Section 3
Agonistic Intensities
Odd Neighbours

Trans-Himalayan Tibetan Itineraries and Chinese Economic Development

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Introduction: To Exile and Back

In 1959, the fourteenth Dalai Lama and much of the old Tibetan religious and cultural elite fled into exile in India. In the intervening years Tibetans on both sides of the Himalayas have not stayed put but have instead travelled frequently back and forth across the range’s high passes. These journeys have been manifold, ranging from taking refuge in the exile communities of north India, to temporary trans-Himalayan sojourns on Chinese passports to visit relatives living abroad and arduous and illicit round trips embarked upon for the purposes of religious or linguistic instruction. In the West, discussions of these movements have focused almost exclusively on the figure of the refugee. And, certainly, the first wave of Tibetan migration south across the ranges was composed largely of refugees from central Tibet. Since the 1980s, however, a second set of migrants, mostly from the regions of Kham and Amdo in what was historically eastern Tibet, has undertaken the difficult journey across the mountains to the subcontinent.

Prior to 2008 when Tibetan unrest across China prompted a crackdown on trans-border flows, several thousand migrants a year or more travelled to (and, in many cases, from) Dharamsala and other Tibetan refugee centres in northern and southern India. SaveTibet.org notes in their annual reports on the ‘conditions impacting the flight of Tibetan refugees’ that following the 2008 protests and ramped up border patrols, the number of Tibetans who made it across the border to Nepal (and in many cases beyond to India) dropped from an average of 2,500–3,000 in preceding years to a much lower range of 650–850 per annum thereafter. While many of these migrants were inspired by (or sent by parents who were inspired by) the prospect

2 As of 2016, these trans-border flows have been halted almost completely by heightened Chinese patrols and cooperation between PRC and Nepalese authorities.
3 That a sizeable percentage of pre-2008 migrants were juveniles can be explained by the fact that refugees who arrive in Dharamsala under the ages of 18 can gain access to free or extremely low cost education at the Tibetan Children’s Villages in the surrounding area. Most of my migrant
of religious freedom and unfettered access to traditional Tibetan culture, many others maintained a more pragmatic attitude toward the physically taxing, dangerous and often costly journey to the subcontinent.4

Such peregrinations have had manifold effects. The ambivalent reception of the ‘new arrivals’ (or sar jorpa) of ‘sinicized’ Tibetans fresh off the path, as it were, from Tibet itself have complicated notions of national belonging in the exile community (Diehl 2002, Falcone and Wangchuk 2008, on broader circuits of Tibetan travel see Hess 2009, Yeh 2007). Many ‘new arrivals’ have returned5 to China,6 bringing with them both a critical consciousness of the blandishments of Chinese nationalism and English-language skills informants had gone to India at a slightly older age and were thus unable to access educational facilities of quite as high a standard, but did receive instruction in English and other subjects at Tibetan Transit Schools.

4 One example: In 2007, Jashi was a 24 year old recently returned from India working as a guide for foreign tour groups. In some respects he is happy to be back home – obviously being close to family is a good thing, and he is resigned to making the best of being in China in general, but he misses his ‘school’ and his friends in India. He had decided to go of his own accord at the age of fifteen. At that time he said (in a mixture of English and Chinese), he was feeling ‘very hard, very excited (jidong 激动)’ and had met many folks who had been there and had told him how great it was there: everything is free and you can learn English. So he made his way to Lhasa and stayed there for a month arranging the travel permit to Dram. From Dram he and his small party made their way painstakingly across the border, taking five days to reach Taptopani. His fellow travelers were limited to the guide who commanded the princely sum of RMB2,500 (over US$600) and a middle-aged couple whose children were living on the subcontinent. The woman had stomach problems and sometimes couldn’t walk and the man was almost blind. During the day the going was okay, but at night things got difficult. Jashi recalls leading the man by the hand across narrow log bridges. Once he got to India, he was only able to communicate with family by phone and email but he really enjoyed the freedom to experience new things and the camaraderie with fellow students at his school. His friends came from various places, Amdo, Lhasa and Kham. He had many good Kham friends, not all of whom he was able to maintain contact with because it seems he left suddenly (not knowing when ahead of time) and didn’t think about getting contact info ahead of time. Now he has fellow returnee friends who say they don’t miss India. He thinks they are crazy.

5 For example, in the 23-person cohort that entered the Tibetan Transit School in the late 1990s with Yeshe, a monk from a farming village near Zhuoni, only two had stayed behind a decade later.

6 In their returns we can see an ironic convergence of the rhetoric of the Tibetan Government in Exile and of China. Since the 1990s, the Dalai Lama has suggested that all new migrants who would not be endangered (as a result of a history of anti-Chinese activism) by returning to China should do so (see Garratt 1997). At the same time, the PRC for many years prior to the events of 2008 (and still to some degree formally at least thereafter) has encouraged ‘Overseas Tibetan Compatriots’ (Guowai Zangzu Tongbao 国外藏族同胞) to join their returned brethren (Huiguo Zangzu Tongbao 回国藏族同胞) to join the big trans-national family of Chinese patriots (see Barabantseva 2012, Vasantkumar 2012). As Basang, deputy secretary of the Tibet Regional Committee of the Communist Party of China explained in a 2002 interview in the People’s Daily,
that enabled them to succeed in the rapidly developing tourism sector back ‘home’. Even in the years of reduced trans-border mobility that have followed in the wake of the turmoil of 3/14, Tibetans on both sides of the Himalayas are acutely aware of how their co-ethnics elsewhere live. Ideas of Tibetan nation, culture and community have come to straddle the Himalayas rather than (or in addition to) be(ing) divided by them.

This chapter deals with a subset of related issues that arose during my first extended period of fieldwork in Xiahe/Labrang – in what is now Gansu Province in China’s northwest – from the summer of 2003 until the spring of 2004, that I also pursued in the course of additional field research in Xiahe in 2006, 2007 and 2009 and in Dharamsala in 2006 and 2007. I had initially come to northwest China to study the relationship between everyday interactions between members of different minzu or ethnic groups in a national framework, specifically between Han, Hui and Tibetans and official PRC projects of multi-ethnic national unity, but as I stayed on in Labrang through a typically frigid winter, I found myself becoming increasingly interested in a particular problem of Tibetanness with both national and trans-national characteristics.

From early on in my fieldwork, I had many interactions with ‘locals’ from the town itself, from outlying regions of the autonomous prefecture in which Xiahe/Labrang is located and from remoter parts of Amdo who had spent time in the exile communities of the Indian subcontinent. The duration of their visits ranged from a few months to upwards of five, seven, or even ten years. Some detested India from the moment they arrived, others still reminisced fondly about pizza and sang tunes from Bollywood musicals, but all had for various reasons chosen to return to Amdo. Some had returned furtively with a critical consciousness of the limits of Chinese nationalism.

China’s policy is ‘All patriots belong to one big family, no matter when they join the family’ (People’s Daily 2002).

Access to such employment opportunities was never guaranteed, especially inside the Tibetan Autonomous Region. There, employment as a tour guide was often contingent on passing a test in written Chinese. The earlier a Tibetan returnee had left for India, the less likely he or she would be able to pass such a test (Martin Saxer, personal communication).

Early in my dissertation research in the late summer of 2003, a returnee monk invited me on a picnic with a dozen or so students he was informally teaching English. As we reclined in post-prandial comfort in a mountain meadow high above Labrang Monastery, he invited each of us to sing favorite songs for the group. When others reacted with shyness, he plunged right in. It took me a second (and a double take) to realize that he had broken into a tuneful rendition of the Bollywood classic ‘Kuch kuch hota hai’. Later he introduced me to another returnee, also a monk, whose first question to me was ‘Do you know pizza? I like pizza’. It turned out that he had worked in a pizza parlour for several years during his time in Dharamsala.
Others found that their time in India with the religious and cultural elite of old Tibet had instilled not a greater reverence for traditional culture but, perhaps surprisingly, a high modernist and rather acerbic anti-clericalism. Still others had returned with official blessing to cash in on the promise of economic development.

Initially, I attempted to analyze their travels within a received framework that sought to understand Tibetan exile and refuge taking in purely Tibetan terms. Only later did I realize that this problem of Tibetanness was also a problem of Chineseness – that it was in fact inseparable from the changing political and economic circumstances of life in China. I realized in other words, that scholars needed a means of analyzing both the interrelationships between Tibetan itineraries and ‘Chinese’ economic development and the reasons behind the invisibility of these interconnections.

‘Oddness’ and Other Predicaments of Neighbouring

To this end, in this chapter I employ the notion of ‘oddness’ as discussed by John Hartigan, Jr. in his work on Whiteness in the US to argue for the necessity of reframing scholarly approaches to contemporary Tibetan trans-Himalayan mobilities. Hartigan (2005) employs this clunky, yet, I insist, generative term in his work to highlight the importance of attending to ‘disjunctive, yet clearly related’ aspects of ‘cultural identity’. Hartigan seeks to gain critical purchase on the class dimensions to Whiteness that are often rendered invisible by a focus on generalized White social privilege. By juxtaposing a historically minded exposition of the emergence and growth of ‘White trash’, first as an epithet and later as a means of self-identification with a situated analysis of ‘the powers and privileges associated with whiteness’ (Hartigan 2005: 1), Hartigan seeks to bring ‘the social predicament of poor whites’ (2005: 4) back into the picture while at the same time attending to processes of racialization and the means by which White Privilege is perpetuated.

In doing so, Hartigan suggests that these two figures, of White Privilege and White Trash are precisely ‘odd’ because, ‘they are difficult to hold equally in view’ – one is associated with ‘domination and hegemony’; the other applies to a population that is ‘far from dominant (Hartigan 2005: 2)’. In Hartigan's analysis of American Whites, he suggests that because ‘prevailing academic discussions’ assume that the pair of whiteness and blackness is ‘sufficient for explaining race ... the degraded status of poor whites ... fall[s] from view’ (Hartigan 2005: 2). The race-based story of White Privilege in this
case trumps class and poor whites are effectively erased. In this chapter, I want to apply Hartigan's analytic oddness to the returned Tibetans I met in and around Labrang as a means of highlighting the ways in which the figure of the refugee has effectively enabled the returned, or migrant Tibetan to drop from view in scholarly circles. Further, by decentring the refugee as the figure *par excellence* of migrant Tibetans in the contemporary world, I want to bring two sets of odd juxtapositions back into the picture.

First I think we can begin to reclaim from obscurity those Tibetan trans-Himalayan journeying practices that do not conform to the refugee ideal – those journeys where religion or cultural nationalism may not be primary motivating factors. Such journeys, I suggest below, have been difficult to ‘hold equally in view’ with journeys of taking refugee in no small part due to a politics of culture that scripts Tibetan motivations as always already separate from China (cf. Adams 1996). In such a frame, the motivations for Tibetan sojourns are seen as explicable in purely Tibetan religio-cultural (or historical) terms and are thought not to be shaped in any meaningful way by the concerns of the Chinese nation-state (at least insofar as these concerns exceed the repression of Tibetans within China’s borders). In this sense, I seek to recover the stories of the odd migrants obscured by a normative focus on the figure of the refugee.

However, I also want to think about ‘oddness’ on a scale that transcends the stories of individuals. Here I refer to the People’s Republic of China and trans-Himalayan Tibet as themselves ‘odd neighbours’ – tightly connected quasi-intimates whose legendary antagonism renders it almost impossible to consider other sorts of mutual interrelationships. Thus the degree that Tibetan trans-Himalayan sojourns were motivated in part by changing economic (rather than political or religious) conditions inside the PRC has stubbornly resisted analysis. This chapter is a necessarily provisional attempt to redress this oversight, by adding the dynamics of economic development in contemporary China to the landscape of multiple in-betweenesses that comprises what the editors of this volume might term the ‘predicament of neighbouring’ that trans-Himalayan Tibetan migrants must negotiate. A story from my fieldwork may help to make these points more concretely.

**A ‘Neverland’ in the Borderlands**

The renovations were behind schedule and Gesar was antsy about how little headway his workers seemed to be making. A bundle of scarcely-contained
energy even when at rest, in his agitated state he now approached a superhuman level of animation. He flitted from one set of workmen to another, supervising and fetching parts as needed. One moment found him cajoling the painter daubing at the dimly traced outlines of traditional motifs on the new reception counter. The next witnessed him haranguing the two men hopping precariously on a shoulder-high plank placed between two rickety-looking step ladders whose efforts to install two lighting fixtures were being impeded by some pernickety ceiling dry wall. Only when he had begun garrulously slapping the backs of the men sweeping debris from what had been previously been slick marble floors did he see that I had entered, pulling up short and hurrying over to greet me with his characteristic and infectious enthusiasm.

A few days previous, arriving in town in the summer of 2009 for the first time in almost three years, I had been surprised and somewhat alarmed to find the lobby of Gesar’s hotel gutted. I was initially concerned that Gesar had been forced to sell or gone out of business as a result of the town being closed to foreign tourists for over a year after the ethnic unrest of March, 2008. At that time, Tibetans all across China had risen in protest against central authorities, and the tide of dissent had sloshed all the way from Lhasa at the centre of the TAR to this far-flung outpost on the border of Han, Hui and Tibetan spheres of cultural influence. I had gotten down from the bus and walked across the street to the steps where Gesar and I had first met seven years before, only to find his hotel a cacophonous construction site swarming with unfamiliar faces. In short order, however, his wife spotted me as I peered in through an open window frame and she ran upstairs to fetch him. He came down looking tired, covered in the dust of renovation.

A few minutes later, smoking and chatting over cantaloupe in the spacious but modestly furnished owner’s quarters, he described the aftermath of the events of the previous March. The last year and half had been hell he told me, even if things had been looking up recently. Business had taken a hit from the enforced absence of Westerners, his father-in-law had died (after which he had had to perform expensive and, to his anticlerical sensibility, pointless mourning rituals) and as if this were not enough, a needed and apparently unproblematic loan application had fallen through at the last moment forcing frantic alterations to the renovation plans. He noted that he had stayed open to this point on the custom provided by Chinese domestic tourists, explaining that he could not not take these Chinese tourists in – if

9 Pseudonym for both hotel and person; given continuing instability in the region I have also chosen to change the name of the town as well.
he didn’t and one complained to the authorities, he’d be out of business ‘like that!’

‘Well, I have to behave, don’t I?!’ he said only half-jokingly. ‘The police call me every week and ask me, “What have you been up to?”’ Plus, there are good and bad people in every group: Tibetans, Han, Muslims, Americans’. Indeed, he continued, when, a few years back he had grown increasingly frustrated with the unreliability and poor work habits of the tour guides (Tibetan like himself) who he employed in his horse trekking company, he had gone into business with a new partner, a Chinese tourist from Chengdu, a motivated and diligent worker, who he later found out was actually a Hui Muslim. When other Tibetans complained: ‘You are such a Tibetan man, always supporting your culture and yet your partner is a Chinese?’ Gesar stood his ground: ‘He’s honest, he works hard and is a good guy. I’ve never wanted to only serve Tibetans; I’ll work with all kinds of honest people’.

Later after a meal with him and his family, Gesar rose from his chair said, ‘Come on, Chris, let me show you something’ and led me out into the street and pointed up to an as yet unfinished portion of the second floor. This, he said, gesturing grandly, is my future restaurant; if the loan had come through when it was supposed to, he would have added a third floor done up in traditional wooden architecture. Yet, despite the economies he had had to take, construction had plunged ahead undaunted. After this view from afar, he led me up the stairs for a tour. ‘Remember? This used to be my lobby’, he said as we passed through the halls of the hotel (then without showers or Western style toilets) in which I had first stayed in a cold December many winters before. In the half-built restaurant, there wasn’t yet much to see but Gesar had all the details mapped out in his head. ‘The chairs will be here’, he proclaimed, pointing out the particular kind he had purchased in a photo album, ‘the tables will be here, the kitchen here. After the tour he was quiet for a moment then pondered out loud, ‘What should I call it? I think either “Black Tent” or “Neverland”’.

As we stood surveying the still mostly nebulous prospect of this ‘Neverland’, a refurbishment and expansion planned in response to the rapid development of Tsatang as a (both domestic and foreign) tourist destination over the previous decade, I couldn’t help but both ponder the theoretical ‘neverland’ inhabited by the economically successful returned Tibetan migrant in contemporary China and be reminded of the humbler but fortuitous circumstances of our meeting. On Christmas Day 2002, nearing the end of

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10 Michael Jackson’s passing had just occurred when this conversation took place. In the end, ‘Black Tent’ prevailed.
my first, preliminary, trip to what scholars used to call the Kansu-Tibet marches, I found myself, freezing and devoid of Western companionship, in what was then a tiny, rather isolated, and almost impossibly picturesque mountain village. Having resigned myself to spending the day watching herdsmen drive their yaks across the town’s main bridge, I sat down on the concrete steps leading up to a storefront to smoke a cigarette and, finding that I had misplaced my lighter, asked the only other person sitting there – a Tibetan man with the long hair and heavy wool-lined cloak of a nomad – in Chinese for a light.

Much to my surprise, he replied to my request in perfect English (‘of course’) and asked me where I was from. We quickly fell into conversation and ended up spending the entire day together over several beers and numerous cigarettes. Gesar, was at first, my ‘Christmas friend’ as he put it. In our long, pleasant, boozy conversation that day I discovered that he had learned his English over the course of an extended stay in the Tibetan exile community in Dharamsala. He had brought back from India a fierce anti-clericalism and a pragmatic approach to life in China – focusing not on political agitation but on improving educational opportunities for local Tibetans. His fluent English had allowed him to begin working as a tour guide in 1999. Within a decade, he had become the proprietor of a hotel (inherited from his father-in-law) and a successful horse trekking business (which he had built largely with his own sweat).

At the time, I didn’t really know what to make of this situation. I took my Christmas friend to be a charming and unexpected aberration from what I assumed to be the usual patterns of Tibetan migration. I couldn’t help wondering, ‘What kind of Tibetan comes back from India?’ I was intrigued but a little suspicious. Yet in retrospect, this meeting with (more than ten years on) my first friend in Tibet, seems incredibly fortuitous. Gesar’s account was merely the first indication of the degree to which prior to the events of March 2008, Amdo Tibetans refused to stay put, or rather, of the degree to which Tibetan lives in what is now northwest China are lived on complex, often trans-national terrains. For, in the mid to late 2000s, Tibetans in and around Gannan Autonomous Prefecture, even those who had never ventured beyond the prefectural capital, lived their lives with a consciousness of the possibility of living those lives in important elsewheres: Lhasa, Dharamsala and the West. As such, the ‘art of neighbouring’ they practiced necessarily had to be responsive to the complexities of negotiating many betweenesses simultaneously.

I conceptualize neighbouring and the itineraries and subjectivities that both condition and are conditioned by it as emerging from multiple,
overlapping and often fraught relationships between proximate quasi-intimates. In such contexts, closeness in geographical or network space or apparent cultural or natural similarity is often belied by the complexity of the intermixtures of the familiar and the unknown revealed in practice. Further, if the word neighbour itself derives from a term denoting the practice or situation of dwelling nearby, in examining the Tibetan examples that follow, we can take neither dwelling (with its common associations of sedentarism, community, and stasis) nor proximity (in physical space) for granted. Instead I suggest below the necessity of treating neighbouring not as passive proximity in geographical space but as an active traversing of multiple scales and cartographies of proximity and un/familiarity at once – the physical barriers and conduits that link and divide China, Tibet and India, for example, different imaginings of China and Tibet, and even variant modes of enacting Tibetanness itself.

Gesar’s example is representative enough despite its specificity. He had returned in 1999 after seven years in India only after the death of his brother and the increasingly poor health of his father prompted his family to ask him to come home. Returning as illicitly\textsuperscript{11} as he had gone, he brought with him both the sterling English that had so surprised me and an intense suspicion of organized religion. Yet his fierce anti-clericalism had not diminished the level of official scrutiny he had received since returning. He joked, wryly, about his being subject to long-term surveillance after his return that, ‘the communist party had me in their heart; I had my own bodyguard for eight years’. Instead of political agitation or religious meditation, his continuing passion since his return had been the sponsorship of quality primary and secondary education for local Tibetans that would allow them to get ahead economically in today’s China. (That his schools were forced to close in the aftermath of the March 2008 protests was personally devastating).

At the time of our first meeting I still naively assumed that anyone who had braved the treacherous and illicit journey across the Himalayas to the religious and cultural freedoms of exile Tibetan communities in India and Nepal would most likely be tempted to stay on on the Sub-continent – both because of the effort expended in the process and on some level, I then

\textsuperscript{11} For many, the return journey is no less dangerous than the outward leg. Another of my first friends in Tibet, Yeshe, a monk from near Zhuoni, narrowly managed to avoid jail time when at the last minute he postponed his return trip, going to Calcutta to meet a high lama instead. The friend with whom he had planned to travel was stopped near the border soon after entering China and thrown in prison when a search of his luggage revealed a tiny but nonetheless damning copy of the Tibetan flag.
thought, because this was just what Tibetans did. Thus both his story and the presence of a sizeable population of returned Tibetans in Amdo both affronted my expectations about what Tibetans should want and do and posed a thorny problem to think through anthropologically. It was clear from my interactions with returned Tibetans that they occupied a particularly fraught space between the moral destinations of Chinese nationalism and orthodox projects of Tibetanness amongst Tibetans in exile. Close to but not quite isomorphic with China, India and non-migrant Tibetan populations, they found themselves confronting multiple proximate un/familiar others on borderlands that were often more imagined than geographic. Moreover, their presence unsettled the usual kinds of stories that people (Western and Tibetan, Scholars and lay folk) tell about the uncomfortable position of Tibet and its people within the contemporary PRC. In these stories there is a term for Tibetans who attempt to leave China illicitly with hopes of making it to the exile communities of north India and elsewhere – ‘refugees’. And certainly many of the returned Tibetans I encountered in Amdo, initially thought of their own journeys in these terms.

But becoming a refugee, taking refuge, is premised on a particular, deferred relationship to the notion or promise of an eventual return. The arc of a refugee’s journey is tied to wider geo-political circumstances. A return is promised, but it is deferred until the conflict or calamity that has resulted in the refugee’s displacement, their up-rooting, has been resolved. Until such a resolution occurs or is made to occur, taking refuge is a waiting game fraught with uncertainties and the journey of the refugee is a one-way ticket. I don’t wish to downplay or denigrate the travails, hopes or extremities of duress that Tibetans who would or do label themselves as refugees have experienced. Instead I want to suggest the at least provisional necessity of stepping back from a perspective where the figure of the refugee colours all knowledge production about the trans-Himalayan peregrinations of contemporary PRC-born Tibetans. In a post 3/14 world in which the ‘Tibet Question’ remains simmeringly unsettled, what do we make of the refugee who goes back (Long and Oxfeld 2004)? How do we begin to reckon with this unexpected trajectory of Tibetan migration – from India (and Nepal) to China in a way that doesn’t end up likening it to driving the wrong way down a one-way street?

12 This point should not be construed as minimizing the struggles of Tibetans who so identify, or as endorsing the lack of legal (as opposed to theoretical) refugee status that makes the lives of Tibetans living in and traveling to Nepal so fraught with danger and difficulty.
Uprouting the Refugee

This question is of particularly pressing importance in the Tibetan case for two reasons that have very much to do with the special status of the refugee in discussions of trans-national Tibetan culture. I will present these reasons briefly before discussing each in turn in more depth. First, in contrast to the usual state of affairs in the ‘national order of things’ (Malkki 1997 [1992]), in the Tibetan case the refugee is seen as normative rather than aberrant. Second, this normative status of the refugee is premised upon a hard and fast separation between Tibetan journeying practices and the recent political and economic transformations of the contemporary Chinese nation-state. Below, I critique both of these propositions arguing that while refugee subjectivities remain important to trans-national Tibetans’ self-conceptions, visions of taking refuge neither completely capture Tibetan itineraries of the last few decades nor do they adequately describe contemporary Tibetan returnees’ subjective assessments of their complex interstitiality-cum-neighbourliness. Refugees, in other words, are only part of the story.

Further, mistaking them for the entirety of the story has led scholars working on Tibetan mobilities to habitually ignore the degree to which such sojourns may be shaped in important ways by China’s rapid economic development. The tendency has thus been to overlook the degree to which both Tibetan journeys and returns are occasioned and conditioned by agonistic intimacies of China and Tibet rather than by their separation. The emphasis of religious over economic factors in Tibetan migrations may be a mark of just how ironclad the common sense that scripts Tibetan journey as always already separate from Chinese development has become. Indeed, it took me several years after my return from the field to make the connection between the two.

I did so by realizing the fallacy of two common assumptions. The first of these is that Tibetans always travel for Tibetan reasons which are always already not Chinese. This claim is belied by the intimacy of the links between the multi-ethnic Chinese nation-state (and its discontents) and both Chinese and Tibetan transnationalism (cf. Tuttle 2007, Vasantkumar 2012). The second specious assumption takes the form of the analogy China is to economy as Tibet is to religion. While this may once have been true at a very general level, it has not held water for at least the decade plus that has elapsed since the beginning of the Great Western Development Scheme (under the auspices of which Tibetan religion itself became a key attraction for the tourist dollars needed to catalyse regional development). Ultimately, I have concluded that despite the over-determined politics of culture that
alternately script Tibetan as separate from both Westerner and Chinese (Adams 1996) or try to reconstruct Tibetan returns to China as ‘Chinese’ sojourns (Vasantkumar 2012), in practice, Tibetan motivations for migration are as likely to be as much economic as religious.

It should be noted that this mutual implication of ‘economic’ and ‘religious’ factors differs not so much from traditional practices of pilgrimage which could incorporate both as it does from received Western wisdom about the spiritual purity of traditional Tibetan culture (and by extension of the journeys undertaken under its auspices). Further, in some sense, despite the fact that Tibetans’ trans-Himalayan peregrinations run counter to the usual itineraries of Chinese development (from the country to the city, from the western hinterlands to the wealthy urban centres of the eastern seaboard), it is hard to avoid the creeping sense that any analysis of such itineraries that does not link them to China’s rapid economic development is incomplete. Let us attempt to redress, at least provisionally, this incompleteness.

Drawing on the work of scholars such as James Clifford (1988, 1997) and Liisa Malkki (1997 [1992]), anthropologists, critical human geographers and practitioners of other allied disciplines have, in recent years, paid increasing attention to the ways in which national belonging is given shape not only by deeply rooted notions of autochthony or primordial identity, but also by particular routes of patterned movement that both tie the component parts of nation-states together into provisionally coherent wholes but also, commonly, exceed or cross-cut the cartographic boundaries of the nation-states in question. This shift in emphasis has taken place in concert with the growth of anthropological inquiries that actively question teleological narratives of the nation-state, inquiries that supplement attention to the eternal verities of nationalist discourse with an attention to the contingent, ongoing production of senses of belonging on both national and transnational scales. By looking at the patterns of movement that performatively constitute people’s subjective apprehensions of being ‘native to the nation’, anthropologists have been able to cast some critical light on the predominantly ‘sedentarist metaphysics’ (Malkki 1997 [1992]) through which national forms are usually imagined and, further, have illuminated

13 Although several informants mentioned in 2007 that many more local Tibetans were migrating to Beijing (thanks to ease of employment in the run up to the Olympics) than heading to India, my research has led me to believe that such travels are either not very common (only one of my informants had a close friend studying or working in Beijing) or not commonly discussed. By contrast I ran into many Tibetans who had been to India, knew friends or relatives who had been, or wanted to go and talked about such aspirations or experiences freely.
the trans-national structures of belonging and community with which national projects are complexly bound up. Routes have been placed along roots in scholarly attempts to understand belonging in the ‘national order of things’ (see Vasantkumar 2013 for a more detailed discussion of related themes).

Malkki has famously described the ‘sedentarist’ and ‘arborescent’ metaphors of culture that characterize this national order and that lead in many cases to displacement as being cast as aberrant – as an uprooting, the consequences of which have historically included the marginalization of refugees and other mobile populations that exist in the national order’s interstices. Yet while Malkki’s interventions are justly famous for providing trenchant ethnographic illustration of Anderson (1991) and Clifford’s (1988) placing mobility at the heart of (more-than-)national belonging, the Tibetan case highlights the limits of her claim that the refugee is necessarily a marginal figure. Quite to the contrary, Moran (2004) acutely notes that in the Tibetan context, rather than being a stigmatized, deracinated or uprooted Other to an authentic, territorially grounded envisioning of nation or culture, the refugee is, instead, central to contemporary articulations of authentic Tibetan culture. According to many of trans-national Tibet’s strongest supporters, both Tibetan and Western alike, ‘Tibetan culture and Tibetan Buddhism now function fully and perfectly only in Diaspora’ (Moran 2004: 188).

In this instance, therefore, it is the rooted (or more precisely for returnees, the rerooted) that is aberrant, the uprooted normative. Moran explains

The rather different semiotic valence of the ‘Tibetan refugee’. It is as if, by the magic inherent in this particular geographic qualifier, the categorization of refugee is stood on its head. The Tibetan refugee does come to stand for his or her nation in absentia, carrying the culture as legacy and as precious cargo. Further, within the world of popular media representations (as well as many Tibetans’ own estimations), this cargo is in fact their gift to the world. Tibetans are not usually portrayed as ‘rootless’ or as stripped of the aura that surrounds their nation-culture; in fact, quite the reverse. (Moran 2004: 189)

If Tibetan refugees reverse (or benefit from a reversal of) the usual terms of the national order of things (even if this symbolic valorisation is of very little assistance in traversing the fraught terrains of national borders and geopolitical struggle), it follows that they also reverse the dialectic of visibility and invisibility that Malkki links to this order. Whereas in Malkki’s
account, ‘refugees are rendered ‘systematically invisible’ (Moran 2004: 189), in the Tibetan case of which I write, it is mobile non-refugee Tibetans that are rendered invisible (non-mobile Tibetans in China are arguably rendered inauthentic rather than invisible, but this is a topic for another paper). Aberrance here is figured not in terms of the uprooting of sedentary authenticities but as the uprouting (if you will) of authentic itineraries wherein returning is tantamount to selling out.

Pilgrims of Development

Let me be clear that I am not suggesting that Tibetans who (return) migrate trans-nationally in search not only of refuge but also of fortune – Tibetans, in other words, who become pilgrims of development – are necessarily co-opted by or complicit in Chinese national projects. While most necessarily swear off explicit political expression, most also have no illusions about the contradictions, injustices and inequalities of everyday life in China. Indeed, some, like Gesar, seek to lay the foundation for a future Tibet of their own imagining that diverges from both China and exile Tibetan ideals. In place of the over-determined binaries of the Tibet Question as phrased by both interested parties (whether cast in terms of the struggle on the part of virtuous communists to free Tibetan serfs from their evil monastic overlords or as a confrontation between the peaceful partisans of Buddhist enlightenment and the destructive, rapacious Chinese nation-state) the situation on the ground is complexly polyvalent (cf. Powers 2004). What should we then make of Tibetan modernists who return to China to work as guides for foreign tourists, showing them the remains of traditional Tibetan culture even as they themselves seek modernity on Tibetan terms and critically assess the essentialist claims of both Chinese and Tibetan nationalisms? ‘Refugee’ will not suffice to describe such travellers.

Those who stay, those who go and those who return all do so for a variety of reasons. This should not be surprising, but, perhaps, it still is. It also shouldn’t be scandalous to admit that for at least some of the Tibetans involved that economics may trump (or exist alongside) religion or politics, that for some at least, travel to India is undertaken at least in part for instrumental reasons – to parlay English language ability into superior economic prospects (and perhaps laterally support for Tibetan education, culture or language) in China. As the iron rice bowl of China under socialism has given way to the new post-WTO world of risk and self-reliance, Amdo Tibetans, in addition to perceiving themselves as cultural and religious
minorities (who prior to 2008 were able to access rather more freedom on those counts than Tibetans in the TAR; times have since rather radically changed), also internalized, to some degree, ideas of economic and cultural backwardness common to those hailing from underdeveloped rural regions in China’s western hinterland (cf. Vasantkumar 2014).

As the Chinese central government has, at least formally, turned its attention to the development of the Western Regions (starting in particular in 2000), local governments have been given some control over assessing how best to employ locally specific resources to foster economic development (under the auspices for example of the maxim ‘develop locally specific economy [i.e. resources], fazhan tese jingji 发展特色经济). Prior to 2008, tourism was, alongside such industries as forestry and mineral extraction, perhaps the idiom par excellence for this locally specific development. Places like Lhasa in the TAR, Lijiang in Yunnan, Jiuzhaigou in Sichuan and ever more widely scattered locales like Xiahe, Tsatang, Langmusi, Repgong, Ganzi, Dege, and Yushu all began to figure with some prominence on the itineraries of Western tourists (and since 2008, with as yet unclear consequences, in the journeys of a new breed of Chinese backpackers (see Lim 2009, Shepherd 2009, Vasantkumar 2009). In this era of expanding western tourism, Tibetans with English language proficiency were ideally positioned to serve as guides.14

This positioning was in no small part due to the confluence between their ethnicity (Tibetans are generally seen by Westerners as more authentic and less politically compromised guides to Tibetan Buddhist monuments than Han Chinese) and their linguistic aptitude (most Western tourists speak only European languages). Given the generally lousy state of English language instruction in Western China in the late 2000s, access to English in India was, for many migrants (both potential and returned) one of the most appealing aspects of the entire endeavour. This is not to say that these economic motives always trumped or replaced more purely nationalist or religious motives, often all three were present in different measure. (Even the most strongly anti-clerical migrants I met, two young Tibetan men who separately praised the Cultural Revolution, only wishing that the Tibetans

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14 Further, most if not all of the Tibetans I talked to in Dharamsala had friends or knew of others who had returned to China and achieved at a modicum of economic success. In 2007, one Tibetan in Dharamsala told me that outside of Lhasa where supervision of returnees is usually strict and occasionally draconian as when in 2004 many returnees were booted from their jobs in tourism-related industries for the crime of having visited India, he knew of many people who had gone back and were doing alright working as guides, English teachers or entrepreneurs.
had been able to control it in their own territory, still expressed reverence for the Dalai Lama and Buddhism in general).

Certainly, the journey itself to and from India was and remains extraordinarily dangerous. Just as certainly some Tibetans would no doubt undertake such travels even if there were no access to free education in the exile communities. Yet, I still believe that a portrait of Tibetan migrants that casts them firmly and solely in refugee mode is less a description of the actual itineraries on the ground than a reproduction of a particular spatialized cultural politics of difference in which Tibetan is scripted as always already separate from Chinese. Whether or not economic motivations for such movements are essential or incidental, it would be advisable, I suggest, to consider contemporary Tibetan trans-Himalayan migrations as proceeding from a complex amalgam of economic, cultural, religious and political motivations. In such an amalgamation, the economic advantages in China provided by English language education in Tibetan exile communities abroad should not be overlooked. Whether, in order to add nuance to our understandings of trans-Himalayan Tibetan migration, we should alternately abandon, centre, or employ the category of refugee as strategic essentialism will thus no doubt occasion significant debate.

Odd Migrants

I suggest that in order to start to make sense of the figure of the returned Tibetan we need to begin by broadening our analytic terminology. In place of the term ‘refugees’ and its over-determining connotations, which are apropos to many but not all Tibetan populations and in place of the descriptive, but strangely flat ‘returnees’, I propose the term ‘odd migrants’. As discussed at the beginning of this essay, I am using the word ‘odd’ in a somewhat technical sense that, following Hartigan, is meant to highlight both the singularity of and the significant internal cleavages within the population I attempt to describe. For, the category of Tibetan returnees is riven by differences of class, region and language that parallel the

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15 Which, it should be noted, exists uncomfortably alongside other mappings (such as the common equation by long-term Tibetan residents of Dharamsala of new arrivals with the cultural and moral orientation of the Chinese nation-state. The bitter irony to find having sacrificed so much to leave China that one is tarred with accusations of complicity with the PRC upon arrival in India, might be another example of the normalization of the figure of the refugee (here equated only with those who left China in 1959 or shortly after) in an exile Tibetan context.
significant discontinuities Hartigan highlights that make it so difficult to think different sorts of American Whiteness together. Two groups of returnees are particularly ‘odd’ in this sense.

These two groups can be effectively distinguished by their reasons for returning, their welcome (or lack thereof) upon return and by the sorts of conceptual limits these reasons and receptions render manifest. The first of these two odd groups is a population of young PRC-born Amdowas, both ecclesiastical and lay, most often, but not exclusively male who venture to India for religious or practical instruction (e.g., learning English) motivated by a general sense of dissatisfaction with life in China’s Tibet(s) that derives only partially from some sort of ethno-national or religious sense of marginalization. These migrants have travelled both to and from India in some less-than-licit manner, sneaking across snowy passes ‘like thieves in the night’ as one of my friends put it, toughing it out in Ngari or dodging border posts down in the misty valleys near Dram. This sort of migrant is no longer feted upon his or her return, but instead goes to a local police station, turns themself in and, depending on their degree of guanxi and the corruptness of the police, pays a fine of varying severity and slips back into the general stream of social life (with perhaps, as in Gesar’s case, a bodyguard in tow).

The return of even average Tibetans used to occasion considerably more positive official attention than it does today. My friends in Labrang told me that the local government used to hold galas to welcome back guiguo zangzu tongbao or ‘Returned Tibetan Compatriots’ and I have seen pictures in friends’ apartments of gatherings of smiling returnees posing beneath red banners with this phrase picked out in gold characters. For the most part, however, Tibetan returnees have grown so common place that the government has become perhaps just a little blasé about them. Or perhaps it has to do with changing definitions of guiguo (归国).

Gui (归), has the connotations of returning home having made good for oneself while away – it in this sense describes a return that casts both the returner and the place of return in a positive light. Where once even the return of farm boys or long haired nomads was viewed in this light, in the years immediately preceding 2008, it seemed that to occasion the kinds of feting now prevalent in the development-minded PRC, as with so many other things in contemporary China, one, as it were, has to pay to play. This is where the second group of odd migrants comes in.

16 By 1998, China had ‘welcomed’ the visits of 22,935 Tibetans visiting relatives and more than 2200 returning from abroad to settle down (China Tibet Information Center 2007).
Here I refer to a smaller and generally more affluent substrate of the Tibetan population who have the means and material resources at their command to be feted as ‘foreign investors’ or who have the life story to allow them to be deployed for propagandistic purposes as the heroes (or more rarely heroines) of idealized success stories, as having achieved what might, for lack of a better phrase, be termed ‘China’s Tibetan Dream’.

In the years prior to the troubles of 2008, five such idealized biographies of returnees could be easily located on the website for the China Tibet Information Center.

These accounts served as exemplifications of opportunity and self-improvement. These five vignettes which all feature a truly baffling system for romanizing Chinese versions of Tibetan names were entitled ‘Yixi Dainbgyai Takes the Lead in Becoming Rich’, ‘Dainzeng Wangdu, an Exemplary Village Head’, ‘Goisam Paintog – A Famous Tibetan Doctor’, ‘Zhaxi Wangdu, a Deputy to the Lhasa Municipal People’s Congress’ and ‘Gyaincain Qoinpe – Member of the Lhasa Municipal Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference’. All the individuals in question hail from central Tibet and are members of the generation of Tibetans who fled the TAR in the 1950s; they are, in other words, as the purple prose of the website puts it, ‘approaching the evenings of their lives’. All returned to Tibet between 1982 and 1987.

While sharing certain formulaic aspects, flight into exile, disillusionment, tearful returns, described in purplest prose – Dainzeng Wangdu for example is said to remark, ‘After my return to the motherland it was as if I were a parched seed [sic] which had suddenly been drenched with sweet dew’, and concluding homilies on the virtues of the party – these vignettes highlight the different modes in which returnees can make good. Yeshe Dhonjub (at least I think that’s how one might render Yixi Dainbgyai) by virtue of his own considerable talents and preferential government investment and taxation policies is able to parlay his small timber concern into a diversified business empire in Tsethang. Tenzin Wangdu illustrates how Tibetans in China can gain control over their own affairs by assuming positions of power in local government. Kelsang Phuntsok demonstrates that traditional arts such as Tibetan medicine are not only allowed to flourish in today’s open-minded China but can become in themselves sources of

17 Given the avidity with which ‘China’ is inserted into Tibet-related titles (e.g., ‘Tin Tin in China’s Tibet’ and ‘China’s Tibetan Mastiff’ just to name two).
wealth and social esteem. Finally, Jashi Wangdu and Tenzin Jigme show that Tibetans even have access to higher levels of Chinese government: ‘as spokespersons for the people, they actively participate in the administration and discussion of state affairs’.

**Conclusion: Odd Neighbours**

I think we should take these vignettes neither as representing the actual experiences of actual individuals nor as completely fictitious, but rather as something akin to, say, a movie ‘based’ on a book by the same name – actualities embellished and repurposed for particular ends – here the United Front attempt to hail overseas Tibetans as one of the key constituencies of the Chinese nation-state. That is to say simply because these accounts stretch credibility or bear the all-too-telltale marks of formalism or because Goisam Paintog crops up at least once as the protagonist of what is supposed to be Dainzeng Wangdu’s story, that does not mean we should conclude that the phenomenon of wealthy and successful Tibetan returnees does not exist, or the interests of such returnees do not sometimes coincide with official envisionings. Just as the strange romanizations distance us but allow us to perceive dimly actual Tibetan names, these formalized accounts similarly allow us distanced, filtered access to actual Tibetan lives even as the medium itself makes it impossible to overlook their repurposing.

Further, even though these exemplary biographies of returned Tibetans made good don't fully coincide with the details of their lives, they can be seen as a significant manifestation of government policy towards potential trans/national co-uterines. They seek to emphasize a co-nascence that highlights Tibetan compatriots’ place in the Chinese national-family. These and other returned Tibetans made good may or may not be foreign born but have found themselves sucked (or have manoeuvred themselves) into the vortex of new forms of nationally-inflected trans-national structures of feeling which the PRC seeks to mobilize. Further projects of economic and ‘social’ development in what are commonly perceived to be backward minority regions hail the so-called ‘Overseas Tibetans Compatriots’ as ‘a potential subset of *Huaqiao* 僑 (华侨) or ‘Overseas Chinese’ and an underutilized source of the ‘foreign investment’ central to plans for (for example) developing the West (see Vasantkumar 2012, for a more detailed treatment of one of these ‘Overseas Tibetans’).

Yet despite the important differences between these celebrated and fictionalized Tibetan returnees and the invisible, illicit ones with whom
we began this chapter, it is worth reflecting on one further valence of neighbouring as I have tried to employ it in this chapter – the fact that the boundaries between the two may not be absolute. The motivations of the wealthy investors may be as much religious as economic, the poorer returnees may have initially travelled in hopes of improving their economic status in China. (Indeed the boundary between the economic and the religious often breaks down on closer inspection). The experience of trans-national, trans-Himalayan migration even in its most illicit form can, as Gesar’s experiences so boldly illustrate, itself be productive of class mobility. Such complexities highlight the degree to which economically and religiously motivated Tibetans are in Hartigan’s terms, precisely odd, given that they are so hard to hold together conceptually. What this oddness in turn suggests, I argue, less as a conclusion than as a jumping off point for further study is that in place of, or at the very least in addition to understandings of these Amdowas’ trans-Himalayan peregrinations as a sort of spatialized Cri-de-Coeur, stemming from a monolithic Chinese anti-Tibetanness, we as scholars must seek to treat them as more complex phenomena that both bind together and produce economic, political and moral terrains in novel and unpredictable combinations. Moreover, in this reimagining, Tibetan mobilities and Chinese economic development are themselves revealed as odd neighbours.