

**Buddhist Books on Trans-Himalayan Pathways:  
Materials and Technologies Connecting People and Ecological Environments  
in a Transnational Landscape**

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**Introduction: Trans-Himalayan routes as a web of cultural, social and economic connections**

In different forms and at different scales, roads and pathways have shaped the existence of a multitude of different communities inhabiting different ecological niches in the Himalaya. The steep and lush southern Himalayan slopes, home to a wide range of ethnic communities with different characteristics and livelihoods have thus been connected to the dry Tibetan plateau inhabited by high-altitude farmers and pastoralists. Trade has historically been the way in which these different communities have related to each other in multiple forms. However, relations were not only about exchanges of goods, they were also about kinship, religious ties and the transfer of knowledge and technologies and well as literary artefacts.

The emphasis currently given to ‘roads’ in the development of these regions echoes much older pathways and ancient connections while pointing to their radical transformation. Cultural production on the Tibetan plateau and in the Himalayan regions would not have been possible without a web of relations enacted over the centuries through mountain trails and trading routes. Manuscripts and prints, both as texts and as material artefacts, tell stories not only of books carried along these pathways, passed-on, copied and translated but also of palm-leaves, paper plants and paper, wood, ink, gold, pigments and dyes which were processed, traded and often presented as merit making offerings.

Literary artefacts can reveal many untold stories if we look at the information given in colophons about the conditions of their production together with the analysis of the materials they are made of and the mapping of their places and routes. In this paper I set out from the exploration of a historic gateway of trans-Himalayan relations to show how Tibetan scriptures can tell a story of materials and technologies that connect different ecological environments inhabited by very different groups of people. I also show that the social life of literary artefacts has shaped the Himalayan region for centuries by linking a ‘galaxy’ of communities with different histories and different perspectives on what constitutes centre and borders and the relationship to each other. Whilst the consolidation of nation-state boundaries through geopolitical processes meant that the flows across these ‘borderlands’ have been increasingly challenged and sometimes completely blocked, new technologies have recently opened up avenues of communication with *digital dharma* becoming one of the most iconic forms of ‘vernacularized modernity’. Scriptures in digital form have thus become part of new imagined and virtual geographies that have added further layers to Himalayan landscapes and expanded in new directions the web of trails that criss-crosses this transnational space.

**Exploring a historic gateway: Mangyul-Gungthang and the Kyirong route between Tibet and Nepal**

Over the centuries, the area known as Mangyul- Gungthang (currently Jilong Xian in Shigatse Prefecture, TAR) has been an important gateway between the north and the south of

the Himalayas, traversed by the main route between Tibet and Nepal, which passed through the Kyirong valley and connected Central Tibet to Kathmandu. This was the route taken by the Nepalese wife of Emperor Songtsen Gampo (died 649) on her way to Tibet. This was, at times, also an important route between the Chinese Empire and India as witnessed by a Chinese inscription on an overhanging rock not far from the ruins of the royal palace left in 658 by Wang Xuance, a diplomat of the Tang imperial court who passed through on his way to and from Buddhist India (Diemberger, 2007:34; Pasang Wangdu, 1996:56-63). He was on a political and religious mission for Emperor Gaozong (628-683) whose wife became famous (and infamous) as Empresses Wu Zetian (624-705), a keen promoter of Buddhism and Buddhist book production (see below). According to the *dBa' bzhed* (folios 5–10) and many other sources, the Kyirong Route was also the itinerary taken by Padmasambhava and Śāntarakṣita in the eighth century on their way from India to Tibet. A Nepalese temple constructor travelled with them to build what eventually became famous as Samye monastery, the first Buddhist monastery in Tibet. This was the most celebrated of a wide range of cultural borrowings and cross-fertilizations that took place along this route, which included the beautiful dynastic temples of the Kyirong Valley in Nepalese style: the Chamdrin Lhakhang and the Phagpa Wati Sangpo traditionally attributed to Emperor Songtsen Gampo (and regularly restored by his descendants ruling this region, see Everding, 2000; Erhard, 2004). Sanskrit palm-leaf manuscripts preserved in Tibet (especially Lhasa and Sakya) are also witness to the journey of the material supports of Buddhist teachings from the south to the north of the Himalaya and the way in which they inspired Tibetan book production. What was travelling along this route was not only the doctrine of the Buddha but also the technologies of Buddhist material culture and architecture.



Illustration 1 Kyirong Valley and ancient trans-Himalayan pathway

During the imperial period this area was considered part of the kingdom of Shangshung and subsequently of Ngari, as western Tibet later became known. In the thirteenth century, under Sakya rule, the kingdom of Mangyul- Gungthang was founded by

Bumdegon (1253–1280) (Everding, 2000:391ff.), who, like the kings who had founded Guge and Purang in western Tibet some two hundred years earlier (see Petech, 1988:369–394), was a descendant of the ancient Tibetan royal house. Under the Sakya rule, following the territorial reorganisation of Tibet into administrative units known as myriarchies (*thrikhor*), it became a regional power part of a complex network of local political domains with varying degree of autonomy. The relationships among these powers alternated between collaboration and hostility, independence and subordination in a setting in which marriage alliances and religious patronage were important integrating factors. The capital of the Mangyul Gungthang kingdom was the centre of its own mandala, protected by the ancestral mountain god and focused on the imperial ancestry of its rulers whilst being strategically positioned on a key route of communication between other centres. This state of affairs lasted until the Mangyul Gungthang kingdom was destroyed in 1620 by the King of Tsang. After this latter was defeated by the Hoshuud Mongols, in 1642 the area came under the authority of the Lhasa based Ganden Phodrang administration and eventually the overlordship of the Qing Empire. Following the Gorkha incursion into Tibet at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, this area became increasingly controlled as a borderland.

Whilst the route via Kyirong following the Zarong Tsangpo/Trisuli River was the most ancient and famous of the historic trans-Himalayan corridors, there are many parallel ones that became more or less significant at different points in history. With the establishment of the TAR/Nepal border this ancient route became marginalised by the opening of other passages (especially the route via Nyalam/Kodari) until recently when it was rediscovered in new guise, with the construction of a tarmac road and the opening of a modern border post in 2015 in the location where the ancient Gorkha border post Rasuwagadhi was located.

South of this border the area is currently inhabited by a wide range of communities, most notably Sherpa and Tamang but also Newari and others. The ethnonyms that are currently used often lump together people with complex histories, which came to be identified as discreet communities through tortuous processes and their integration into the Nepalese state. Their history however goes far back and is in many ways connected to the trade route and to their specialisations and livelihoods; in some cases craftsman such as the Newari migrating northwards bringing labour and skills to the Tibetan plateau and people migrating southward from the Tibetan plateau to inhabit the so-called Hidden Valleys or Hidden Lands (*beyul*). In fact both east and west of the main trade route there are areas such as Helambu, Langtang and Kyimolung that are considered to be sacred sites hidden by Padmasambhava to be revealed at the appropriate time as a place of refuge and mystical realisation.

### **Books as texts, literary artefacts and ritual objects travelling on trans-Himalayan routes**

Written by hand or blockprinted on paper made from the bark or the roots of plants that grow on the Himalayan slopes and on the Tibetan plateau (see below), Tibetan sacred books reflect a long and rich textual tradition. Most are constituted of loose sheets of paper that mimic the palm-leaves on which Buddhist texts were written in Sanskrit and were taken from India to Tibet by Buddhist scholars and pilgrims (a format called *pothi*, from the Sanskrit *pustaka*). Some of them are richly illuminated and written with precious inks made of gold, silver or precious stones on dark paper, others are more ordinary, written in black ink made of soot on whitish paper, which usually gets darkened with age. Usually wrapped in a particular cloth that is often called with the same name as the monastic robe (*namza*), tied

with strings that are often called ‘belts’ (*kura*) and invited (*chendren*) from one place to another as if they were honorific persons, Tibetan books are closely connected to the Buddhist cult of relics. As ‘symbols/supports of the speech’ (*sungten*), they embody the speech of the Buddha and of the masters who continued his deeds; alongside statues and paintings, the ‘symbols/supports of the body’ (*kuten*), and actual relics enshrined in *stupas*, the symbols/supports of the mind’ (*thugten*). Through reading aloud they are activated and they are therefore part of ritual practices that harness the blessing power of Buddha’s and Buddhist masters’ ‘speech’. As ritual objects, they are endowed with the power of blessing people and fields, they demand handling according to specific protocols and can express a strong moral message to the people who come in touch with them: producing or restoring books are as much merit making activities as destroying or neglecting them are moral downfalls.

According to Buddhist narratives, the idea that books embodying the Buddha’s speech are sacred items leads back to the very moment of his demise and is related to a conflation of the cult of relics and the cult of the book. Texts could be considered as relics, worshipped like the bodily remains of the Buddha (or of those who enacted his vision) and put into *stupas*. The relevant ritual acts could be multiplied and, in the case of rulers, they also meant a re-enactment of Ashoka’s model of the Buddhist sovereign, the *cakravartin*, distributing relics.



Illustration 2 Local lama reading a book

The understanding of text as a relic together with Buddhist merit-making practices was thus also linked to the development of early printing in China, Korea and Japan (cf. Schopen, 2005:309-311; see also Strong, 2004). In his book *The Woman who Discovered Printing* the Sinologist Tim Barrett (2008) describes how the controversial Chinese Empress Wu Zetian (624-705) ordered innumerable copies of a ritual text to be printed and distributed. Thus, through her way of making merit and enacting the Buddhist *cakravartin* ideal to establish her own dynasty (Zhou), she probably led to the “discovery” of printing as early as the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> century.

An understanding of the book as relic, artefact and ritual object as well as medium for the communication of Buddha’s message underpinned both the production of manuscript editions of Buddhist scriptures as well as Tibetan prints. The *Royal Genealogy of Gung thang* (*Gung thang rgyal rabs*) lists the rulers of the Gungthang kingdom in chronological order and describes their deeds. The production of Buddhist volumes as ‘symbols of the speech’

(*sungten*) appears often alongside statues, paintings, temples and shrines as merit-making activities, especially after the passing of a family member. Until the reign of Thri Lhawang Gyaltsen (rl.1419-1464) these were manuscript copies, sometimes lavishly illuminated editions written in gold on deep blue or black paper. From then on, the printing of Buddhist texts appears in the narrative as a crucial merit-making activity.



Illustration 3 Local lama copying a book, photo by Christian Schicklgruber

This was the beginning of a period in which more popular, grass-root forms of religious practice developed, propelled by the increased access to printed texts (Erhard,2004:149) and the involvement of larger parts of the population in the support of printing projects which were not the prerogative of rulers (see Diemberger and Clemente, 2013:119-142). Thri Lhawang Gyaltsen's printing operations were followed by those of his son and his further descendants on the Mangyul Gungthang throne, leading to the production of a whole host of print editions that included great classics such as the biography and songs of Milarepa by Tsangnyon Heruka (see Erhard, 2000; Schaeffer, 2009; Sernesi, 2011: 170–237). In the 15<sup>th</sup> and the 16<sup>th</sup> centuries a multitude of printing houses were built in palaces and monasteries including Trakar Taso in the Kyirong Valley, which became famous across the entire region (see Quintman in this volume).

It is during this time that the *Mani bka' 'bum*, a text traditionally attributed to the first Tibetan emperor Songtsen Gampo (d.649), was printed at the royal palace of the Mangyul Gungthang kings. Its narrative contributed to the spreading of the Tibetan imperial legacy and the cult of the bodhisattva Avalokitesvara, protector of Tibet, of whom the Emperor Songtsen Gampo and later the Dalai Lama are considered emanations.<sup>1</sup> The mention in this text of a famous scheme of thirteen Buddhist temples that pin down the territory of Tibet, imagined as the body of a demoness, was also crucial in linking one of the ancient local temples attributed to Songtsen Gampo (the Chamdrin Lhakhang) to the pan-Tibetan narrative centred in Lhasa that shaped what George Dreyfuss (1994) defines as 'proto-nationalism'. The Mangyul Gungthang editions of this text travelled across Tibetan areas and one of them became the basis for the 17<sup>th</sup> century print edition produced in Bhutan (see Kapstein, 2000 :260), where another of the 'temples taming the further border' (*yangdul*) is located. Both manuscript and printed versions of the *Mani bka' 'bum* can currently be often found in the Mangyul Gungthang region and in the adjacent areas in Nepal and are witness to the importance and the popularity of this text. From the biography of Kuntu Sangmo, we learn that it was not only important for people who directly read it but also for the illiterate as

households used to invite monks and nuns to read it for them, spreading a narrative that eulogised the Tibetan imperial legacy (see Diemberger, 2016:267-308).

What was happening in Mangyul Gungthang in the 15<sup>th</sup> century was not unique. In other areas of Tibet, the Phagmodrupa rulers, the lords of Gyangtse, Yasang, Yamdrog and other local polities engaged in similar operations creating print editions of texts that became established as classics of monastic curricula most notably Tsongkhapa's *Lam rim* (see for example Jackson, 1990: 107-116) and Tibetan historiography and by the turn of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Tibet was buzzing with printing houses. Manuscript production on the Tibetan plateau did not necessarily involve the importation of paper, paper plants and wood from the lower area. Paper could be produced locally from roots of a plant called *stellera* and ink could be derived from common soot. However, de-luxe manuscript editions needed gold, silver, pigments and dyes that had to be sourced from different areas on the plateau and from the lower valleys, in ways that were parallel and comparable to *thankha* paintings (see Jackson and Jackson, 2006). Similarly printing was dependent on trade as printing paper needed at least a portion of bark of Daphne/Edgeworthia species (see Helman-Wazny, 2016:532-554). It is likely, therefore, that the increased reliance on paper plants and wood involved in printing tightened and enhanced the trading links between the north and the south of the Himalaya, with paper production and its trade becoming essential for communities such as the Tamang who specialised in this craft.

#### **A 1441 print of the *dPal de kho nan yid 'dus pa snying po*: the example of a literary artefact as a node in a trans-Himalayan network**

In the British Library there is a printed copy of a text considered to be the 'essence' of the work of the great polymath Bodong Chogle Namgyal, a text written in 1441 in a hermitage in Mangyul Gungthang by the polymath Bodong Chogle Namgyal. This volume in *pothi* format printed with black ink on beige Tibetan paper, arrived in the UK in the wake of the British invasion of Tibet in 1903/4. Retrieved in Ngonga Chode monastery near the Nakartse fortress in Yamdrog, it was one of the numerous items that the British brought back to satisfy their desire for treasures from Tibet as a mysterious land that had captured their imagination.<sup>2</sup> A careful inspection of the volume in *pothi* format reveals that its folios actually belong to two different print editions. One produced in Zurtsho (an area between Mangul Gungthang and southerh Lato) in 1442 and the other much further to the east in Yamdrog in 1443 (see Tsering Dawa, 2016:237-266). The colophons of both these print editions celebrate them as deeds instigated by the respective rulers and celebrate their domain as the centre of the world, highlighting the local mountain god and its sacred territory and without any reference to higher levels of authority despite the fact that they were nominally part of larger political entities (Tibet was at that time under the loose control of the Ringpungpa rulers). The first of these two prints was produced with the patronage of the female ruler of Zurtsho, whose domain had shifted between being loosely under the kings of Mangyul Gungtang to being under the rulers of southern Lato with a great deal of autonomy.<sup>3</sup> The second was produced with the patronage of the ruler of Yamdrog, who had ancestral connections to Sakya and controlled a region south-west of Lhasa.<sup>4</sup> Both rulers had been disciples of Bodong Chogle Namgyal and were part of a network of followers of the same tradition. The reason why folios from two separate print editions ended up within a single volume is unclear but is certainly associated with the close religious links between these areas that are geographically relatively distant. The transregional network within which the two print editions were produced is also reflected in the names of the scholars mentioned in the colophon as involved in the editing of the text and its preparation for printing (see Tsering

Dawa, 2016:237-266). A wide range of scribes and carvers ensured that the text was adequately copied onto sheets to be glued on the wooden blocks to leave the letter marks in reverse and eventually carved. Little is known about the craftsmen beyond some of their names, the most skilled and prominent are celebrated as embodiment of Viswakarma, the Indian god of craftsmanship – which reminds us of the transnational character of a skill that originated in China but reflected the Indian roots of Buddhism.

The paper on which the text is printed is made of Daphne, which implies direct or indirect trading links with a region where this plant grows. The Zurtsho community generally sourced its paper or papermaking materials from the Himalayan slopes south of the Nyalam and Mangyul areas, in places that now belong to Nepal; the Yamdrog community probably sourced its paper from the area currently known as Bhutan. The birch wood for the printing block was equally sourced from these regions as was the ink imported from soot made from burning pine tree. Caravans would take these goods to trading places called *tshongdu* (meaning ‘market’, a very common place name along the entire Himalayan range) or to specific people and institutions that needed them to which they were connected by ties of allegiance, ritual friendship or kinship.

### **Books connecting people to the north and the south of the Himalaya**

Whilst there was some availability of local wood and paper on the Tibetan plateau, most of the materials used to produce books were sourced from communities inhabiting the southern Himalayan slopes (Sherpas, Tamangs, various Bhutanese groups etc.). They lived along trading routes or in the so-called Hidden Valleys (*beyul* or *belung*), sacred landscapes in relatively secluded places rich in herbs and forest products as well as ‘spiritual treasures’ (*terma*). They harvested the bark of *daphne* or *edgeworthia* species from the forest and processed it into paper, which could then be traded northwards over the high passes (see Trier, 1972; Helman-Wazny, 2016:532-554). In a similar way they traded wood planks for the printing blocks obtained from the Himalayan birches and soot for ink production produced by burning the wood of resinous pine trees (*pinus wallichiana*). Many of the people inhabiting the area where these materials were sourced were not only exporters, they were also keen recipients of sacred texts that reached them from the holy sites on the Tibetan plateau with the blessing of the relevant spiritual masters and were worshipped as sacred objects even if only a few members of the community were in the position to read them. In some cases these texts were hand-copied or even re-printed and passed on generating local teaching lineages and traditions.

The social organisation of the communities on each side of the Himalaya varied as did eating habits, kinship practices and languages. In fact both historical sources and current oral traditions are rich in comments about relative difference among the various communities inhabiting the Himalayan slopes and reflect different perspectives on marginality and centeredness. Subordination and the self-understanding of one community as marginal in relation to a centre or a heartland was not necessarily a given and often communities could have multiple external political and spiritual centres in relation to which they positioned themselves. At times tensions developed among these different entities and there is indeed a long history of local conflicts; however more often peaceful coexistence and trade were to mutual advantage and worth trying to preserve and restore – kinship and religious ties played an important part in this. When overarching state structures emerged or took control they often integrated and built on pre-existing arrangements in ways that preserved a lot of their features and allowed for fluidity and strategic ambiguities – Geoffrey Samuel (1993:61-62)

has productively adapted the notion of a ‘galactic polity’ developed by Tambiah to this Himalayan creative and dynamic messiness. It is this heterogeneous web of relationships that we find reflected in books, through their production, their journeys and their uses. Whilst books clearly offer a perspective that is skewed towards those who can read them, they can provide insight into their wider social and cultural context in ways that include illiterate and partially literate communities.

In addition to the north-south routes connecting the southern and the northern slopes of the Himalaya, there were myriads of East-West routes connecting different groups inhabiting the valleys at various altitudes. Local temples and monasteries as well as the houses of tantric priests contain texts that have travelled on these pathways. Sometimes these books travelled; more often they were hand copied within teacher-disciple lineages. When in the 1980s and 90s I studied the Hidden Valley of Khenbalung to the East of Mt Everest I found manuscripts that contained prayers to the transmission line mapping the routes that the texts had travelled, having arrived either from the west via Kyirong and Helambu or from the north via southern Lato and Karta. Many showed a range of immediate connections to the Sherpa inhabited Solu. A few had been printed in Tibetan monastic printing houses, such as that of Rongbuk Monastery, on *daphne* paper that had travelled northwards in paper bundles and returned southwards as sacred scripture. Whilst the particular books and links are specific, most of the local textual collections that can be found in the Himalayan valleys have a similar nature.

The hidden valley of Khenbalung, a true hub of religious and trading links, is divided into two parts by the current state boundary and encompasses places that traditionally had very different social and political structures but were tightly connected: the communities to the north were stratified and integrated into Tibetan state structures; the communities to the south much less so despite their formal integration in the Gorkha/Nepal state since the 18<sup>th</sup> century (see Diemberger, 1996:219-232). This state of affairs was perceived and commented upon by the Tibetan Lama of Rongbuk Monastery, Ngawang Tendzin Norbu, who travelled to the region in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and observed that Khenbalung as a holy land of Padmasambhava did not experience taxes and corvée services and he regretted that the arrival of the Gorkha affected its status and the integrity of its honour. The different people inhabiting the Beyul Khenbalung region (Tibetans, Shingsawa, Sherpa, Rai, Tamang etc.) participated in the perception that this particular geographical space was a sacred hidden valley, even though they had different perspectives about it. Some of the narratives were oral, others were written. Some were framed in clear Buddhist terms, others focused on the local mountain gods. Manuscripts made of *daphne* bark paper preserved in several of the local village temples and private houses describe the way to reach the hidden valley from different cardinal directions. This ‘guide’ (*neyig*) to the Hidden Valley of Khenbalung was revealed by the ‘treasure revealer’ Rigdzin Godem (1337-1408) who had been active at the court of the kings of Mangyul Gungthang in the 14<sup>th</sup> century and has become famous for having opened many hidden valleys in the Himalaya (see Everding, 2000:481ff).

As nodes in networks and networks of networks books tied a great variety of people together, including many who were not literate, in a web of routes used to source the materials, produce manuscripts and prints, and circulate them. There were plenty of borders between different communities but these were porous and locally negotiable. Things have been transformed by the consolidation of modern state boundaries – border management was somewhat looser (but certainly an important area of negotiation) between the Qing Empire and the Gorkha State as well as British India; it became much tighter and increasingly

controlled by modern border control practices between the PRC and India, Nepal and Bhutan. The long distance trans-Himalayan trade is now a phenomenon of the past despite a certain amount of border trade. The *tsongdu*, the traditional big market places, have stopped being at the centre of transnational networks where traders from all directions gathered at particular times of celebration and commerce. Only very few monasteries have functioning printing houses; paper is no longer sourced from the Himalayan valleys for manuscript and print production and where the craft has been revived it is mainly for the benefit of a tourist and art market (in addition to a modest amount for the traditionalist local Buddhist revival); industrially produced ink is readily available so that only few people know how to prepare it from soot (although many have memories of the process). For technological, economic and political reasons, books seem to have stopped being nodes in these extensive webs of people, materials and technologies. Or have they?

### **The Himalayan region as a transnational virtual space for the preservation and circulation of books as spiritual and cultural heritage.**

With the destruction of many books during the Cultural Revolution and the subsequent revival of Buddhist traditions on the Himalayan plateau a new kind of endeavour has emerged: the rescue, restoration and distribution of scriptures. In many cases, books that have left the Tibetan plateau during or before the Cultural Revolution as well as those that have survived thanks to the endeavour of people who hid them (or sheer luck), are at the centre of this effort. They are the drivers of synergies informed by both a Buddhist morality of protection and distribution of sacred scriptures and a secular morality of cultural heritage. In recent years digital technologies have assisted this effort in significant ways: sometimes enabling the digital reproduction, storage and distribution of texts; sometimes as an aid in the processing of new print editions that are then brought back to their places of origin.

In Mangyul Gungthang, now Jilong xian, the monastery of Trakar Taso, famous as a Milarepa sacred site and as a printing house, used to host a substantial collection of manuscripts and prints – including the writings of the master Trakar Chokyi Wangchuk (see Quintman in this volume). The monastery was completely abandoned and partially destroyed in the 1960s but part of its collection was hidden in a cave above the monastery and a more substantial part had been taken earlier by Lupon Gyurme to his monastery in the adjacent area within Nepalese territory. When Trakar Taso monastery was restored in the late 1980s the nuns managed to rescue printing blocks and the part of the collection that had been hidden in a cave – but the manuscripts and prints had been badly damaged by water and dampness.<sup>5</sup> In 2015 Lama Shedrub a disciple of Lupon Gyurme was able to get hold of the microfilms of Lupon Gyurme's collection produced in the 1980s by the NGMPP (these were deposited in Nepal at National Archives and in Germany). With computer technology he produced a modern re-print of the text in Kathmandu and this is currently being brought back to Trakar Taso by one of the Tibetans who initiated and supported the restoration of the place.



Illustration 4 Monk taking photograph of illumination with mobile phone, photo by Bruce Huett

The text of the essence of Bodong Chogle Namgyal's teachings preserved at the British Library was brought back to Yamdrog and delivered to Samding monastery by the British Library Tibetan curator Burkhard Quessel in digital form in 2007. When I re-visited Samding in 2015 I found a new computer laboratory in the monastery, with a group of young monks preparing textual materials for a session of spiritual teachings. These textual materials were based on a painstaking research work that had gathered what was available from monasteries belonging to the same tradition in Tibet and abroad. This was just one of the many networks that has emerged in recent years, incorporating the ancient Himalayan geography but having a global span and connecting people in the name of particular Buddhist traditions. Websites, mobile phones, USB, hard drives, CD and other supports have been expanding the space of trans-Himalayan communication in unimaginable ways. At the same time ancient craftsmanship has been revived under the rubric of tangible and intangible cultural heritage of the Himalaya within a globalised perspective involving multiple forms of agency at different levels.

## **Conclusion**

Exploring the social life of books, the Himalayas emerge as transnational space where for centuries flows of ideas, people and materials have connected places that are both relative centres and peripheries. This included a wide range of people that had different relationships to the written word and were not necessarily literate. Anthropologists such as Anna Tsing (1993, 2005) have shown that remote or 'marginal' and 'out-of-the-way' places are not all they appear, and that such places are also co-creations of their inhabitants in dialogue with global narratives, linked by transitive relationships that flow between community, nation-state and the global politics of 'modernisation'. Whilst Van Spengen's notion of Zomia may

be used productively in the trans-Himalayan context to understand the transnational character of this space and its cross-boundary flows, Geoffrey Samuel's adaptation of Tambiah's concept of 'galactic polity' might be more effective in capturing its political dynamics, its multi-centredness and its complexity through history. Relationships among places and people have been shaped by religious, cosmological, kinship and economic flows in ways that a narrow focus on 'political formations' and the relationship of communities to 'the state' might obscure. A close observation of books, not only as texts but also as artefacts, offers a different perspective and a unique opportunity to explore multiple relationships and their transformations as well as their trajectories in geographical, imagined and virtual spaces.

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<sup>1</sup> The kings of Mangyul Gungthang sponsored several print editions of this work, for a discussion of these early prints made in Mangyul Gungthang see Erhard, 2000:15; Ehrhard, 2013:143-171. A remarkable early 16<sup>th</sup> century version produced by the Mangyul Gungthang royal house is preserved at the Cambridge University Library.

<sup>2</sup> This is suggested by the seal mark of the monastery on many of the folios.

<sup>3</sup> Zurtsho was one of the entities making up the nomadic and semi-nomadic polity of Porong under the command of the Porong Jebon. This latter was connected to the rulers of southern Lato, one of the myriarchies under the Sakya rule, but in an extremely loose way. (Everding, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> Yamdrog was one of the myriarchies under the Sakya rule and retained its territorial identity through later administrative reforms.

<sup>5</sup> A detailed account of the process is given in Diemberger, 2010:113-125.