

Introduction to Special Section

INTRODUCTION

NETWORKS AND IDENTITIES AS REVEALED BY JOURNEYS IN SOUTH ASIA AND THE HIMALAYAS

Aaron Fine, Truman State University, with contributions from the authors in this guest-edited section: Chaya Chandrasekhar, Janice Glowski, and Ihor Pidhainy.

This guest-edited section of *ASIANetwork Exchange* focuses on cultural networks in South Asia and the Himalayas during various periods from the late 19th century to the present. The issue is multi-disciplinary in outlook, including history, art history, the visual arts, and religion. Titled *Networks and Identities as Revealed by Journeys in South Asia and the Himalayas*, the section also broadly addresses themes of global migration, diaspora, exile, and colonization. Each of the four articles features a traveler whose cultural identity is every bit at stake as he explores and creates new cultural connections through his travel. This introduction provides a brief commentary on the articles, intending to help readers discover the various kinds of networks, and their effects, that may be found between individuals and the identities formed at their intersection. Additionally, the introduction serves as a reflection on how educators might bring the topics addressed in the articles into the undergraduate liberal arts classroom.

ARTICLES IN THIS SECTION

In “Tibet through the Eyes of a Buryat: Gombojab Tsybikov and his Tibetan Relations,” Ihor Pidhainy offers an historical examination of the travel writings of Gombojab Tsybikov (1873-1930), an ethnic Buryat from Russia. Tsybikov lived and studied in Tibet from 1899-1902 as part of a scholarly expedition sponsored by the Russian Geographical Society. The information that Tsybikov gathered about Tibet, and the photographs he made there, served to introduce Tibet to the world. Pidhainy’s study explores the circumstances of Tsybikov’s expedition and positions it within the broader context of religion, nation, international politics, and modernity. By examining the travel writings of Tsybikov, Pidhainy expands our understanding of cross-cultural interactions in the early 20th century. He argues that as a man between Asia and Europe, Tsybikov was an ideal candidate for the task of documenting Tibet, and, as a subject, is ideal for the study of transformation and complexity of identity in the modern world.

While there is a good body of scholarship on Sino-Tibetan connections, examinations of Buryat perspectives of Tibetan Buddhism remain limited. The article, which includes translations from Russian texts by the author, sheds light on an important individual little known to English-language readers. Additionally, Pidhainy’s study provides insights into the use of the photographic travel narrative in colonial and post-colonial contexts. This topic overlaps with Chaya Chandrasekhar’s article, which discusses an example of travel photography in post-Independence India.

Chandrasekhar’s “Along the Grand Trunk Road: The Photography of Raghbir Singh” provides an art historical perspective on Singh’s photographs of the Grand Trunk Road,

a major highway that extends across north India and Pakistan. For millennia, this thoroughfare has served as the gateway to the subcontinent and is thereby characterized by tremendous diversity and tolerance of differences. Between 1988 and 1991, Raghubir Singh (1942-1999), one of India's eminent documentary photographers, traveled and photographed the Indian section of the Road. Chandrasekhar examines how Singh carefully selects and arranges the photographs of the Grand Trunk Road in his publication in order to highlight the heterogeneity and acceptance of differences that mark the highway. By composing and organizing his photographs in a specific way, Chandrasekhar argues, Singh provided a critical visual commentary on the divisive politics in India at the time. The 1980s and early nineties in India witnessed the rise of Hindu nationalism, when many of its political arms attempted to erase the subcontinent's heterogeneous past in order to present India as a monolithic Hindu nation. Chandrasekhar's visual analysis of Singh's photographs demonstrates how photographers, along with painters, sculptors, and other artists of post-independence India contribute to the construction of national identity.

Photography has only recently become acceptable as a form of contemporary Indian art worthy of critical attention. As such, Chandrasekhar's study expands boundaries both in terms of its theme and the sources it employs. Aaron Fine's essay similarly examines a body of material that has traditionally escaped the attention of academic art and art history. The themes of identity and partisan politics continue in Fine's article.

In "No One Even Has Eyes," Fine employs creative non-fiction and his own coloring book-plate illustrations to explore the rapidly expanding digitalization of Indian visual space. In recounting his journey to Mumbai, India, he considers the expansion of political networks and the destruction of creative ones, even as this change lays bare his own (1971 – present) status as outsider, post-colonizer, and practitioner of pre-digital visual art. This investigation underscores how technological change, while advancing cultural connectivity, could simultaneously result in the loss of individual creative identity. Fine's study addresses significant lacunae by bringing to the foreground an art form that has dominated the political visual landscape of India since independence, but which scholarship has tended to disregard as mass-produced propaganda. Examining the digitalization of political posters, Fine's work calls attention to the drastic shifts taking place for the art form and its marginalized artists. Like Fine's work, Janice Glowski's article also explores dramatic change expressed through art, discussing the relationship between dislocation and cultural networks, and thus rounding out this guest-edited section.

Glowski's "The Great Stūpa of Dharmakaya: Visual Expressions of a Tibetan Teacher's Path and Lineage in the Diaspora" combines art historical analysis and religious studies approaches to analyze The Great Stūpa of Dharmakaya in Red Feather Lakes, Colorado. This monument, dedicated to the Tibetan teacher Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche (1940-1987), reveals formal and iconographic elements that express the teacher's Buddhist lineage and practice path. The essay examines issues of religious continuity within the context of displacement, as well as the Tibetan diaspora in the United States. In the diaspora's ever-expanding networks, writes Glowski, the monument's visual elements communicate connections with tradition and provide a ground for emerging religio-cultural spaces.

Glowski's essay demonstrates the relevance of applying established art historical methods of investigation to new contexts, like the Tibetan diaspora. Within the purview of Asian art history, architectural iconographic investigations are typically reserved for the study of traditional temples and other monuments. Glowski applies this art historical method to analyze a Buddhist *stūpa* in Colorado's Rocky Mountains. Moreover, Tibetan diasporic studies in general have tended to remain within the disciplines of religion and sociology.

Glowski opens up the field to include art historical investigation.

All of the articles in this guest-edited section explore the social and physical networks that form identities in the Himalayan and South Asian regions, and how they connect to the wider world. Numerous potential connections can be made between them. By reading across the essays, students may find that Tsybikov's narrative of a journey into Tibet has some bearing on the challenges faced by Trungpa Rinpoche during his exodus from the same country fifty-eight years later. The articles also shed light on the oft-joined traditions of the photo essay and the written travel narrative. Pidhainy's contribution examines how Tsybikov employed these documentary forms for scholarly purposes. Chandrasekhar's work also picks up this thread, making note that Singh's documentation of the Grand Trunk Road is a type of re-appropriation of imperial photographic routes, even as it presents an alternative view of India guided by a more creative, rather than documentary, methodology. In the case of Fine's essay, the reader will not find a *study* of a travel narrative, but rather a personal travel account. Fine's images similarly derive from photography but have had the color removed from them. These whitewashed images may evoke the absence of aesthetic richness that is an increasing hallmark of a modernizing Mumbai. The reader is invited to imaginatively fill these colors back in and to share and compare their results with other scholars.

As this section's title suggests, the four articles are especially concerned with the concept of networks—structures that bind individuals together. The authors each place emphasis on various forms of social infrastructure that enable networks, while also attending to the concrete role that infrastructure plays. Thus, the Tibetan diaspora establishes new networks of cultural understanding at the same time that it spreads Buddhist practice into the United States. The Grand Trunk Road creates a vital artery for the commerce of both goods and ideas in pluralist India. Any discussion of networks enables critical examination of the erosion, or the severing, of previous kinds of connections between individuals. The sudden popularity of digitally produced billboards in Mumbai, along with the establishment of Internet connectivity even in remote villages, erases the market for hand-painted billboards, causing the evaporation of a whole range of creative traditions seemingly overnight. Perhaps more dramatically, new barriers emerge that undermine networks, as new borders get drawn across previously traversable spaces like the Grand Trunk Road, or as a mountain nation seals itself off from influences newly defined as “outside.”

REFLECTIONS ON PEDAGOGY

The articles in this guest-edited section each engage areas of inquiry that have previously tended to draw little scholarly attention. Therefore, this special section offers new content for consideration by specialists in the respective fields of study. Simultaneously, the essays present material that could potentially be used by teachers and students in the liberal arts undergraduate classroom. Some educators might limit their inquiry to an essay's topic, integrating the subject directly into a syllabus. Others may explore some of the broader, overarching themes that the articles share, like modernization, colonization, and globalization. Still others may wish to explore with their students the implied challenges to disciplinary categories, as well as the opportunities for practicing critical thinking that the articles present.

Pidhainy's article may lend itself to discussions in the classroom that pertain to identity and its representation, politics of the day, religion, and questions pertaining to the interplay between technology, modernity, and a shrinking world. Gombozhav Tsybikov was a complex figure. He was a Buryat and a Buddhist, who participated in the mapping of Tibetan

Buddhist culture in the Russian language for the Russian Imperial Geographical Society. Pidhainy's article, used in conjunction with Anya Bernstein's article,¹ would give students two fairly different approaches to the question of Buryat identity and the role that Buryats played in the Russian empire. The idea and application of "Orientalism" can further be explored in conjunction with one or more articles from *Kritika* (Fall, 2010).²

Pidhainy's article could also serve as a gateway into a discussion of Central Asian politics, in particular the contest between Russia and Great Britain over the region. It can be used alongside Peter Hopkirk's *Trespassers on the Roof of the World*³ or *The Great Game*.⁴ These highly readable and accessible studies of the Central Asian contest may be used to encourage students to consider Tsybikov through the prism of these popular works. Students can reflect on whether or not Tsybikov was part of an imperial agenda, working on behalf of the Russian government to expand its place and bring (eventually) another nation under heel.

Teachers and students of Tibetan history, religion, and culture could use the article to explore the role of the scholar in the examination of "foreign," "minority," or "indigenous" cultures. Or, they could study the means by which technology was central to bringing Tibetan Buddhism to the world. Tsybikov was an important and early scholar of Tibet. His work was thorough in its evaluation of religious institutions and customs of the people, and his writings deserve more attention. Although Tsybikov's own full study of Tibet took almost twenty years to appear, his shorter works and photographs spread quickly throughout the world by means of popular journals. The most famous of these journals was *National Geographic*, which was itself transformed by the inclusion of Tsybikov's photographs into a magazine that came to be identified by its photographic essays. The photographs themselves are accessible online (at the University of Wisconsin), and thus available for developing assignments and class projects. Instructors could also use the articles from *National Geographic* concerning Tibet (see Pidhainy's bibliography for reference to Joseph Rock's later articles) to have students explore the changing and deepening views of the "Roof of the World" and Tibetans in popular American culture.

Chandrasekhar's article on the work of the photographer Raghbir Singh allows teachers to bring into the visual studies classroom an area of Indian art that has received little attention.⁵ Chandrasekhar's art historical method of analysis takes Singh's broader creative process into account, and particularly emphasizes the role that selection and presentation play in photographic practices. The article, therefore, could be used in the classroom to allow students to reflect on how photography as a medium might differ from other art practices, like painting or drawing, for example. Chandrasekhar's article could be read in conjunction with Terry Barrett's highly accessible discussion about photography and other mediums in his book *Interpreting Art*.⁶ Barrett summarizes how photography differs from other art mediums in terms of instantaneity, credibility, and selectivity. Photographs differ from paintings, for example, because in most cases they are made in a short instant of time. This allows the photographer to click the shutter and produce several images with relative rapidity, while a painter requires far more time to produce her art. Painters look at their work, add paint to their canvases where needed, paint over sections, and carefully construct their pictures. Photographers, on the other hand, as Barrett notes, capture instants, and at the moment of exposure, when most cameras block the view, may in some ways not actually see what they photograph. Barrett notes that people also afford credibility to photographs in different ways than they do for a painting or drawing. While a painter or illustrator may entirely imagine a picture and depict a scene that never existed, a photographer has to have the object that is being photographed in front of the camera to make the image. Regard-

less of how the photograph may be manipulated or altered, the object has to have existed. Additionally, selectivity sets photographs apart from other mediums of art. Painting is an additive process, in which a painter applies pigments to a blank surface to create a picture. By contrast, photography is subtractive. A photographer makes choices regarding what to eliminate from all that is visible through the viewfinder to make an image. Furthermore, a photographer's creative process involves not only making photographs, but also the selection for reception: How many photographs of a particular subject did the photographer make? Why was the one chosen for viewing? How is it presented? Does its presentation impact interpretation?

Chandrasekhar's examination of Singh's photographs shows that he worked within the accepted mode of documentary street photography. His photographs, like those of Tsybikov, appeared in illustrated magazines such as the *National Geographic* and *The New Yorker*. However, with the selections that Singh made for inclusion in the publication *The Grand Trunk Road* and his careful arrangement of the photographs within the book, Chandrasekhar shows us how Singh developed a visual narrative, which works as a critique of the political realities of India during the time of his travels. Instructors, therefore, could use both Pidhainy and Chandrasekhar's essays to discuss how photography has served as an instrument of imperial expansion, colonization, and re-appropriation of national identity. Many of these topics could also be addressed through Aaron Fine's contribution to this guest-edited section.

Fine's essay is first of all a creative work, distinct from the other articles in this volume in form and methodological basis. For some students, this example of creative nonfiction will be novel and may call for some contextualization; this is a genre in which a true story is told with all the techniques of craft employed by a novelist. The illustrations tend to underscore this novelty. For the scholar of South Asian studies, the rewards of working with such material is essentially empathetic—allowing audiences to experience another life and culture in an especially forceful way. The chief drawback for the educator is the bias and creative license that are inherent in the arts.

Fine's strong, directed approach is reflected in the way that the first person point of view is used throughout the narrative. By touching upon the narrator's uncertainty, dependency, and possible unreliability, the story provides a kind of corrective to the assumption that audiences are ever wholly objective. Throughout the tale that unfolds, subjects refuse to cooperate by providing boilerplate answers of dubious merit, or by sending their sons to be interviewed in their place. Along the way, the narrator expresses doubt about the possibility of any certainty over the matters he explores. In emphasizing the first-person point of view and its perils, the project offers a glimpse at what can happen when the author situates himself or herself within the history they study.

An aspect of Fine's essay that coincides with the other works in this volume is the way that it suggests territories of expansion for South Asian studies. Fledgling art historians often think of their field as the study of the set of great artworks that make up the canon. The content of Fine's essay dwells upon a network of issues that connect to the production of political party signs in Mumbai. The narrator presumes to travel to India to study the hand-painted banners and murals he's seen on previous visits. His expectation is to learn more about the world's largest democratic system, and to consider the ways that literacy and illiteracy might interact with more graphic forms of visual communication. But instead he encounters a landscape transformed by the proliferation of digitally produced banners. The study of visual culture, both as a trend outside of art history and a growing practice within it, proposes that non-canonical aspects of the visual environment are as significant, or

potentially more significant, in terms of what they reveal about a culture. Scholars unfamiliar with, or unprepared for, the writings of John Berger or Walter Benjamin, for example, may find this exploration within their area of study especially refreshing and pertinent.⁷ The articles on the scholarly website Tasveer Ghar (<http://www.tasveerghar.net/>) are particularly useful for those whose interest is piqued.⁸

Put simply, Fine's essay addresses the complications of modernization and globalization. The centralized activities of political operatives replace the craftsman's labor. The promise of digital connections is compromised by the loss of a rich visual tradition and numerous jobs. The rush to modernize creates a visual culture of figurative and literal garbage. This last element raises the question of how the city's inhabitants might best relate to their environment, and whether switching from a cyclical use of resources to one that generates landfill is truly a step forward for the urban system. Finally, it becomes an open question whether the visual environment in Mumbai has ever been a matter of individual creative expression, rather than an expression of power by political parties and institutions who coerce acceptance from the general population. Issues brought to the fore by Fine's article, such as the environment, resources, and waste, have global relevance and could be brought into discussions beyond the art history or visual arts classroom. Janice Glowski's article provides another example of globalization, in this case as it pertains to the Tibetan diaspora.

Glowski's study of the Great Stūpa of Dharmakaya in Colorado addresses the dispersion of Tibetan Buddhist art and architecture, which resulted from the Chinese invasion of Tibet in the late 1950s. This diffusion transformed many aspects of the western world's visual environments. Today, Tibetan Buddhist imagery is commonly found in curio shops, on tee shirts, and in advertisements; and Tibetan Buddhist architectural forms, like *stūpas*, increasingly populate American landscapes. The rise in students' exposure to Tibetan Buddhist thought and visual forms, therefore, has heightened the need to bring Tibetan studies more centrally into the undergraduate art history and religion classrooms. This endeavor, however, can create challenges, as Tibet inherited India's most fully developed Buddhist intellectual and artistic traditions (8th – 12th centuries) primarily from eastern India and the Kashmir region. Buddhist scholar Donald Lopez summarizes this historical situation in the following words:

Tibet received and made accurate translations of the sutras that were so important in China, Korea, and Japan. But it also received and made accurate translations of the treatises on Buddhist logic and philosophy, including the major works of the Madhyamaka and Yogacāra schools as well as the late Yogacāra and Madhyamaka synthesis, largely unknown in East Asia. It received and made accurate translations of the extensive literature on the Buddha nature, the *tathāgatagarbha*, as well as important commentaries on the *Perfection of Wisdom* sutras, setting forth in great detail the structure of the bodhisattva's path to Buddhahood, commentaries that have little influence in China. And Tibet received the transmission of the tantras, far more than were translated into Chinese, as well as the teachings of the great adepts of medieval India, the *mahāsiddhas*.⁹

The art and visual culture that intertwined with these textual traditions was equally rich. Further complicating the situation, the received Indian Buddhist traditions changed and adapted to their new social, religious, and political environments in Tibet, creating some of the most complex visual imagery and socio-religious systems in the Buddhist world.

Tibetan Buddhism's resulting esoteric methodologies and iconographies are not easily incorporated into Buddhist religion or art survey courses. The philosophical and artistic

background necessary to grasp the tradition and decipher its art could easily overwhelm an undergraduate course. Conversely, introducing Tibetan Buddhism through broad generalities risks promoting misunderstanding rather than clarity. The tradition's vibrant paintings, for example, often depict dynamic, wrathful meditation figures that are easily exoticized or otherwise misinterpreted when viewed through the lens of Abrahamic sensibilities. In this complex milieu, Glowski's article provides pedagogical support for teaching Tibetan Buddhism in the undergraduate classroom. Her study proposes that the concepts of lineage and the practitioner's progressive path of meditation are two of Tibetan Buddhism's essential and distinguishing characteristics, and, therefore, are worthy of pedagogical emphasis. She offers a contextual, iconographic case study of an early Tibetan diasporic *stūpa* that provides a self-contained, instructive tool for teaching these principals. *The Great Stūpa* maintains symbolic, aesthetic, and functional connections to Tibetan Buddhist art and practice, as they existed in Tibet prior to the Chinese invasion. Further, since the monument is located at the Shambhala Mountain Center, a public retreat center in the Colorado Rockies, it is also more accessible for study than architecture in Tibet itself.

Glowski's article also brings Shambhala to the academic fore. This international community of meditation practitioners, founded by Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, is most fully formed in the United States, Canada, and Europe. The community's meditation instruction and teachings include both traditional Tibetan Buddhist modalities and newer methods that relate to principles of warriorship (interpreted as fearless and gentle social engagement) and the creation of an enlightened society. Shambhala's simultaneous continuity with Tibetan Buddhism's past as well as a contemporary vision that addresses new and emerging social and cultural spaces parallels the teacher's life—a young monk who came of age in traditional Buddhist Tibet and yet immersed himself in western culture. Trungpa Rinpoche attended Oxford University in England, left his monastic life, married a young English woman, and was one of the first Tibetans to teach the *buddhadharma* and publish *Dharma* texts in the English language. Incorporation of this biography and its impacts could inform classroom discussions that address historical and contemporary religio-cultural shifts resulting from colonization and dislocation. Glowski's tandem use of visual forms and religious biography to analyze sacred architecture and its implications also provides educators with an example of how interdisciplinary analyses can be used to approach diasporic studies.

IN CONCLUSION

Used collectively in the classroom, the articles in this multi-disciplinary issue reveal cultural networks and identities as they are challenged, dismantled, and created. They provide new sources for the study of these subjects, both by identifying new materials and integrating materials that have been marginalized in disciplinary or pedagogical practice. The essays, when taken as a whole, may also enable classroom discussion around the attributes and limitations of each of the liberal arts disciplines represented. Teachers, thus, can enable a broader discussion of the liberal arts as a form of education. Both individually and when compared, the essays frustrate disciplinary over-simplification. Each essay features an individual whose identity is slippery in terms of its constituent elements, as well as in his/her motives for and consequences of his/her actions. This guest-edited section aims to present the subtle and challenging nuances of identity and networks in a manner that is accessible, while maintaining the rigor of critical thought to which the liberal arts is dedicated.

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NOTES

1. Bernstein, Anya. 2009. "Pilgrims, Fieldworkers, and Secret Agents: Buryat Buddhologists and the History of an Eurasian Imaginary" in *Inner Asia*, 11(1): 23-45.
2. See Khalid, Adeeb. 2000. "Russian History and the Debate over Orientalism" in *Kritika*. 1(4): 691-699; Knight, Nathaniel. 2000. "On Russian Orientalism: A Response to Adeeb Khalid" in *Kritika*. 1(4): 701-715; and Todorova, Maria. 2000. "Does Russian Orientalism Have a Russian Soul? A Contribution to the Debate between Nathaniel Knight and Adeeb Khalid" in *Kritika*. 1(4): 717-727.
3. Hopkirk, Peter. 1982. *Trespassers on the Roof of the World: The Race for Lhasa*. New York: L Murray.
4. Hopkirk, Peter. 1992. *The Great Game: The Struggle for Empire in Central Asia*. New York: Kondasha. Kawaguchi, Ekai. 1909. *Three Years in Tibet*. Madras: Theosophical Office.
5. Sunil Gupta, photographer and curator of *Click*, a 2008 exhibition of contemporary Indian photography, notes the general lack of attention paid to the medium until about a decade ago. See Sunil Gupta, "Click: Reframing Indian Photography as Art" in Sunil Gupta, Radhika Singh, *Click: Contemporary Photography in India* (New Delhi, India: Vadehra Art Gallery, 2008) p. 1. Studies that paid attention to photography in India typically focused on the photographers of the colonial period and their work. As a result, art historical analyses of post-independence Indian photography, as art historian Rebecca Brown notes, are limited. Brown explains how several artists now known for their painting and printmaking also practiced inventive photography throughout their artistic careers. However, these artists rarely exhibited their photographs, and most of their collections remain undocumented. See Rebecca M. Brown, *Art for a Modern India, 1947-1980* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009) n. 7, p. 169. Within such an environment, artists like Raghbir Singh pursued documentary practices as an avenue for making and publishing their creative photographic work.
6. Terry Barrett, *Interpreting Art: Reflecting, Wondering, and Responding* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2003) pp. 139-161.
7. Two seminal works in the study of visual culture that address the cultural nature of vision as well as objects that are seen are Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" in Hannah Arendt ed., *Illuminations, Essays and Reflections* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968) and John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 1972).
8. <http://www.tasveerghar.net/> *Tasveer Ghar: Digital Archive of South Asian Popular Visual Culture*. University of Michigan, Heidelberg University, and Duke University, n.d. Web. 24 Mar. 2013.
9. For a brief introduction to Tibetan Buddhism's historical place among Buddhist traditions in Asia see Donald S. Lopez, Jr., "Introduction: The Buddhism of Milarepa" in *The Life of Milarepa* by Tsangnyön Heruka, Andrew Quintman, trans. (New York: Penguin Group, 2010) pp. ix-xviii.