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## Asian Highlands Perspectives: Making a Place for Local Voices in Global Conversations

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# Research Report | **Asian Highlands Perspectives: Making a Place for Local Voices in Global Conversations**

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*Asian Highlands Perspective (AHP)* is a journal and book series that brings together a broad scholarly audience while also providing opportunity for voices from the Tibetan Plateau and nearby areas to make themselves heard in novel academic formats.

Although *AHP* published its first volume in 2009, our decision to establish the journal dates back to 2008, and the collaborative ethic that underpins the journal dates back much further. Stuart, for example, has worked with a variety of collaborators based in China since 1988 (Wei and Stuart 1988, 1990a, 1990b; Almas and Stuart 1988; Sainchogtu and Stuart 1991; Narsu and Stuart 1991) on topics as diverse as Mongolian willow huts, to an overview of cultural entomology in Mongol life, to an ethnographic study of a Mi nyag village (Bkra shis bzang po 2012). Since Roche's arrival in Xining, he and Stuart have worked together e.g., Tsering Bum et al. (2008) and Libu Lhaki et al. (2010).

By 2008, the strain on publishers and authors to publish writing with impacts that could be measured through such metrics as journal rankings and h-indexes was driving ethnographic and folkloric journals increasingly towards greater theorization, 'framing', and less description. Meanwhile, rapid modernization across the Tibetan Plateau was seeing much traditional culture and oral history vanish unrecorded. As opportunities for publishing descriptive work declined with a simultaneous rise in urgent need, Stuart and Roche established *AHP*.

Stuart and Roche spent the first twelve months editing a collection of essays, assembling a consultative editorial board (consisting of twenty-five members from six disciplines in eight countries), and putting together a core editorial board of five members. All materials are peer reviewed by members of our consultative board and by anonymous experts. As of mid-March 2013, *AHP* has published twenty-three volumes of collected papers, case studies, and autobiographies.

*AHP*'s publications may generally be divided into three main "streams." We have published four volumes of collected papers (one annually, 2009-2012) each containing articles, fiction, photo essays, and, since 2012, book reviews. Another nine volumes may be classified as case studies, focusing on oral or ritual traditions of a specific group, defined geographically (e.g., a village) or linguistically. Several of these case studies present the first information about the focus group available in any Western language. Our third 'stream' of publications consists of biographical and autobiographical works giving detailed insights into the daily lives of ordinary people on the Tibetan Plateau.

In encounters with the overwhelming influence of modernity and outside forces that result in radically new ideas and practices, certain Western academic values, interests, and publications do not necessarily represent what local communities may see as research priorities. Given the dearth of evidence and complex realities of

indigenous cultures on the ground (Tibetans who fish and cultivate rice; Tibetans whose first language is not Tibetan (Bkra shis bzang po 2012; G.yu lha 2012); Hui Muslims whose first language is Tibetan), the study of certain cultural periods and intellectual traditions may prove hard to fit into existing theoretical academic schemes. Instead, there is often much more interest in framing general social trends using overarching theories. Unfortunately, this tendency may ignore the rich oral literatures that are critically important mediums of cultural expression, binding individuals and local populations together in mostly illiterate indigenous communities, and helping to maintain a centuries-old, cultural and linguistic identity in the midst of the sweeping changes brought by modernity. Going beyond having their passive voices heard, *AHP* empowers locals to assume active roles in creating local, public knowledge, in both hardcover and digital format, for themselves. *AHP* thus assists in preserving these oral aspects of culture that deeply engage indigenous values.

Publishing such a diverse, yet clearly related, array of material would have been impossible until the recent era of online, open access, and print-on-demand publishing that has made publications such as *AHP* possible. This, in turn, has made publishing more accessible to people outside the Western academy, allowed for the opening of new research terrain, and has provided forums for new academic discussions.

Significantly, *AHP* has provided a venue for local, often non-academic, authors to publish their work. By article, about seventy percent of the materials *AHP* publishes are authored or co-authored by people from the Plateau writing about their own lives, languages, communities, and traditions. A good example of one such author is the prolific Mongghul scholar, Dr. Limusishiden. An orthopedic surgeon, Limusishiden is also one of very few Mongghul able to write in English and in Mongghul (as well as in Chinese). Deeply passionate about preserving the rapidly disappearing traditions of the Mongghul people, Limusishiden has produced an important corpus of materials including folktales written in Mongghul, non-fiction articles, historical fiction, and biography. Academic publishers effectively exclude authors like Limushiden, who write English as a foreign language, and are unfamiliar with Western academic conventions and trends, despite the great value of contributions that such authors have to make. *AHP* is proud to provide a venue through which such authors may have their voices heard.

*AHP* also strives to open up new research terrain and linkages between existing disciplines. The Tibetan Plateau forms the core focus of our journal, yet we also recognize

the strong historical, political, geographical, linguistic, demographic, ecological, and ethnographic linkages that the region has with surrounding areas. The Plateau has never been, and should never be studied as, an isolated entity. *AHP* thus attempts to engage scholars from a wide variety of regional specializations, including those working on the Southeast Asian Massif, Himalayan Massif, the Extended Eastern Himalayas, the Mongolian Plateau, western China, and other contiguous areas. As such, our journal builds on the work of such authors as Samuel (1994), Michaud (1997), van Schendel (2002), Giersch (2006), Blackburn (2008), and Scott (2009), who, despite their differing theoretical and disciplinary orientations, concur on the need to study interregional linkages and commonalities.

A final important feature of the journal is its trans-disciplinary nature and aim to examine the Plateau and surrounding regions from different angles, especially those that have been neglected by traditional scholarship. *AHP* is primarily a social sciences journal, publishing across linguistics, ethnography, folkloristics, tourism, and history. However, we have also published an issue on environmental issues on the Plateau, reflective of our commitment to truly interdisciplinary research.

Through our foci on advocating works by local authors and encouraging dialog between different disciplinary and regional specialists, we hope *AHP* will be a space where novel perspectives grounded in the complex realities of the Plateau can emerge. We welcome you to join this process by becoming involved as an author or editor. We encourage submissions from a wide range of scholars with an interest in the area. Given the dearth of current knowledge on this culturally complex area, we encourage submissions that contain descriptive accounts of local realities – especially by authors from communities in the Asian Highlands – as well as theory-oriented articles. Items of irregular format are published such as long articles, short monographs, photo essays, fiction, and auto-ethnography.

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**Gerald Roche** (PhD, Asian Studies, Griffith University, 2011) is an anthropologist and educator. He is currently a post-doctoral research fellow at Uppsala University's Hugo Valentin Centre. He is founder and co-editor of the journal *Asian Highlands Perspectives*, and also founded and now advises the Plateau Cultural Heritage Protection Group, a participatory initiative to digitally document and revitalize endangered oral traditions on the Tibetan Plateau. His research interests include cultural diversity, resilience theory, human-environment relations, and oral traditions within the context of the Tibetan Plateau.

**Timothy Thurston** (PhD candidate, Chinese, The Ohio State University) is a folklorist. He has been a co-editor of *Asian Highlands Perspectives* since 2009. Thurston studies ethnic minority folklore and cultural production in Northwestern China. His past research has examined the connection between folklore and Sinophone Tibetan literature, as well as projects on Tibetan oratory in Amdo. He is currently working on several projects related to cultural production and the public intellectual in twenty-first century Amdo, and on oral history and cultural memory in Yushu.

**CK Stuart** (PhD, University of Hawaii-Manoa, 1996), a native of Albion, Oklahoma, is a student of culture, ESL teacher, rural development specialist, editor, and writer. He has lived in Inner Mongolia, Qinghai Province, and Shaanxi Province, China; Ulaanbaatar; Negros Oriental; and Honolulu, Hawaii since 1984.

**Rin chen rdo rje (Rinchen Dorje)** is currently a graduate student in religious studies at the University of Virginia. He is interested in the merging of religion and politics in the context of Tibet's relation with its neighbors - the Mongols and Manchus - during the Qing dynasty. His current research focuses on the rivalry between major Tibetan Buddhist monasteries of the Geluk School and expansion of their respective religious jurisdiction in the form of a complex network of branch monasteries in Amdo.

**Tshe dbang rdo rje** (PhD, Educational Leadership, Assumption University, 2009) is Tibetan and an Associate Professor at Qinghai Normal University in China. His name is also written as Caixiangduojie in Chinese pinyin. He focuses on English-Tibetan-Chinese language and culture education in China's Tibetan areas, and has published a number of articles and books, including *Leadership Styles and Challenges of English Teachers in China's Tibet*, *Ne'u na Tibetan Weddings*, and "Thirty Years of Educational Reforms in Tibetan Areas of China."

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## The Border Worlds of Wim van Spengen

### Preface to “Beyond Annapurna, or How to Interpret Success in Himalayan Trade”

Wim van Spengen’s “Beyond Annapurna, or How to Interpret Success in Himalayan Trade,” published here for the first time, sums up much of van Spengen’s valuable contributions to the social and economic study of everyday life in the Himalayas. Although many scholars have worked to dispel the myth that the Himalayan region is a remote, “unspoiled world,” van Spengen has been able to clearly demonstrate how longstanding and far-reaching trade connections have unfolded—and continue to develop—in the Himalayas and throughout Asia more generally. Through his work with the Nyingshaba of Manang, whose trade circuits connect Nepal with the “wider Southeast Asian economy” (a group that was given the first Nepali passports in 1962!), he understood all too well that Asian globalization—a term that shot to popularity in the 1990s—was certainly not a “new” phenomenon.

In the piece that follows, van Spengen writes that without openings to northern mountain passes, the Nyingshaba successfully turned towards Southeast Asia to trade. This is a rather different story from other work on Himalayan trade that mostly focuses on routes oriented towards Tibet. And yet, he shows that the geographical orientation of Nyingshaba trading patterns was not simply based on an environmental determinism (their physical position in Manang), nor was it culturally determined (a cultural proclivity to cross-border friendships), nor was it the result of a set of purely economic opportunities. His attention to the complexities of trade—that commodities bought and sold are subject to geopolitical ebbs and flows: supply, demand, droughts, embargoes, long-term historical and political struggles—follows in the tradition of Fernand Braudel, Eric Wolf, Giovanni Arrighi, and Wim Wertheim, all of whom were well known for highlighting

the dynamic contributions of relatively small social groups within larger world systems. However, he was also a realist, warning his audience of the danger of romanticizing agency. “Not all frontier populations are in a position to actively change their life for the better,” for everyday lives in the borderlands are tempered by political and institutional constraints, power imbalances, inequalities, and heavy competition.

Wim’s interest in geographical frontiers paralleled his interest in the borderlands of academic fields. It would be a disservice to classify him as a geographer simply based on his Ph.D. A true interdisciplinary, he read widely: in history, economics, anthropology, geography, politics, sociology, and literature. As Alex McKay has noted in his tribute to Wim in this volume of *HIMALAYA*, the word “modest” was often used to refer to van Spengen. It is true. After meeting him for the first time at the International Association for Tibetan Studies meeting in Bonn in 2006, I mentioned that his *Tibetan Border Worlds* was very influential during the writing of my Ph.D. “Oh, that thing,” he said, dismissing it with a wave of a hand. We proceeded to have an engaging conversation, and refreshingly, not a word about academic work or trade was spoken. We chatted about libraries around the world, international travel, our families—other worlds that were just as important and motivating to Wim.

**Tina Harris** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Amsterdam. She is the author of *Geographical Diversions: Tibetan Trade, Global Transactions* (University of Georgia Press, 2013) and is an Editorial Board member of *HIMALAYA*.