a frenzy.

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10 “Tibetan Traders’ Delegation Leaves for Calcutta,” March 16, 1952, 5.

11 “Wool Details Sent to Lhasa,” June 1, 1952, 11.

## Unequal prosperity

The president of the Kalimpong Chamber of Commerce, Sri Rameswar Agrawal, gave an anniversary address in Kalimpong's Town Hall on June 24, 1952, where he stated angrily that, "Indian merchants at Kalimpong kept Tibet well supplied with the best of food and clothing which Tibetans seem to have forgotten to-day when they are negotiating independent wool deals with their new Chinese masters in total disregard of the wool that were purchased from them and are now lying in the godowns of Indian traders at Kalimpong" (*Himalayan Times*, June 29, 1952, 8).<sup>12</sup> This anger was clearly directed at the wealthy and elite Tibetan trading families who went directly to the Indian government to allow them to trade between Tibet and China through "Indian soil and ports without their being required to pay any customs, import or export duties" (*Himalayan Times*, June 29, 1952, 8).<sup>13</sup> Furious at this introduction of monopolistic trade, Agrawal addressed the crowd of mostly Marwari traders. It is here that we have an example of the divisions in trade and profit marked by class and ethnicity in the town; the three main trading families dictating the geographical direction of the wool trade, during a small window in the history of trade through Kalimpong.

While the three Tibetan trading families were struggling to hold on to their longstanding legacy of trade in the cross-border region, different classes of traders—the muleteers and porters responsible for bringing the caravans back and forth to Kalimpong—began to reap profits. For instance, in July 1952, against the backdrop of a severe strain felt by Tibetans in Tibet, when food was scarce and prices were soaring, the Chinese government provided interest-free loans to businesses that were importing food from India (Shakya 1999, 135). China needed to bring a thousand tonnes of rice to Tibet, which had to go through India because of the lack of internal roads in China. The loads of rice were sent to Siliguri, then up to Gangtok. It was noted that "all available mules are being reserved for carrying these rice bags to different parts of Tibet which has created a flutter amongst private merchants who feel great difficulty in finding mules to carry their goods to Tibet either from Kalimpong or from Gangtok. The muleteers however are reported to be happy as the Chinese are paying them well for the services of their mules" (*Himalayan Times*, July 13, 1952, 2).<sup>14</sup> Transport wages to various locations in Tibet also skyrocketed, where a single *bdal gla* (Tib., "one mule load" or two maunds) from Kalimpong to Lhasa rose from thirty-five Rupees to 200 Rupees in the course of a few days (*Himalayan Times*, July 27, 1952, 5).<sup>15</sup> Porters' wages had surged to the extent that people who had previously not been porters became "attracted to the profession" and porters from Yatung, Bhutan, and Eastern Nepal began to flock to Kalimpong

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12 "Kalimpong Chamber of Commerce 26th Anniversary Meeting," June 29, 1952, 8.

13 Ibid.

14 "In Tibet To-Day: Control Order Promulgated," July 13, 1952, 2.

15 "Gleaning From Tibet," July 27, 1952, 5.

for work. Other commodities were fetching higher prices as well; while “the wage for the distance of 40 miles paid for Chinese rice is Rs. 35/- per mule, for other merchandise it is as high as Rs. 58/- per mule and Rs. 28/- per porter” (*Himalayan Times*, October 5, 1952, 5).<sup>16</sup>

Viewing the trade through immediate, material circumstances such as lack of access to mules, it is possible to see this as a peculiar moment in Kalimpong’s history of trade where the economic power of the long-standing Tibetan trade families began to diminish, and the smaller traders began to reap the economic benefits of the transnational trade. A further example is for instance the 1953 reports from traders in Kalimpong of hundreds of camels that were said to have been plying between Phari and Yatung to replace the mules that had been transporting wool. Apparently, overwork and malnutrition during the previous trade season meant that a lot of mules had died; in addition, many mules were also being used by Chinese troops for road-building and other pack animals were in great demand. Yak too were also hard to obtain for transport as they were reportedly being used for Tibetan road builders and Chinese troops (*Himalayan Times*, November 22, 1953, 3).<sup>17</sup> Once again, a more-than-human story such as the availability of pack animals can be seen as another important material component of geo-political and geo-economic change in the region.

In October 1954, the market for commodities in Tibet began to soar as a result of the increasing demands of Chinese troops in Lhasa and the surrounding areas. In Kalimpong, a note of hope lingered in the air; India had signed a trade pact with China, trade through Kalimpong to Tibet was on course to resume, and Agrawal made optimistic declarations to the Kalimpong Chamber of Commerce that “there is every reason to believe that this upward trend will continue in the near future” (*Himalayan Times*, October 17, 1954, 9).<sup>18</sup> The *Losar* (Tibetan New Year) celebrations in Kalimpong in 1955 were reported to be held with “great enthusiasm,” precisely because of the increase in demand for commodities from India for the rapidly growing, Chinese-run city of Lhasa. Around this time, the Trade Agency of the People’s Republic of China in India was opened at Kalimpong, with Lobzang Yampel Pangdatsang as the first Trade Agent. Further hopes were also raised by the possibility of Kalimpong-based traders working in collaboration with those in Lhasa, with the aim of maintaining the long-standing trade links and networks between Tibet and Kalimpong.

Increases in profits for smaller traders, muleteers, and porters also went hand-in-hand with the rise in ownership of personal automobiles and the completion of fully motorable roads along the trade route in 1955 and 1956. Features and articles in both the *Tibet Mirror* and the *Himalayan Times* began to be accompanied by a notable increase in advertisements

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16 “Heavy Demand of Porters at Gangtok,” October 5, 1952, 5.

17 “Chinese Camels in Tibet,” November 22, 1953, 3.

18 “India Signs Trade Pact With China, Concessions on Transit to Tibet,” October 17, 1954, 9.

for jeeps and cars, specifically models by Ford and Studebaker. Indeed, many items that were in serious demand in Tibet reflected the increase of rapid infrastructure building of roads: tyres, inner tubes, and equipment for yak and horse carts, for example. In addition, the increase in the availability and movement of commodities through Kalimpong led to fierce competition between different brands of the same coveted product. One popular Indian item that was sought-after in Lhasa was toothbrushes. Aryan Toothbrushes was one brand that prided itself on finding markets in Tibet and beyond, and found itself in heated competition with the Brite toothbrush company (figure 3):

M/S Bright Bros of Bombay are once again in the market with their famous 'Brite' Tooth Brushes, capturing the fancy of the Chinese and the Tibetan merchants. Reports reveal that their Export Agents at Kalimpong are overwhelmed with orders for *Brite Tooth Brushes*. They are also offering nice presents with every case of their tooth brushes (*Himalayan Times*, January 22, 1956, 3).<sup>19</sup>

Both companies took out ads in Tibetan, English, and Chinese, and railed against each other in notices in the *Himalayan Times* in order to remind consumers to "beware of imitations." Indeed, by summer 1956 the town of Kalimpong was going through a revival in trade; imports of Tibetan wool into Kalimpong reported an increase of about 4,000 maunds nearly every week. But this renewed trading activity was short-lived; a rapid slump soon followed, which I will outline in more detail further below.

## Transportation and technology

One of the most common narratives found in both of the Kalimpong-based newspapers was the building of roads along the trade route. Thousands of Chinese troops were deployed to build roads in Tibet, and paired with the Government of India's five-year programme for road-building, the expectation of a shorter journey—and indeed, one that could accommodate cars instead of mules—across the Himalayas was palpable amongst traders in the town. By the end of 1951, repairs to the roads from Gangtok to Nathu-la, Jelep-la, and Lachen were well underway. While mule, yak, and porter transportation was until this point the main way of getting goods up over the Himalayas, by the summer of 1952 there was a great hullabaloo about the road from Yatung to Gyantse being prepared for a fully motorable journey, and traders were beginning to feel the anticipation fanned by this coming change.

Around 1954, automobiles and trucks began to be more common along the trade routes between Kalimpong and Lhasa, thanks to improvements

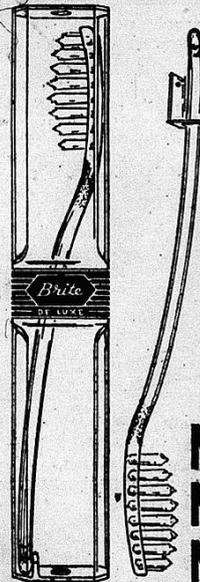
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19 "Beware of Imitations," January 22, 1956, 3.

Two *Himalayan Times* April 22, 1956

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STOCKISTS  
**BALKISHANDAS SHYAMRATAN**  
KALIMPONG

**Brite**  
**TOOTH BRUSH**

Figure 3: Brite Toothbrush advertisement in Tibetan, Chinese, and English, April 1956.

in the roads. A report from Kalimpong in the summer of 1954 noted that new vehicles—including bicycles, cycle rickshaws, and tongas (horse-drawn carriages)—had travelled through Kalimpong to Tibet. Cars, novel to Tibetans, were “mostly owned by either rich landlords and traders or by Chinese officials and government offices” (*Himalayan Times*, June 27, 1954, 3).<sup>20</sup> During this period, the Dalai Lama’s new car, a gift from the Chinese government, had just arrived in Calcutta, while the Panchen Lama’s car had

20 “Vehicular Traffic in Tibet,” June 27, 1954, 3.

already been delivered. Even mule transport had dramatically changed as a result of road improvements; mules that had previously been used as pack animals were now drawing “rubber wheeled cart[s], one of which is already plying between the upper and the lower Chumbi valley covering a distance of about five miles in one hour” (*Himalayan Times*, June 27, 1954, 3).<sup>21</sup> Towards the end of August 1955, the number of vehicles brought from Kalimpong to Lhasa had increased to approximately 6,000 bicycles and 100 motorcycles, and a breathless report from a trader noted that the journey from Yatung to Lhasa was to be slashed from twenty to twenty-five days by mule caravan to only three days by automobile (*Himalayan Times*, September 4, 1955, 3)!<sup>22</sup>

These massive cuts in transport time and material transformations in technology along the newly repaired roads thus amounted to significant alterations in traders’ experiences of time and space; the feeling of a “shrinking of space,” well documented by Wolfgang Schivelbusch in his cultural history of the introduction of the railroad (Schivelbusch 1986). By the beginning of 1956, the consignments from Kalimpong to Lhasa no longer consisted of just four or five cars per journey. For instance, thirteen jeeps with trailers and a truck were brought by one Sri Onkar Mull Mintri of Messrs. Mintry Transport, Kalimpong for export to Tibet, one of the biggest consignments thus far. As was common in the mid-1950s, the vehicles—too large to traverse the narrow mountain roads at their highest—were disassembled in Kalimpong “to be packed into loads of reasonable weight and size so that these may be conveniently carried on mules and porters up to Phari” (*Himalayan Times*, January 29, 1956, 5).<sup>23</sup> This is thus another moment where porters and mules were in great demand, right before the roads became fully accessible over the mountain passes and the porters and mules were quickly made redundant. This happened soon after the end of 1956.

## Disorganisation and decline

This season of Indo Tibet trade has been one of the worst it can be said without any hesitation. There are many reasons for this. The most important cause of this position is due to huge accumulation of goods in Tibet which are still lying undisposed. The postponement of the development plan in Tibet by the Chinese authorities can also be ascribed as one of the reasons. The quantity of Tibetan Wool which came to India was comparatively low than past few years. Although the political office at Gangtok has always been trying to help the Indian interest, the entrance of some unscrupulous

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21 Ibid.

22 “Nathula-Phari Motorable Road,” September 4, 1955, 3.

23 “Jeeps for Tibet,” January 29, 1956, 5.

businessmen and their dishonest practices have been responsible for losing good will of Tibetan traders. Due to this year's bad season already four or five concerns have been closed down and many are contemplating to do so. If the present position continues, there will be threat of a big unemployment. Traders have no uniform policy and at Kalimpong alone there are half a dozen Trade bodies (*Himalayan Times*, February 16, 1958, 4).<sup>24</sup>

These frustrations began a few years previously, where editorials on the Indo-Tibetan trade bemoaned the fact that it was controlled by "a number of government officials of different departments with very little or at times no co-relation amongst them raising such intricate problems as defy all understanding and solution" (*Himalayan Times*, June 27, 1954, 4).<sup>25</sup> This included administrative positions such as the Political Officer in Sikkim, Sikkim State Officials, the Tibet Liaison Officer, the Land Customs Officials, the Enforcement Police, and the Frontier Check Post Staff. The distress amongst traders was that they needed to "pass through all these hurdles before any business materialises" (*Himalayan Times*, June 27, 1954, 4).<sup>26</sup>

But in addition to the red tape and bureaucratic headaches, perhaps one of the main reasons that led to this frustration within the trading community was the changing times. Transformations in transport and technology, as well as the creation of new trade networks in China, meant that old methods of trade were no longer sustainable. Several members of the main Tibetan trading families had left or were being accused of spying for the Chinese. The stagnancy of economic life in the town once again prompted serious concerns that Kalimpong was almost totally dependent on the Tibet trade. A very telling editorial in the *Himalayan Times* notes that "Our traders have not thought about the changing condition in Tibet, they are still thinking that the age old system of trade would go on for ever. Things have changed on both sides and the traders shall have to realise it. The situation won't improve only by multiplying daily new trade bodies and by talking about past; time has changed and they shall have to march according to it" (*Himalayan Times*, June 15, 1958, 4).<sup>27</sup> Like the editorial from 1949 presented at the beginning of this paper, there was always the acute awareness that Kalimpong would not always be able to rest on the back of the wool trade, but that new opportunities had to be recognised and correctly implemented.

A real sense of dread was beginning to become noticeable in Kalimpong towards the end of 1958; there were no new jobs for young people. This was compounded by another rapid decline of morale in the spring of 1959 as the Dalai Lama left for India. More restrictions on traders—including an

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24 "Indo Tibet Trade," February 16, 1958, 4.

25 "Indo Tibet Trade," June 27, 1954, 4.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

export duty that was reintroduced on yak tails, wool, musk, and carpets—was coupled with an announcement that China would take action against anyone not purchasing from Chinese stores; this forced many Indian traders to shut down their businesses in Tibet, particularly in Yatung. When the 1954 Sino-Indian Trade Agreement expired at the end of 1959, it was not renewed, and as a result, “Indian merchants in Tibet are now confronted with the inevitable conclusion that the Indo-Tibetan trade is dead” (*Himalayan Times*, July 24, 1960, 3).<sup>28</sup> Tensions came to a head in Kalimpong in 1960 when Chinese traders were asked to leave Kalimpong because they were considered to be “dangerous elements,” and by late August 1962, the only Indian merchant left in Yatung returned to Kalimpong, marking the end of the network of traders who spent their lives shuttling between Lhasa and Kalimpong (*Himalayan Times*, September 4, 1960, 1).<sup>29</sup> Soon afterwards, the first breach of the border leading to the Sino-Indian War essentially closed off all mountain passes between Tibet and India, bringing to a close all interaction across the border for nearly half a century to come.

## Conclusions: end of an era

In the very last issue of the *Himalayan Times* in 1963, the farewell editorial read as follows:

[...] the only English Weekly from North Bengal, “The Himalayan Times” is yet another victim of the complete stoppage of Indo-Tibet trade, and the consequent results ensuing therefrom such as fewer subscribers, fewer advertisements, and a general decrease in sales. As if these difficulties were not enough to contend with, there is also the present shortage of newsprint and the enhanced cost of production (*Himalayan Times*, February 17, 1963, 4).<sup>30</sup>

While it may be easy to label the failing businesses and unemployed inhabitants of early 1960s Kalimpong as the “victims” of the decline of the Tibet trade, it was in fact well known that the golden era could not last forever. Even David MacDonald, the former British Trade Agent in Yatung and Gyantse, pressed the warning bell in 1952:

[...] the red-light flashes for Kalimpong. Should the caravans from Tibet fail to come down here in their usual numbers, what of the entire 10th mile area where shops are stocked to the ceilings with merchandise to catch the eye of the Tibetan trader? Apart from large business houses engaged in the wool trade of which the profits may

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28 “Indo Tibetan Trade Deadlock,” July 24, 1960, 3.

29 “More Chinese Told to Leave Kalimpong,” September 4, 1960, 1.

30 “Farewell,” February 17, 1963, 4.

or may not remain in Kalimpong, what of the many inns catering for muleteers and Tibetan traders, and the local people who supply fodder and grain for thousands of mules, and the hundreds of workers with their dependents engaged in the wool-godowns in sorting and bailing Tibet wool? If Kalimpong is to flourish economically, Indo-Tibet trade must be sound (*Himalayan Times*, April 27, 1952, 2).<sup>31</sup>

After the devastating landslides and the destruction to local infrastructure in 1950, there was a grave understanding that Kalimpong's severance from Tibet would sound the death knell to its important economic, social, and geopolitical position in the Himalayas; "here we have only one type of trade—the trade with Tibet in absence of which Kalimpong has no importance from business point of view—which is a serious problem for the trading community of the locality to consider" (*Himalayan Times*, December 2, 1951, 2).<sup>32</sup> The understanding that Kalimpong must have a life of its own and that it should not be defined solely by its links with Tibet was underscored by numerous articles, books, and suggestions for setting up local cooperatives or introducing other products as alternatives to the wool trade. The *Himalayan Times* and the *Tibet Mirror* featured supplements that drew attention to "industrial possibilities" in the town, including harnessing water power in the region and increased facilities for tourism, so that its total dependence on the Tibet trade could be eased. In the 1960s, B.C. Roy (the Chief Minister of West Bengal) suggested, in his great distress at the impending stoppage of Indo-Tibetan trade, that small cooperatives should be set up in Kalimpong to improve horticulture and sericulture (*Himalayan Times*, May 29, 1960, 1).<sup>33</sup> Several of these cooperatives were indeed successful; cheese and milk manufacturing dairies were set up, such that Kalimpong became famous for its lollipops and cheese, and some former traders moved into the horticulture or tourism industries (*Himalayan Times*, June 12, 1960, 1).<sup>34</sup>

It is unsurprising perhaps that these twentieth-century steps toward revitalisation continue to be echoed through the sentiments of several Kalimpong residents and former traders in the 2000s, reflecting the resilience of a town acutely aware of its position and potential and not as a mere victim of border closure and the decline of trade, as portrayed in many sweeping accounts of the region. Residents mentioned the great potential for a revitalised economy of consumer products and produce such as oranges and ginger that could set Kalimpong apart from the outdated "tea, timber, and tourism" slogans of nearby towns such as Darjeeling and Gangtok (if only there was more support from the central government) (Harris 2013, 98–99). But the precariousness of Kalimpong's

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31 David I. MacDonald, "Kalimpong," April 27, 1952, 2.

32 "Industrial Kalimpong," December 2, 1951, 2.

33 "Dr. Roy Disturbed Due to Stoppage of Indo Tibet Trade," May 29, 1960, 1.

34 "Cheese Manufacture at Kalimpong," June 12, 1960, 1.

position in the hills is a continued concern; residents worry about the environmental repercussions of increased roadwork, dams, and the inevitable failure of infrastructure during every monsoon season. It is precisely these kinds of immediate, everyday dealings with more-than-human material life—oranges, dairy cooperatives, monsoons, rivers, and roads—that have characterised the contemporary history of Kalimpong, and it is by paying closer attention to these mundane aspects of material life that we can continue to follow the dynamic, fluctuating life of the town and its transnational connections.

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