

THE RANGE OF THE RIVER

TIBETAN-HIMALAYAN RIVERS AND TRANSREGIONAL MOBILITY IN SOUTH AND SOUTHEAST ASIA

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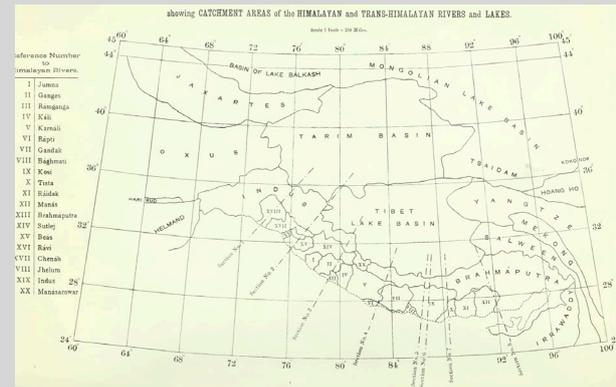
The large rivers that flow from the Tibetan-Himalayan highlands to different locations in the Bay of Bengal and China Seas provide more ground for connections and mobility than usually imagined in modern Asian studies. Some of the rivers have received useful individual attention in recent scholarly work, which points to the remarkable potential for further explorations of connected histories of these rivers. Set in the river systems of the Brahmaputra, Irrawaddy, Salween, Mekong, Red, and Yangzi, my current research project examines how these rivers engendered multi-agentive mobility across several regions and how these developments contributed to transregional integrations in Asia in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. By doing so, I suggest that the spatial reach of the Tibetan-Himalayan rivers are insufficiently imagined and aim to secure for the river a larger berth in the recent macro-historical turn.

The arid and the semiarid regions in northern China (Yellow-Wei system) or northern India (Indus-Ganges system) were subject to complex irrigation and river-training projects under demanding imperial bureaucracies and technological interventions. The rivers I am exploring, however, were relatively less exposed to prodigious statecraft and were more free-flowing, generating a gravitation toward commercial and cross-cultural connections across Bengal, Assam, Myanmar, southeastern Tibet, and southern China, until the cartographic constructions of postcolonial states throttled such flow. I argue that these rivers, by inspiring the political, commercial and quotidian performances and practices taking place in a large stretch of contiguous territories, engendered an ecological split and provided a third space beyond “core” China and “core” India. The new spatial scale was characterized by the mobility and temporal interactions enabled by these rivers. By the 1850s, the port cities of Calcutta and Rangoon in the Bay of Bengal and Canton and Shanghai in the China Seas were in the grip of British and other imperial forces, and French control of Saigon and Tonkin soon followed suit. Port-to-port maritime contacts in the Indo-Pacific rim were matched by

parallel efforts that were made to establish inland communication through the rivers that linked these ports.

Imperial attachment to rivers, because of their strategic influence and their use for the transportation of commodities, accompanied the revival or creation of new agrarian fields, bazaars, travelers’ lodges, places of worship, and merchant trails along and across the river valleys. Ethnic groups, imperial officials, private individuals, and religious communities established zones of cultural and commercial contact via these networks and corridors of circulation. The Tibetan-Himalayan river systems were at the heart of this flux that shaped inter-Asian entanglements. These rivers were sites of evolving contestations and conflicts but also of referral, signification, material exchanges, and crosshairs of paths and pathways.

The research project thus seeks to offer a narrative of imperial encounters with the river as it induced new, or enhanced, economic and popular mobility across a wide range of territories. The empire created new forms of temporality around these rivers, yet these rivers remained a force that shaped imperial practices along their own fluvial footprints, through defiance or unnerving uncertainty or through communication pathways they fashioned for the empire. These processes and trends, I suggest, contributed to the emergence of the river as a collective commons that defied political, economic, and morphological divides across these regions and territorial sovereignties. The findings of the research project are expected to resonate with the postcolonial development practices with regard to the rivers covered. Until recently, policy makers, environmentalists, and civil society activists have mostly based their approach to rivers on the impact of anthropogenic interventions into the river systems, leaving the question of whether the river is a historical force itself less focused. An exploration of this question allows me to show that nation-states’ efforts toward damming, diverting, and training these rivers for “national” developments sit uncomfortably with the transnational commons that were shaped by and had shaped the relationship between ecology and economy, commodity flows, and cultural interactions



S.G. Burrard and H. H. Hayden, *A Sketch of the Geography and Geology of the Himalaya Mountains and Tibet* (Calcutta: Government of India, 1907), Chart XXIII.

across regions. Through this attempt to restore the river as an integrative force, the project seeks to recover the river as a transnational commons that contrasts with its fragmented body across the postcolonial nation-spaces.

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