

# Himalayan Journeys

crossings

assembling

journeying

circulations  
and  
transformations

Conférence  
internationale  
22-24 juin 2022

Centre d'études  
himalayennes  
(CNRS)

Campus Condorcet  
Centre de colloques  
Aubervilliers

**PROGRAMME**

The constraints and limitations imposed by topography, climate and ecology are characteristic of the Himalayan experience, but equally distinctive are the various ways these barriers to social life have been creatively overcome and circumvented. Trade, political, religious or familial connections have allowed for the circulation of people, goods, skills and ideas.

The intensely historical and changing character of the Himalayan region and of its human settlements exemplifies how movement has been valued differently through time and across cultures. Social and spatial mobilities also result from inequalities and the need to be connected to the pervasive delocalisation of social life.

This conference calls attention to *movement* as a particular social dynamic and explores how it relates to cultural practices, imaginaries and materialities. Participants consider mobility and circulatory regimes, trails, routes and roads as the “connective tissue” within various historical and political contexts and against the backdrop of rooted cultures and identities inscribed in particular landscapes. They explore how circulations can be socially transformative.

Les contraintes et les limites imposées par la topographie, le climat et l'écologie sont caractéristiques de l'expérience himalayenne, mais tout aussi distinctives sont les différentes façons dont ces barrières à la vie sociale ont été surmontées et contournées de manière créative. Les liens commerciaux, politiques, religieux ou familiaux ont permis la circulation des personnes, des biens, des compétences comme des idées.

Le caractère profondément historique et changeant de la région himalayenne et de ses établissements humains illustre la manière dont le mouvement a été apprécié différemment à travers le temps et les cultures. Les mobilités sociales et spatiales résultent également d'inégalités et doivent être mises en relation avec la délocalisation omniprésente de la vie sociale.

Cette conférence attire l'attention sur le *mouvement* en tant que dynamique sociale particulière et explore la manière dont il est lié aux pratiques culturelles, aux imaginaires et aux matérialités. Les participants considèrent la mobilité et les régimes de circulation, les sentiers, les routes et les chemins comme le « tissu conjonctif » dans divers contextes historiques et politiques, avec en toile de fond des cultures et des identités enracinées dans des paysages particuliers. Ils explorent comment les circulations peuvent être socialement transformatrices.

# 1. Programme



# Wednesday 22 June

## Crossings: fantasies and conflicts

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**9:00** Coffee

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**9:30** Welcome address

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### PANEL 1

## Road promises

CHAIR: NICOLAS SIHLÉ (CNRS)  
DISCUSSANT: OLIVIA AUBRIOT (CNRS)

**10:00** Nilamber Chhetri (Indian Institute of Technology Mandi) — Remaking the made: challenges of infrastructural development in the Eastern Himalayas [P.13](#)

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**10:35** Vibha Arora (Indian Institute of Technology Delhi) — Indian National Highway number 10 and its development promise: past and present [P.9](#)

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**11:10** Discussion

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**12:00** Lunch

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### PANEL 2

## Road unexpectedness

CHAIR: STÉPHANE GROS (CNRS)  
DISCUSSANT: NICOLAS SIHLÉ (CNRS)

**13:15** Valentina Punzi (University of Tartu) — Ghostly encounters on the Jiu-Mian highway in a Baima village (Sichuan, PRC) [P.24](#)

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**13:50** Sanggay Tashi (University of Colorado Boulder) — Herding yaks to driving cars: standardization, subjugation, and skillful means of settled nomads [P.27](#)

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**14:25** Discussion

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**15:15** Break

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**15:30** Florent Grazide (Bordeaux Montaigne University) — Building a road, constructing/deconstructing political ideas? A case study in a Tamang village [P.17](#)

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### PANEL 3

## Road politics

CHAIR: OLIVIA AUBRIOT (CNRS)  
DISCUSSANT: NITASHA KAUL  
(UNIVERSITY OF WESTMINSTER)

**16:05** Brigitte Steinmann (Lille University) — Shifting territorialisations of borders and development: Tibetan, Nepalese and Sikkimese Himalayan traders facing capitalist globalisation, from Tibet (China) to Walungchung gola (Nepal) (1920–2018) [P.26](#)

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**16:40** Discussion

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**17:30** End

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Thursday 23 June

# Assembling: the social life of infrastructures

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## PANEL 4

### Managing flux

CHAIR: STACY LEIGH PIGG (SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY)  
DISCUSSANT: JOËLLE SMADJA (CNRS)

**9:00** Tom Robertson (Kathmandu University Medical School and Dhulikhel Hospital) — Airplanes and modernity in Chitwan, Nepal, 1950–1980 [P.25](#)

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**9:35** Nadine Plachta (University of Toronto) and Galen Murton (James Madison University) — Assembling new roads in highland Nepal: mobilities, socialities, and territories [P.23](#)

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**10:10** Ben Campbell (University of Durham) — Energies of movement: livelihood transitions, multi-species migrations, and the spread of biogas in Nepal [P.12](#)

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**10:45** Break

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**11:00** Discussion

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**12:00** Lunch

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**13:00** Kathrin Fischer (University of Oxford) — Big people and small countries: changing maps of choice in a Nepali village [P.14](#)

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**13:35** Jagannath Adhikari (Curtin University of Technology and Nepal Institute of Development Studies) — Changing pathways of mobility for livelihoods: consequences of political changes and infrastructure developments on patterns of migration and exchanges of goods in Karnali region [P.8](#)

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**14:10** Tristan Bruslé (CNRS) — (Ir)rational mobilities: chance, risks and uncertainty in labour migration from Nepal [P.11](#)

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**14:45** Discussion

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**15:45** Break

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**16:15** Daniela Berti (CNRS) — Tiger corridors, national highways and wildlife politics in Uttarakhand [P.10](#)

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**16:50** Swargajyoti Gohain (Ashoka University) — From monastic governmentality to monastic visibility: Buddhist tourist circuits in the Indian Himalaya [P.16](#)

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**17:25** Discussion

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**18:15** End

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## PANEL 5

### Patterns of mobility

CHAIR: KATSUO NAWA (INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED STUDIES ON ASIA)  
DISCUSSANT: INA ZHARKEVICH (UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD)

## PANEL 6

### Circuits and corridors

CHAIR: BEN CAMPBELL (UNIVERSITY OF DURHAM) / DISCUSSANT: ORNELLA PUSCHIASIS (INALCO)

Friday 24 June

# Journeying: landscape, ancestral roads and other geographies

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PANEL 7

## Movement and the senses

CHAIR: JOËLLE SMADJA (CNRS)  
DISCUSSANT: STÉPHANE GROS (CNRS)

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**9:00** Thibault Fontanari (UC Louvain) — The social life of pathways: building infrastructures through giving and walking in the Karakoram, Pakistan [P.15](#)

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**9:35** Callum Pearce (Leiden University) — Paths not taken: landscape, movement, and avoidance in Ladakh [P.21](#)

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**10:10** Amy Johnson (Northumbria University) — Hiding in sight: eco-social rhythms of women's autonomy in small town Nepal [P.18](#)

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**10:45** Break

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**11:00** Stacy Leigh Pigg (Simon Fraser University) — Visual journeys: sensing roads past and present [P.22](#)

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**11:35** Discussion

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**13:00** Lunch

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PANEL 8

## Roots and routes

CHAIR: TRISTAN BRUSLÉ (CNRS)  
DISCUSSANT: GRÉGOIRE  
SCHLEMMER (IRD)

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**14:00** Katsuo Nawa (Institute for Advanced Studies on Asia) — Multilayeredness of journeying experience and its transformation among Rang from Byans, Far Western Nepal [P.20](#)

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**14:35** Wen-Yao Lee (University of Kansas) — Mountain-connected roots and routes: the place-based identity of the Pumi in the Sino-Tibetan borderlands [P.19](#)

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**15:10** Discussion

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**16:00** Break


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**16:15** General discussion and concluding remarks

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**17:30** End

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## 2. Abstracts

(alphabetical order)

# Changing pathways of mobility for livelihoods: consequences of political changes and infrastructure developments on patterns of migration and exchanges of goods in Karnali region

**JAGANNATH  
ADHIKARI**

Curtin University  
of Technology and  
Nepal Institute  
of Development  
Studies

THURSDAY 23 JUNE — 13:35

This paper examines the changing mobility patterns of different groups of people in the traditional Karnali region for their complex livelihood structure anchored in exchanges across different locations, within and outside the region, with embedded social relations. Three major historical periods are considered – prior to 1959 during the salt trade with Tibet, from 1959 to the construction of roads linking Karnali region to the national road grid and to Tibet/China, and after the construction of these roads. A clear pattern of change in mobility, in the nature of the goods exchanged, and in embedded social relations can be discerned in these periods. These changes came as a response to the need to adapt to the changing circumstances to support people's livelihoods for which traditional cultural capital has also been utilized - albeit in different ways. Moreover, different groups of people undertook different types of mobility depending on the opportunities and social/cultural capital they had generated.

The political development in Tibet/China in 1959 had severe consequences on the salt trade and on circular movements of people and animals and exchanges across different geographical locations in the Himalaya. People then started taking part more regularly in trading Chinese and Indian goods in the hills, with a reduced reliance on pack animals. The trading of herbs such as Yarchagumba came as a new opportunity. Thakalis drew on new opportunities for tourism, hospitality businesses and contractorship in urban areas, which led to their relocation to these areas – mainly in the middle mountains. The construction of a road to link Karnali to the national road grid is gradually affecting both in-migration and out-migration in the region. The road-link between Karnali (also Mustang) and Tibet has also started to trigger transformations in Karnali region's economy and society, with new products coming from China and new markets (for example Lo-Mangthang) for Chinese goods slowly emerging. This paper calls attention to a great transformation that is underway in this part of the Himalayan region.



# Indian National Highway number 10 and its development promise: past and present

VIBHA ARORA  
Indian Institute of  
Technology Delhi

WEDNESDAY 22 JUNE — 10:35

Border highways and roads have become technological categories through which socio-natures are transformed into a valued resource for capitalist expansion: they ensure the circulation of people, goods and ideas, and they materially reinforce the governmentality of the state. My paper is about the border highway that interconnects the Himalayan state of Sikkim, its capital city Gangtok (eastern Sikkim) and the border town of Siliguri in West Bengal in the Himalayan foothills. The Indian National Highway number 10 starts from Fulbari near the Indo-Bangladesh border, crosses into Siliguri, Sevoke, Melli Bazaar and terminates at Gangtok in Sikkim. As a spatial-temporal motif, 'roads' help distinguish between now and before in social histories and political changes, and foreground the future impulse (development). Drawing upon archival resources and extended multi-sited fieldwork in the region and numerous ethnographic journeys (undertaken between 2001–2018), I argue that they shape the rhythms and striations of social life, situate ethnic-nationalist aspirations and embody modernity, express territoriality, and mark state presence (imperial state and post-colonial state). The paper highlights the 'promise' of infrastructure and its inter-connection with the ideology of modernity and development.



# Tiger corridors, national highways and wildlife politics in Uttarakhand

DANIELA BERTI  
CNRS

THURSDAY 23 JUNE — 16:15

Preserving endangered species has been a major focus of Indian policy in recent decades. Iconic species in particular, such as tigers or Asiatic lions, have received special attention in terms of scientific research, public funding and management, not only to create natural reserves where these animals can live in the wild, but also to protect the corridors that allow them to move between different reserves. In my paper, I first examine how the assessment of these wildlife corridors is addressed at a scientific level. Based on preliminary research conducted at the Wildlife Indian Institute of Dehradun, India, I examine how animals' movements are investigated and monitored in the field by wildlife biologists using different techniques (camera traps, radio telemetry, DNA, etc.). The data collected is evaluated in the laboratory using dedicated software in order to assess and predict the connectivity of animal populations in terms of genetic exchange or habitat suitability.

The issue of wildlife connectivity also involves political and economic stakes, as these wildlife corridors are often located in residential areas or can connect places through which people commute. Many conflicts are brought to court by various actors – NGOs, citizens, environmental lawyers – who oppose development projects (roads, highways, tourist infrastructures, etc.) on the grounds that they cross a wildlife corridor and would prevent animals from moving. In the second part of the paper, I look at a case that has been brought to court to oppose the construction of a road within an area concerning the Corbett Tiger reserve in Uttarakhand and which has largely been covered by the media. I show, on the one hand, how the argument of wildlife connectivity is used in court as a counter-narrative to the state or state-approved development agenda; on the other hand, how the production of scientific knowledge becomes entangled with dynamics of power and political stakes.

# (Ir)rational mobilities: chance, risks and uncertainty in labour migration from Nepal

TRISTAN BRUSLÉ  
CNRS

THURSDAY 23 JUNE — 14:10



Labour migration has long been viewed by migration theorists as a way to mitigate inherent life uncertainties on different markets (labour, credit), notwithstanding the fact that going abroad is in itself a risky endeavour. In Nepal, images of coffins arriving at Kathmandu airport from foreign destinations have become common representations of labour migration. The COVID-19 pandemic also proved that the insertion of Nepalese workers on the global labour market is paved with risks, deception and catastrophic consequences. However, the outbound flow of labourers has remained unabated. Migrants keep on relying on optimism to travel abroad towards more-than-often unknown working and living conditions. I will try to understand how risk, chance and uncertainty as social constructs are taken into account by migrants and their families during the migration experience. How do migrants and their kin perceive risks and chance? How do they mitigate risks associated with labour migration? Has risk become calculated and manageable? Based on migrants' testimonies, this paper aims at deciphering workers' (ir)rational migration strategies.

# Energies of movement: ← livelihood transitions, multi-species migrations, and the spread of biogas in Nepal

**BEN CAMPBELL**  
University  
of Durham

THURSDAY 23 JUNE — 10:10

As infrastructures of multiple kinds alter the directions and frequencies of movement in Himalayan social worlds, experiments with connectivity and adoption of technical innovations in daily life can be intimately dependent on changing patterns of movement among people, non-humans and things. This paper discusses how an example of the movement of a renewable energy technology – biogas anaerobic digesters – into new territories has rather particular requirements and enabling conditions for its acceptance among Nepali householders. Factors that appear to be significant to engineers and to sustainable energy policy-makers for villagers to adopt biogas tend not to have appreciated domestic livelihood processes of movement, and the contexts of daily and seasonal circulatory habits of people and livestock.

Over 400,000 domestic biogas systems have been built in Nepal. How has this energy infrastructure travelled and been taken up, by whom, and what kinds of movement by people, animals and things does it entail? Promoted especially in the area surrounding the Terai national parks, biogas allows villagers to dispense with the need to collect firewood from forests for domestic fuel. The paper analyses adoption (and abandonment) of biogas technology within transitions in rural economy from subsistence agro-pastoral livelihoods to migrant labour dependency. But beyond mere techno-economic factors, it considers changing symbolic values of household labour and lifestyle aspirations influenced by levels of remittance income from migrant household members. An anthropological interest in energy transitions as being about so much more than just the technology identifies contexts of multi-species movements and how regulation of environmental access enabling these movements is mediated by climate change discourse and renewable energy policies in surprising ways. Previous work in Rasuwa gives a comparative view on how the spread of biogas has been seen as limited by environmental factors favouring warmer conditions, which can be argued to display rather a territorial naturalisation of Pahari bias in the institutional culture of innovation surrounding renewable energy in Nepal. This has implications for how territories for sustainability are imagined. The paper reflects on taking forward territorial concepts from P. Sagant and R. Burghart to locate energy on the move in Himalayan worlds.

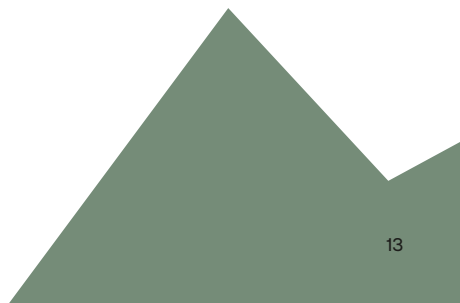
# Remaking the made: challenges of infrastructural development in the eastern Himalayas

**NILAMBER  
CHHETRI**  
Indian Institute of  
Technology  
Mandi

WEDNESDAY 22 JUNE — 10:00



Building roads and developing infrastructural facilities in the Himalayan region have received great impetus both in the colonial and post-colonial periods. During colonial times, it was the lucrative trade with Tibet that shaped infrastructural networks, while in the post-colonial period it was the security concerns that augmented infrastructural development in the region. Focusing on the Darjeeling-Sikkim Himalayas, this paper provides an ethnographic account of the making and remaking of the two distinct yet, interrelated constructions projects. It highlights the continued repair work on National Highway 10 (NH 10) that is the lifeline of the state of Sikkim, and the recent laying of the new railway line by tunneling the hills. The paper charts the different meanings associated with infrastructural projects to argue that people engage in the complex process of making and unmaking infrastructure. I base my understanding of these thematically related infrastructural projects on qualitative research tools. I build upon separate yet interconnected empirical studies on the repair of the existing roadway network and the boring of tunnels for the railway line to argue that we have to view infrastructure as a process, constantly evolving through processes of repair, replacement, restoration. Mired in these processes, the development of infrastructure is compounded by fears of corruption, irregularities, and incompleteness. These two projects offer great insights into the workings of both futurity and ruination. Ruination is evident in the constant efforts launched by the state to salvage the already crumbling infrastructure that is NH 10. On the contrary, the railway line suggests futurity, which encapsulates the aspirations of society, the legibility of the state in the borderlands, and stands as vivid and concrete instantiations of visions of the future.



# Big people and small countries: changing maps of choice in a Nepali village

KATHRIN FISCHER  
University of Oxford

THURSDAY 23 JUNE — 13:00


This paper is based on 14 months of qualitative research on migration decision-making in a multi-ethnic village in western Nepal. In Nepali villages, migration destinations are often categorised in ‘big’ (*thulo*), ‘small’ (*sano*), and ‘so-so’ (*thikai*) countries, depending on the prestige, respectability, income-level and power associated with the country. The terminological distinction is a marker of fundamental difference and is intrinsically linked to notions of ‘big’ and ‘small’ people. The idea that the prestige and success associated with ‘big’ countries is reserved for ‘big’ people, and thus unreachable for those situated in the lower strata of society, is deeply entrenched in the worldview and self-image of some of the villagers.

The horizon of possible destination countries depends on self-perception, role-ascription and different forms of capital. It relates to gender and age, and changes with experience, access to knowledge and resources. Financial and knowledge thresholds conflate with notions of deservingness, merit, and suitability. As a result, the villagers do not choose from a plain hierarchy resulting from popularity and affordability of destinations, but tend to contemplate migration options within these categorical boundaries. The resulting migration patterns have salient correlations with ethnicity, caste and gender. This selective connectivity in the village is engrained in and is a continuation of the valley’s history of immigration and emigration. According to the inhabitants’ oral history, the valley was first populated by the Magars after they had fled from hostile groups further west. They invited high-caste Chhetris for protection against their enemies, who then themselves invited Dalit castes to fulfil labour services. A history of trade, recruitment for foreign armies, the opening of the Gulf States, ten years of civil war, an Australian NGO, as well as caste-dynamics of privilege and discrimination have all contributed to the migration patterns we observe today. Despite the radical changes in the ways that information flows into the village, there is a striking continuity in the way new migration trends are born throughout these different historical periods. As remittances now allow the re-location of households, the ways in which social and geographical landscapes are mapped onto each other is re-negotiated.

# The social life of pathways: building infrastructures through giving and walking in the Karakoram, Pakistan


THIBAUT  
FONTANARI  
UC Louvain

FRIDAY 24 JUNE — 9:00



Wakhi farmers and herders of Shimshal in the Hunza Valley, in the Karakoram range of northern Pakistan, build their mountain pathways through a complex pooling of gifts called *nomus*: a family offers resources to build an infrastructure (a pathway, a bridge, a canal) in honour of a loved one, and the other families mobilise their workforce to build it. Everyone walks and everyone gives, but by giving in order to walk with ease and by experiencing the need to give while walking, the Wakhis of the Karakoram invite us to think about the intertwining of the circulation of the gift with the circulation of people along their mountain paths.

This paper first shows how the perception of the built environment through walking generates the obligation and the motivations to give. According to theories of the gift, social relations are (re)generated through gift-giving between groups and individuals. Landscape studies have also shown how people weave relations between humans, non-humans and their environment through walking. This paper argues that these two important dynamics intersect in the building of infrastructures by local people. The living and the deceased (re)generate their relations through the circulation of gifts, but also through the building of collective infrastructures that will enable them to circulate. Moreover, motivations to give are experienced not by beings detached from the world but within an ontological relationship with this world. The paper furthermore explores how motivations to give have changed as a result of the construction of roads. The Karakoram Highway, built between 1966 and 1978 to connect Kashgar in China to Mansehra in Pakistan, and then the Shimshal Road, built between 1985 and 2003 to link the village to the Karakoram Highway, offered new forms of connectivity and provided the ground on which the inhabitants circulated and encountered cultural differences. These encounters led them to develop new imaginaries, giving rise to new reasons for giving and ways of organising themselves to build new kinds of infrastructure in the village such as schools, religious buildings, and roads suitable for four-wheel drives.



# From monastic governmentality to monastic visibility: Buddhist tourist circuits in the Indian Himalaya

SWARGAJYOTI  
GOHAIN  
Ashoka University

THURSDAY 23 JUNE — 16:50

Post 1959, with the reconstitution of a Tibetan diasporic community in India, important monasteries displaced from Tibet were rebuilt in India. Not only have these monasteries contributed to preserving and promoting Tibetan Buddhist traditions in India, but they have also led to a revival of Buddhist pilgrimage and tourist circuits. While scholars have focused on the reinvention of Buddhism in India through the analysis of Buddhist sites and universities (such as Bodh Gaya or Nalanda), in this paper I am interested in seeing how monastery spaces, Buddhist festivals, and Buddhist sacred spaces have led to a reinvention of Buddhism in the Himalayan borderlands. I examine the new tourist circuits that coincide with monastery circuits in western Arunachal Pradesh in Northeast India.

These Buddhist monasteries in the Indian Himalayan regions blur the boundaries between pilgrimage and tourism by tapping into the spiritual tourism potential in India. If, in precolonial times, monasteries represented an order characterised by 'monastic governmentality', they are now increasingly directing the tourist gaze through 'monastic visibility'. The performance of monastery festivals and the construction of sprawling monastery quarters, opulent guesthouses, and other tourism infrastructures contribute to this form of monastic visibility. Unlike the diasporic reinvention of Tibetan Buddhism in India – discussed by Toni Huber, Donald Lopez and other scholars – monastic visibility through tourism in contemporary India enables new forms of community and networks among Indian Himalayan Buddhists. Through the circulation of domestic and international tourists and resources, monastic visibility supports the nationalist co-option of these borderland spaces as both Buddhist and Indian. This becomes important when we look at the reclamation of India as a Buddhist homeland in tourist imaginaries and nationalist discourse.



# Building a road, constructing/deconstructing political ideas? A case study in a Tamang village

FLORENT GRAZIDE  
Bordeaux  
Montaigne  
University

WEDNESDAY 22 JUNE — 15:30

This qualitative study was carried out over a three-year period to illustrate the relationships between the construction of infrastructures and their political and social effects on different scales. In Nepal in 2017, following decentralization as laid down by the 2015 constitution, the leaders of new rural municipalities were elected. In the district of Solokhumbu, several ward chairpersons launched the construction of roads as soon as they had been invested in order to connect to the new centre of power the last people situated far from it. This study shows how one of those projects – whose stated goal is to integrate marginalized populations into the so-called ‘development process’ – lay the ground for disintegration of hope and re-shaped political ideas and allegiances. Focusing in particular on the young people of the village, this paper proposes to follow political life, albeit obliquely, among those who are not traditionally bearers of political ideas in rural areas, namely young people from an indigenous community (Tamang) long considered as slaves, then as a cheap labour force. From this perspective, the study focuses on the values and on the conceptions of the capacity to act. It also shows how the road, as materiality, symbolizes the possibility or the impossibility of political, economic and social emancipation. The ethnographic description of the relationships forged around this construction project between expecting villagers and politicians working for their re-election provides a complex example of contemporary issues in Nepal. This research shows that the fluidity of political ideas is not only determined by the success or failure of a project, but also by the place a road occupies – as fantasy – in the collective imagination of a youth in search of meaning.

# Hiding in sight: eco-social rhythms of women's autonomy in small town Nepal

AMY JOHNSON  
Northumbria  
University

FRIDAY 24 JUNE — 10:10



In the small town of Pathakpur in Nepal's Farwestern Tarai, women's lives move in and out of focus as they seek ways to secure privacy in an environment of hyper surveillance. Grass-cutting and other daily chores, conventionally regarded as drudgery, present precious opportunities for women to hide (*lukaune*) from the demands of their households, to process thoughts, daydream, and satiate small vices (a cigarette, a hashish joint, a pinch of snuff). Amongst the various housework performed by women, grass-cutting is ideal for these pursuits because, at minimum, a Pathakpur woman spends two hours a day searching for, squatting within, cutting upon, and carrying loads of grass to feed her family's livestock. Yet, finding the right kind of grass can be tricky. As the seasons change, the availability of good fodder grasses fluctuates. Women must move with the seasons to locate spaces of privacy and plentiful grasses, creating a choreography expressive of the Farwestern Tarai's entangled ecological and social rhythms. In this context, the paper will explore the relationship between the materiality of grass and acts of *lukaune*, or hiding, enacted during grass cutting excursions. Thinking with James J. Gibson (*The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*), I consider what grass—in its qualities of texture, color, location, and availability—affords, 'what it offers ... what it provides or furnishes, either for good or ill', especially as a hiding place for women (Gibson 1979: 127). I will provide different examples of *lukaune* alongside observations of material changes in grasses to foreground the double circulation of daily movements and seasonal cycles that underscore women's lives in a small Farwest Tarai town. In doing so, the paper will offer a gendered and more-than-human theorization of women's labor and the practice of personal freedom.



# Mountain-connected roots and routes: the place-based ancestry of the Pumi in the Sino-Tibetan borderlands

FRIDAY 24 JUNE — 14:35

WEN-YAO LEE  
University  
of Kansas



This paper focuses on the place-making practices of Pumi (Premi) communities in Yunnan, based on fieldwork in northern Ninglang. In addition to the much discussed ancestors' routes and place-making by circulating through sacred mountains, I will discuss how Pumi people's burial of cremated bones in the mountain lays the physical foundation for their migration memory and place-based ancestry. I will first describe how traveling is culturally marked as an essential component of Pumi people's lives and their memory of the past, as reflected in their daily greetings, prayers, means of making money, and narratives of ancestors' migrations and nomadic lifestyle. Secondly, I will introduce ritual practices to establish relationships with local mountains: the daily and annual dedications to mountain deities and the burial of family members' cremated bones at specific mountain sites. Then, I will discuss how these practices that connect people to the landscape, together with Pumi idioms for specifying one's ancestral origin (*ru*) and a family's heir (*mǎru*), construct a place-based ancestry.

The Pumi idiom, *ru*, which equally refers to the buried bone ashes and the proper name(s) for specific ancestry, suggests that new names emerged from migration to a new area with a new burial mountain. At the same time, the health and fertility of a family's heir (*mǎru*) to continue an ancestral line require blessings from mountain deities secured through proper rituals. In Sino-Tibetan borderlands, various local groups use the Mandarin idiom of root (*gengen*) to refer to one's ancestral origin and family's heir(s). The Pumi name for a specific ancestry, their *gengen/ru*, is always generated from a separation in their migration history. The juxtaposition of the Pumi understanding and the Mandarin translation thus suggests an interpretation of rootedness that has the double meaning of past migrations and embeddedness in the current settlement. Pumi people's place-based ancestry is 'rooted' in a series of places where ancestors had migrated and made relations with mountain deities. The toponyms listed in an ancestors' migration route mark these relations and reflect a conception of landscape interwoven with the family's past.

# Multilayeredness of journeying experience and its transformation among Rang from Byans, Far Western Nepal

KATSUO NAWA  
Institute for  
Advanced Studies  
on Asia

FRIDAY 24 JUNE — 14:00

The main inhabitants of Byans, Chaudans, and Darma, three adjacent regions in the upper reaches of the Mahakali (Kali) River, call themselves Rang. Many Rangs in Byans were trans-Himalayan traders, carrying out seasonal migrations between their villages and their winter residences in the southern hills of the Himalayas. In this presentation, I discuss how the lived experience of trans-Himalayan journeying has changed among the Rangs in Nepali Byans over the past seventy years, mainly based on my ethnographic fieldwork from 1993 onward in Darchula District and elsewhere. In the first part, I reconstruct how their ‘traditional’ movement across the Himalayas, most importantly the ‘traditional’ seasonal migration between Byans and the southern foothills of the Himalayas, was conceived by elder villagers in the 1990s.

Based on my analysis of their ways of narrating the movement, both imagined and real, focusing on their usages of toponyms and deixis, I argue that they articulated it as movement on foot through various named places. In their narratives, each named place is geographically located within a network of named places, mutually connected most probably by trails, often lived by their affines, friends, or benevolent and malevolent spirits. According to their oral tradition, ancestors walked through some of these named places, and each and every Rang would eventually visit many of them, from south to north, to finally go to their ancestors’ land after they passed away. In the second part, I reconstruct how the lived experience of their trans-Himalayan movement using two foci – Nepali Byans and Darchula, their main winter residence –, has been transformed within the past seventy years, by mainly considering the following factors: construction of the Baitadi-Darchula-Byans road (not motorable but suitable for moving along with large domestic animals), the closure of the India-China border via the Lipulekh pass (but not the Nepal-China border via the Tinkar pass) for thirty years starting from 1962, and the changing proportion of domestic animals with which they seasonally migrate, as well as more recent changes in the political situation in Nepal and infrastructures on both the Nepali and Indian side of the Mahakali river.

# Paths not taken: landscape, movement, and avoidance in Ladakh


CALLUM PEARCE  
Leiden University

FRIDAY 24 JUNE — 9:35



Discussions of the topic of landscape influenced by phenomenology have tended to characterise placemaking as defined by wayfaring, embodied knowledge, and ongoing processes of dwelling. Yet these approaches often obscure the role played by the presence of danger in the landscape and by strategies of avoidance, presenting human entanglement with the landscape in largely positive and even romanticised terms. Drawing on fieldwork in Ladakh in 2013, 2014, and 2019, and on a discussion of movement and non-movement around villages in the region, this paper instead considers negative forms of engagement as active means of placemaking: it treats physical avoidance, sensory avoidance, and managed involvement with dangerous places as processes that work to disentangle self and landscape.

These processes invert the normal logic of wayfaring and dwelling, relying on curtailed movement and a refusal of knowledge as means of protection against the threats inherent in familiar places. These threats are embodied in spirits that maintain an uncertain reality: definitionally unstable, difficult to identify, and often regarded as little more than half real. The danger represented by these beings reflects local understandings of the unreliable nature of human perception and the awareness that ordinary knowledge is always imperfect, making direct engagement with the landscape undesirable and full of risk. Yet this attitude also begins from a sense of inescapable entanglement with non-human forces, a recognition of an unbounded and interrelated world that broadly accords with phenomenological characterisations of landscape. Far from establishing static divisions between self and landscape, human and spirit, or the village and the mountains beyond, avoidance behaviour contributes to the management of porous and shifting boundaries through which threatening forces routinely flow.




# Visual journeys: sensing roads past and present

FRIDAY 24 JUNE — 11:00

**STACY LEIGH PIGG**  
Simon Fraser  
University



The process of creating a non-fiction graphic novel about a road in Dolakha District has led the creative team of artists and anthropologists to a deeper appreciation of sensory experience and memory. Whilst social researchers observing the effects of rural road building in Nepal build an analysis of hidden processes ‘up’ from the myriad of evidence in everyday life, the project of visual storytelling reverses this relation between the specific and the general. Scene-building through drawing demands extra attention to evocative details. This presentation describes insights gained from the process of making a graphic novel. The noticing and rendering involved in creating scenes gives salience to the sensory experiences of travelling along or living along a new road, highlighting embodied experiences of different ways of being mobile or fixed. Within the material/sensory present also lie memories of recent or distant pasts. The past-within-the present is not immediately observable, but it becomes knowable through social relationships that foster sharing recollections. Whether through a thing, a story, a photo, a ruin, or a memory shared, glimpses of the histories immanent in the present also have a sensory presence. These too can be evoked through visual storytelling. This presentation shares the collaborative efforts of anthropologists and artists to find ways to convey the politics of roads through visual storytelling.



# Assembling new roads in highland Nepal: mobilities, socialities, and territories

THURSDAY 23 JUNE — 9:35



NADINE PLACHTA  
University  
of Toronto

GALEN MURTON  
James Madison  
University

Trade and pilgrimage routes have traversed high mountain passes between Nepal and Tibet for centuries. Shaped by environmental conditions and Himalayan topographies, these pathways facilitate the flow of people, goods, knowledge, ideas, and capital. Despite their perceived remoteness and isolation, trans-Himalayan pathways were crucial sites of social life and cultural practice, both connecting and fostering civilizations through circulation and movement.

More recently, geopolitics and global markets are transforming historical pedestrian routes into modern transnational highways. Roads and other infrastructures (hydropower projects, transmission lines, future railways) promise greater connection, development, and progress, while also serving to materialize power and demarcate state territories across Himalayan borderlands. For local communities situated along these new economic corridors, development schemes are often agents of change. They tear through social fabrics of people, reconfigure material practices, and change political economies. While generating new mobilities, the same infrastructures also restrict and contain, reproducing social hierarchies, changing collective memories, and expanding systems of securitization.

In this paper, we trace the trajectories of three roads in Nepal to see how local communities react and adapt to different forms of roadmaking. Focusing on new mobilities of people and things in Lapchi, Tsum, and Mustang – where roads co-exist in different stages of anticipation, construction, suspension, completion – we explore how roads accelerate broader forces of globalization. The following questions form our analysis: what are current development imaginaries of road building and how are they translated into local contexts? What kinds of stories of disruption, success, and failure circulate in these new road assemblages? Who benefits from (dis)connection and who does not? What else do roads and highways assemble in unexpected ways? In answering these questions, we attend to particular places on the geographical peripheries of the state, where roads serve as pathways and filters that transcend both frontiers and boundaries. By identifying patterns of road-making across historical and contemporary contexts, we show why roads in seemingly out of the way places are nevertheless also a matter of global concern.

# Ghostly encounters on the Jiu-Mian highway in a Baima village (Sichuan, PRC)

VALENTINA PUNZI  
University of Tartu

WEDNESDAY 22 JUNE — 13:15

The 245-km Jiu-Mian highway in western Sichuan connects Jiuzhaigou National Park in the north with Mianyang city in the south by cutting through a valley of eighteen villages inhabited by Baima – a small community officially classified as Tibetan in the People's Republic of China.

While villagers in this area, which is especially prone to earthquakes and floods, are hoping to benefit from the improved connectivity and to promote local tourism, they are also developing fears about the new road and its dangers. In particular, a number of accidents and casualties that occurred during the construction, which started in 2017 and was expected to be completed in 2021, turned the seamless emptiness of the road into a hideout for ghosts that disrupt daily activities with their persistent torments.

Based on fieldwork carried out in the area in 2018–19, I will first introduce a domestic ritual performed in a Baima village by a ritual specialist to address the assaults of a ghost, which followed a deadly accident witnessed by a villager on the side of the highway. Secondly, personal narratives of encounters with ghosts will provide a glimpse into the contemporary cosmology of Baima and the ambivalent response of the community to the challenges and opportunities derived from the construction of the Jiu-Mian highway. Finally, this plurality of voices assembles a fragmented picture that shows how the Baima community is coping with the highway as a pervasive, non-linear space that intrudes into the landscape, no less than into local lives with the promise of development.



# Airplanes and modernity in Chitwan, Nepal, 1950–1980

THURSDAY 23 JUNE — 9:00




**TOM ROBERTSON**  
Kathmandu  
University Medical  
School and  
Dhulikhel Hospital

Few things did more to transform spatial and social geographies in the twentieth century than aviation. And arguably, in few places did aviation play a more pivotal and unusual role than in Nepal, due to this South Asian country's history of isolation until 1950, its almost complete lack of roads for many years, and its inaccessible geography. Unfortunately, little has been written about Nepal's aviation history (with the exception of Solukhumbu). This paper tells the story of aviation in Nepal – to chart what this new spatial technology meant economically, socially, politically, and culturally to Nepal and its diverse peoples. This paper will do several things. It will start with a basic narrative of the development of air travel to and within Nepal. What air networks were established where and when? How did this new form of transport and travel compare with transport in earlier decades?

After establishing this broader context, the paper will focus in on one particular place and several particular questions. It will look at how aviation reshaped Chitwan district in the 1950s and 1960s, in particular how air travel influenced three big changes: 1) Nepal's first and largest development projects, 2) the establishment of Nepal's first national park, Royal Chitwan National Park, and 3) pioneering developments in 'jungle' tourism. Airplanes played a role in all three. Several specific questions will be addressed: with development projects, did something about the view from above help foster the grandiose high-modernist visions that James Scott has argued characterized post-war development projects? In conservation projects, how did surveying from the air, used in the research that led to Chitwan national park's establishment, differ from earlier ground-based surveying? With tourism, what role did aviation play besides just bringing more Western tourists closer to Nepal more quickly? Although these developments will involve Westerners and national elites, care will be taken to bring in the views and interests of the various groups in Chitwan, not just those of migrants to the district from the hills but also indigenous Tharu.





# Shifting territorialisations of borders and development: Tibetan, Nepalese and Sikkimese Himalayan traders facing capitalist globalisation, from Tibet (China) to Walungchung gola (Nepal) (1920–2018)

BRIGITTE  
STEINMANN  
Lille University



WEDNESDAY 22 JUNE — 16:05

Ancient conceptions of ‘borders’ as places of encounter and barter exchanges within international and local Himalayan trading, shifted in the 1960s to take on a highly capitalised nature. Today, in a global market economy, money-dominated trends operate at the expense of a number of local barter transactions and exchanges, especially since the opening of new highways and 21st-century Asian forms of capitalist development in Nepal. In this paper, I study the global transformations and regional implications that have taken place in Nepal’s north-eastern border areas with Tibet and Sikkim from 1920 to 2018, with the opening of a new highway on Tiptala pass. I especially explore, through various historical, political and geological fault lines, how these areas remained in isolation for police and political purposes since the 19th century.

I aim to bring to light new theoretical issues for a global analysis of the global capitalist process of structural change on so-called ‘forgotten borderlands’. I focus on the ancient *gola* of Walungchung with its traditional ‘go ba’ Tibetan leaders, its territorial administration through a strictly hierarchised society and a domestic mode of production, which helped the political and administrative oligarchic systems of government in Nepalese Ranas’ times to implement a state policy, and to play a key role in the development of an ancient capitalistic mode of development. How are we to study this irreversible ‘market opening’ of these most ancient ‘sacred places’ (*sBas Yul of Sing sa Walung*)? How do people adapt to and resist foreign modes of development brought about by the sudden, long-awaited opening of these areas through the building of roads and an airport? I provide a detailed ethnographic and comparative economic and anthropological analysis, taking into account the local socio-economic stratifications, and the long co-existence of diverse kinds of out-migration ventures, landlord-tenant policies, rich merchants’ accumulation of resources and capitalist ways of life, alongside poor autochthonous cattle breeders from Limbu and Lepcha areas, who built these complex places of exchange, and are now faced with a place transformed into a modern Himalayan highway.

# Herding yaks to driving cars: standardization, subjugation, and skillful means of settled nomads



**SANGGAY TASHI**  
University of  
Colorado Boulder

WEDNESDAY 22 JUNE — 13:50



Over the last ten years, road infrastructure on the Tibetan plateau has dramatically improved. And, with the establishment of Nomad Settlement Towns in particular, new roads have been built, and traffic rules and regulations applied in many remote corners of Tibetan herding areas in Qinghai, China. Although local Tibetan nomads are delighted that improvements have been made to roads in their communities, the requirement of obtaining a driver's license has become a major issue for them. Based on an ethnographic study of Tibetan nomads' quest to obtain a driver's license, primarily in Qinghai, this paper investigates how development such as road improvement as a process of bureaucratic infrastructure and standardization of the state disempowers people and gives rise to disorientation, paranoia, and financial costs that go beyond the envisioned goals of development. At the heart of this ethnographic study is my desire to describe how people experience, navigate, and adapt to new forms of bureaucratic requirements in their daily lives, taking the driver's license as an example. I argue that development in the form of infrastructure and standardization not only distinctly requires new skills, knowledge, and behaviors but also disvalues and in some cases even demands obliteration of other forms of knowledge, behavior, and skills. Finally, this paper shows how changes in one sector of life, such as the settling down of nomads or road improvement, can cause a whole series of other unexpected or unintended changes, as exemplified by the influence on settled herder's daily life of seemingly disconnected but inextricably linked Nomad Settlement Policy, roads, driver's licenses, and cars.

## Wednesday 22 June

### Crossings: fantasies and conflicts

9:00		Welcome
10:00 - 12:00	PANEL 1	Road promises
12:00 - 13:15		Lunch
13:15 - 15:15	PANEL 2	Road unexpectedness
15:15 - 15:30		Break
15:30 - 17:30	PANEL 3	Road politics

## Thursday 23 June

### Assembling: the social life of infrastructures

9:00 - 12:00	PANEL 4	Managing flux
12:00 - 13:00		Lunch
13:00 - 15:45	PANEL 5	Patterns of mobility
16:45 - 16:15		Break
16:15 - 18:15	PANEL 6	Circuits and corridors

## Friday 24 June

### Journeying: landscape, ancestral roads and other geographies

9:00 - 12:00	PANEL 7	Movement and the senses I
10:45 - 11:00		Break
11:00 - 13:00	PANEL 7	Movement and the senses II
13:00 - 14:00		Lunch
14:00 - 16:00	PANEL 8	Roots and routes
16:00 - 16:15		Break
16:15 - 17:30		General discussion

This conference is convened by Tristan Bruslé and Stéphane Gros on behalf of the CNRS's Centre d'études himalayennes; the photography exhibition is organised by Olivia Aubriot and the convenors; the texts for these events have been copyedited by Bernadette Sellers.

Scientific committee:  
Olivia Aubriot,  
Daniela Berti,  
Tristan Bruslé,  
Stéphane Gros,  
François Jacquesson,  
Martine Mazaudon,  
Fernand Meyer,  
Philippe Ramirez,  
Nicolas Sihlé,  
Joëlle Smadja,  
Gérard Toffin.

Graphic design:  
thibauto.fr



The programme and all the information on the conference are on :  
*Le programme et toutes les informations sur la conférence sont sur :*  
[himalayajourney.sciencesconf.org](http://himalayajourney.sciencesconf.org)

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