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The Anchor of Identity: Resilience and Influence of Trading Cultures and Peoples in South East Asia

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Abstract

In this paper, I elucidate on the influence of trading communities on geopolitics and regional economies, and look into how these communities establish, recreate and perpetuate their traditions irrespective of their location. This has been done through the examples of the Khampa traders of Eastern Tibet, the Tai people and the local communes of China's Yunnan Province, and the Hakka Chinese community of Kolkata. The role of tradition, community and personal bonds transcending spatial novelty and geographical differences has been paid particular attention to.

Keywords

Khampa, Tai, Hakka, Identity, Migration, Trade, Cowries, Southern Silk Road, Silver, Leather

Introduction

The Khampa, Tai and Hakka communities each exhibit the common characteristics of occupying a niche, being either a part of the local administration of their areas of operation, or of occupying the position of regional elites, circumventing all forms of formal royal authority imposed by empires. The Hakka in particular exhibit how an immigrant trading community can not only survive but flourish in a setting alien to itself, by dint of ingenuity and innovation.

The sources used to understand these communities are numerous: while the Hakka Chinese have been understood through oral sources as well as field research, the Kham traders' influence has been drawn mainly from the daily accounts (Nyindep) of a Khatan Dzamyag, a chief- merchant (tsongpon), covering the time span from 1944 to 1956. The study of Yunnan was far more complex, as referral to local

traditions, Chinese official documents as well as the accounts and histories of visiting officials had to be referred to- a robust exercise due to Yunnan's central presence in what was known as the Southern Silk Route. A glance at the sources as well as a spatial analysis of these communities reveals little in common- the distinctive feature being how the Kham, the Hakka and the local Yunnan elite were able to use their surroundings to the highest potential.

The Khampa as seen by Khatag Dzamyag

One cannot hope to understand the Khampa trading communities' influence without first understanding the region of Kham. Kham, which would later become China's Xikang province in 1939, comprised of the Eastern Regions of Tibet, and has been described as the fringe of the Tibetan plateau. Gros de-scribes it as 'a fragmentary politico- religious landscape and complex cultural matrix, both multivocal and multilocal'[1]. Khampa identity was diverse from that of central Tibet as well as that of China, and the region was politically fragmented. This may produce the idea of a 'stateless' region, while there was actually the existence of multiple polities each considering themselves to be centres in their own right. Chieftainships, micro-states and monastic estates each commanded local authority and crosscut over each other in the region. Trading communities were able to act as go- betweens and interpreters; as seen in the tea trade where they linked Central Tibetans with Chinese Han Chinese and Hui (Muslim- Chinese) merchants[2]. Trade networks also successfully bypassed the areas of influence of the Qing Empire and the Tibetan Government based in Lhasa, and was able to utilize the power of local elites and representatives in areas not yet penetrated by these regimes.

Dzamyag starts his nyindep from when he departed from his ancestral land of Rabshi, his accounts acting as a trading journal along with a personal diary. He

[1] Lucia Galli. "Money, Politics, and Local Identity: An Inside Look at the 'Diary'of a Twentieth-Century Khampa Trader". In: *Frontier Tibet*. Routledge, 2025, pp. 313–336, As quoted from Stephane Gros on Page 314.

[2] Charles Patterson Giersch. *Asian borderlands: the transformation of Qing China's Yunnan frontier*. Harvard University Press, 2006, Page 25.

mentions in the Nyindep that his property, wealth and Estate were confiscate on the accusation that he was complicit in the murder of the scion of a local ruling family- even as there was no proof of his personal involvement. This example shows the authority wielded by the local Lord of Rabshi, even while the Nationalist Government took measures to ban Indigenous Chiefdoms[3]. The arena of operations of Khampa traders was focused around Central Tibet, and access to the same was enabled through the means of established trading families in the region. These families paved the way for many trading communities from outside Central Tibet- the Pandatsang, Sandutsang and Andrutsang were particularly helpful for smaller Khampa traders[4].

Dzamyag himself had links to the Sandutsang trading family. Lhakpa Dondrup, an erstwhile trader, discusses the workings of these families in one of his essay-memoirs: the families were structured like a clan, and a leader functioned as a primus inter pares. This leader was responsible for being spokesman of his co regionals and for regulating them, while the co regional clans each had a headman (gotso) of their own too- a structure resembling bureaucracy. By opening a path to eastern Tibetan traders, the larger households also indirectly brought about the rise of other minor trading families, resulting in the formation of an intermediary class.

Khampa trading families opened branches in Tibet, Sikkim, Northern India and Nepal- responding to growth in market demand. The branches in all these important trade centres were controlled from Central Offices in Lhasa, where there was regular interaction with the Lhasa Nobility and members of the Lower Aristocracy were commonplace- these were also offcialized by the ennoblement of the upper middle- class traders or by marital alliances. Dzamyag writes in the nyingdep that he was summoned by the treasurer of the Khagsar Labrang, of Ngor E Wam Choden, and requested to supervise the investment of some of the funds of the abbot, into a Kalimpong business venture. This provides insight

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[3] Galli, "Money, Politics, and Local Identity: An Inside Look at the 'Diary'of a Twentieth-Century Khampa Trader", Page 318.

[4] Ibid., as quoted from 'Sa spang mda' gnam spang mda': Murder, History, and Social Politics in 1920s Lhasa by Carol McGrranahan (2002).

into multiple facets of Tibetan trading investments- Monasteries were not mere places of worship, but had their own economic ventures, which they carried out using the capital from the Monastery.

This would lead to capital gains as well as expansion of the Monastic influence. The position of a monastic agent was considered one of great status, with only a few traders possessing the means and the acumen to reach it. The gradualist Approach adopted by Chairman Mao allowed the local monasteries and chieftains to operate as agents of power as late as the 1950s. In the late 1940s, while the Ganden Phodrang government at Lhasa grappled with a possible encroachment attempt from China in Tibetan Territory, the economic and political influence of the larger Khampa trading families continued to increase- Dzamyag's own trading business saw increase in 1953[5]. The 1940's also saw the rise of the Pandatsang and the Sandutsang to the ranks of the Lhasa government, after which 1949 saw the establishment of the 'Association for the Promotion of Autonomy of Kham and Tibet'. The trading families were thus directly involved in a nationalist struggle in the face of Chinese aggression- eventually the warrior guerilla volunteer group Chushi Gandruk (Four rivers, Six ranges) grew under the leadership of Gonpo Tashi Andrutsang[6]. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has been alluded to in Dzamyag's writings as 'red flames'.

The Southern Silk Route as seen in Yunnan Province

While Khampa and Tibet show the growth of a local elite, Yunnan offers a global perspective of the influence of regional trade. The Yunnan Province was a central location of the Southern Silk Road- another overland trading route apart from the Northern Silk Road, this would connect Yunnan with India via Burma, along with linking to Tibet, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and

[5] Galli, "Money, Politics, and Local Identity: An Inside Look at the 'Diary'of a Twentieth-Century Khampa Trader", Page 322.

[6] Ibid., page 324, as quoted from Four Rivers, Six Ranges: Reminiscences of the Resis-tance Movement in Tibet by Gompo Tashi Andrutsang (1973).

Vietnam[7]. The conquest of Yunnan took place in 1662 under the Qing Dynasty, but prior to conquest, the area was one of little penetration from the Ming. Dominated by regional powers, with the most prominent stakeholders being various Tai Aristocracies, Yunnan was able to benefit off its reserves of precious metals, especially silver, as well as facilitating the trade of Horses and tea along the Southern Silk Route. One of the unique features of the Southern Silk route Trade is how it was able to evolve its own unique system of exchange based off the currency of Cowries- a useful practice that helped trade forces flow unhindered despite the existence of various regimes existing along the route, each with their own distinct systems of currency. The Yunnan frontier had multiple empires vying for influence- the Qing con-trolled the area from Muong Mau and Tengue in the North to Simao and Chiang Hung in the South. This region resembles a crescent- while at the same time the empires of Burma and Siam attempted to expand their influence in the region. Despite the conquest, the Qing influence could only be enforced by means of garrisons and bureaucracy in the crescent- beyond that the Qing could neither master indigenous societies nor affect their pre-dominant political influence. The frontier was ethnically diverse, and the locally influential Tai aristocracy also maintained ties with the empires in Burma and Siam. The influences of all three empires showed visibility in the ruling practices of the Tai. The crescent also had the socially transformative influence of Chinese migrants.

Chinese migrants and Qing officials were not natural allies, with both having different aspirations and aims from the soil of Yunnan. The immigration led to a slow but steady demographic transformation in the crescent, as the migrants and indigenes fought at times, but also intermarried, and traded. Indigenous groups began to acculture themselves to the practices of Chinese immigrants rather than Qing Imperial practices. Cultural contact led to each side tolerating the other, with

[7] Bin Yang. "Horses, silver, and cowries: Yunnan in global perspective". In: *Journal of World History* (2004), pp. 281–322, Page 286.

immigrant cultures proving to be more pervasive than the imperial cultures[8].
Yunnan has also been called a 'persistent frontier', as unlike the idea of a conventional frontier, there is no era for a decisive opening or closing of the frontier, given the continuous expansion and contraction of Chinese regimes. It is also difficult to establish any point of 'first contact' with the indigenes, as is visible in the European conception of a frontier, hence, the use of such terminology becomes necessary. It was only in the 1950's that the Chinese government was able to remove all local contenders for power.

Chinese migrants in the area too were far from homogenous, consisting of multiple occupational groups, with soldiers and merchants forming the majority. The local Tai people speak dialects from the southwest Tai group, part of the Kadai language group (tai- kadai). The Tai people too are divided into the Tai Laem, Tai Khun and Tai Yuang, Tai Yai and Tai Lue People. The Tai Yai people, often referred to as the Shan people, resided around Muong Mau- their location in the crescent led them to be heavily influenced by Chinese politics and culture. The Tai communities had a few distinctive common features- their common religion of Buddhism and their occupational practice of growing rice in irrigated fields being a few. Most of the Tai resided in river valleys, and their economy allowed a hierarchical arrangement of villages (baan) into domains (muong). These muong were united over time by aristocratic leaders to form small states[9].

The trade in Yunnan was dominated by the export of Horses, primarily to be used as war horses for cavalry, as well as profits obtained by mining precious metals, mainly silver. While there was no paucity of precious metals in the region- gold, silver, copper, tin and lead to name a few, the mining of silver was particularly profitable. Silver was seen as a luxury product, and both the Yuan and the Ming dynasties generated heavy income from the tax on the mining of silver in the region. Zhuge Liang, the minister of the Shu Kingdom, mentioned the mining of Zhuti Yin (Silver mined in Zhaotong) as an important source of

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[8] Giersch, *Asian borderlands: the transformation of Qing China's Yunnan frontier*, Page 7.

[9] Ibid., Page 25.

wealth[10].

The indigenous people of Yunnan and Burma had mastered the technology needed for mining and smelting silver. They played agents of trade: Chinese sources mentioned the indigenous group known as jinchi, translating to 'Gold Teeth', whom Marco Polo had also met[11]. Silver was one of the commodities transported in small quantities via ships and animal transport, but only within Chinese territory, as the Yuan and Ming Dynasties had forbidden the export of precious metals. A major commodity of export along the Southern Silk Route were Horses- the horses bred in Yunnan were considered "the best horses bred" by Marco Polo[12]. They were shorter than their northern counterparts, well suited for subtropical climate and had numerous advantages in the Huai and Yangzi riverine regions; some horses were even products of the North- western plateau region. Horses were traded in Guangxi throughout the Song dynasty period. Horses were exported to Bengal, and then transferred to Eastern Deccan and China, with Bengal serving as a transit centre for the horse trade.

One of the more unique features of the trade were how the system of using cowries as a medium of exchange were developed along the route. Cowries (shell currency) were a useful replacement for the Barter system that had been dominant across the route. There was also no single empire possessing the dominance to control the whole route and thus impose a common currency policy. The cowries originally came from Maldives and were exported to other regions; Bengal again serving as a centre for Cowry distribution. Cowries penetrated daily life and were used as articles for carrying out daily transactions. Briefly during the Han domination of Yunnan the cowry system fell out of use, but it returned as quickly as Chinese influence subsided in the region. According to Hans Ulrich Vogel, the silence of Song sources on Cowrie use

[10] Yang, "Horses, silver, and cowries: Yunnan in global perspective", Page 301.

[11] Ibid., Page 304, as quoted from John Deyell (1994).

[12] Ibid., Page 294, as quoted from 'The Travels of Marco Polo' ed. Manuel Komroff (2002).

could have been due to the political independence of the Dali Kingdom[13]. Cowries were used for a variety of purposes- paying taxes, government salaries and as donations to Buddhist monasteries, along with being used for regular purchases and land transactions.

The Enduring Culture of the Hakka Community

While Khampa and Tai people provide us examples of political dominance ad economic clout, the Hakka Chinese community of Calcutta shows a different side of Diaspora. Similar to Khampa traders, the Hakka people to clung to their culture even in an alien surrounding, not letting their spatial setting influence their way of life any degree beyond which it absolutely needed to. The community does not form the entirety of the Chinese Diaspora of Calcutta- the Cantonese from Guangdong and immigrants from Hubei also settled in the city. All three communities maintained the distinct markers of their culture and identity along with their language. A similar process was seen in the economic niches they chose to occupy- the Cantonese primarily took to carpentry and the smaller Hubeinese community took to dentistry. The dominance of the Hakka community in city life is also visible in the dominance of their culture- the author claims that in the year of her re-search, there existed two Chinese schools for the Hakka community and only one for the Cantonese. The Hubeinese and the Cantonese are also fluent in conversing in Hakka, while few Hakka consider it important to learn the Cantonese or Hubeinese dialects[14]. The Hakka Chinese prospered from their involvement in the business of Tanning- engaging in a variety of businesses alongside, such as restaurants, shoe shops and hairdressing salons. Despite this variety, the tanning business employed the largest numbers of their community.

One cannot see the case of the Hakka without first examining the city of Calcutta

[13] Yang, "Horses, silver, and cowries: Yunnan in global perspective", Page 308, as quoted from 'Cowry Trade and Its Role in the Economy of Yunnan: From the Ninth to Mid-Seventeenth Century (Part I)' by Hans Ulrich Vogel (1993).

[14] Ellen Oxfeld. "Still guest people: The reproduction of Hakka identity in Kolkata, India". In: *China Report* 43.4 (2007), pp. 411–435, Footnote 1, Page 149.

itself. A port city, it served as a hub of finance, trade and industry, and was the capital of the English East India Company until their shift to Delhi due to political agitation. Its predominance continued despite the shift, and it always served as a hotbed of migration. It attracted immigrants from the surrounding countryside of Bengal, neighbouring states of Odisha and Bihar, more distant states of Punjab, Tamil Nadu and Gujarat; with no other major urban centres in its vicinity, there was no competition to serve as an alternative to invite migrants. Migrants also hailed from neighboring countries such as Nepal and Bangladesh. Migration only saw an increase post partition, and at a time a sizable Jewish population as well as a small Armenian community resided in the city. The rich diversity of migrants also led to the city serving as a melting pot of cultures. In the years between 1881 and 1961, more than 50 percent of the city's population comprised immigrants from outside West Bengal[15].

The city possessed a plethora of caste and community norms, some particular to religious communities, which extended to occupational niches. Among the hindi-speaking migrants, Marwaris served as industrialists and businesspersons, whereas Bihari migrants were rickshaw pullers and petty labour. South Indians occupy clerical positions while Sikhs were involved in transport[16]. Tanning was predominantly seen as a lower- caste and polluting occupation in the caste hierarchy- it involved interacting with cow hides, and was thus shunned by the upper castes. This occupational niche was captured by the Hakka, who bought hides from Punjabi Muslims and Sikhs, hired lower caste Biharis (of the Chamar caste) to work in the tanneries, and purchased cheap land in the marshland site of Dhapa. Oxfeld claims it not to be uncommon for immigrant minorities to engage in occupations denigrated by the host society across the world. The author quotes Nirmal Kumar Bose when referring to the importance of ethnicity in Calcutta's social structure, who says that an economy of scarcity led to the everyone clinging closely to the occupation associated with their ethnic group,

[15] Oxfeld, "Still guest people: The reproduction of Hakka identity in Kolkata, India", Page 152, as quoted from 'The Growth of Calcutta in the Twentieth Century' by Satyesh Chakraborty.
[16] Ibid., Page 153 as quoted from Nirmal Kumar Bose' Calcutta: A Social Survey.

and depending on their colinguals. The site was at the fringe of the city- making land cheap while ensuring the availability of water, essential for tanning. The leather was then sold. The idea of the peripheral location of Dhapa also resembles the structure of a village- with the more polluting occupational groups residing on the fringes of the city. Conversely, Chinese shoe shops had to be placed at the city's centre.

Hakka Chinese upheld distinctions from both other Chinese and Indian communities-there was no intermarriage and very marginal intermingling, only as much as the task of tanning would necessitate. The Indian view of Dhapa as a walled city, at the fringe and cut off from the centre, associated with impure tasks, did cause a degree of discrimination against the Hakka, while the Hakka would view Indians as corrupt, based off their interaction with state bureaucrats. The view of the entire Chinese diaspora on part of the Indians too saw a shift after the 1962 Sino- Indian war wherein many Chinese residents of India were stripped of their citizenship and faced deportation. Oxfeld explores the concept of ethnic identity as interpreted through the Hakka, calling it dialogical and reflexive. This is because identity is created and maintained through a set of oppositions between one's in- group and the other(s). The idea of the Hakka as 'guest- people' persisted, and was self- reproduced, as Oxfeld demonstrated using the example of the Toronto Hakka. The Hakka diaspora in Brampton, Toronto traces its origins to Calcutta and not to China, while considering themselves to be guest people even in their new surroundings.

Conclusion

The case of Khampa traders shows the evolution of a trading force into a political force over time, at how the overlapping of economic and political influence led to the growth of Khampa families into decision makers, evident from their eventual presence in the Ganden Phodrang. The Tai people show

their control of local trade flows along with their ingenious use of the cowry system, while the Hakka Chinese show the clever use of pre- existing caste structures of purity and pollution to tap into a new economic spring, and profit out of it. Systems evolved and times changed, but identity persisted, and business continued. These examples go on the show the resilience and the influence of trading communities of South East Asia.

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