



HEIDELBERG ACADEMY OF SCIENCES
AND HUMANITIES

Research Unit, "Documents on the
History of Religion and Law of Pre-
modern Nepal"

Nepal Heritage Documentation Project

'A Yam between Two Rocks' Transcultural Histories of Nepal's Relations with India, China, and Tibet

27–28 May 2024
Heidelberg

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Prior registration is strongly recommended

In his political testament, *Divyopadeśa* (c. 1774), King Pṛthvinārāyaṇa Śāha poignantly likened Nepal's geopolitical position, wedged between China and India, to that of a "Yam between two rocks" (*duī dhuṅgāko tarula*). This metaphor underscores the intrinsic link between Nepal's political destiny and its neighbors—a sentiment echoed by political analysts and decision-makers to this day. However, within the same text occurs another famous phrase — that of Nepal as the "true Hindustan" (*asala hindustāna*). In demarcation to colonized India, this self-representation upholds Hinduism's central role for the polity, observes the Brahmanical caste order, and zealously restricts foreign influence.

It is this notion of Nepal as the "true Hindustan" that has shaped the country's image as a "fossil" (Mary Des Chene), offering tourists an authentic glimpse into Indian culture and researchers an opportunity to study an India in the making ("Le Népal, c'est l'Inde qui se fait", Sylvain Lévi). The conference takes these tensions as a point of departure to delve into the historical, political, cultural, and intellectual connections between Nepal and the world, especially India, China, and Tibet. Moreover, it seeks to explore moments of conflict, seclusion, and the restriction of exchange resulting from complex entanglements. By investigating the potential of transculturality in understanding specific aspects of Nepal's non-colonized history, the conference simultaneously honors Professor Axel Michaels on the occasion of his 75th birthday. It critically engages with a key term in his scholarly oeuvre, inviting reflection on Nepal's dynamic relationships with neighboring regions in the past and present.



*The Gurkha Campaign, painting on silk,
China, 1792/93, Völkerkundemuseum vPSt*

PROGRAM

Monday, 27 May 2024

Panel sessions

Venue: Heidelberg Academy of Sciences and Humanities, Karlstraße 4, Heidelberg

9.30: Bernd Schneidmüller, Heidelberg Academy of Sciences and Humanities
Welcome Address

Panel 1: Himalayan crossroads: Nepal-Tibet-China relations and regional dynamics

9.45-10.15: Axel Michaels, Heidelberg Academy of Sciences and Humanities
Transcultural turbulences: New Nepalese documents on the Sino-Gorkha War of 1791-92

10.15-10.45: Franz Xaver Erhard, Leipzig University
The Tibet-Gorkha War of 1790-92: A Tibetan perspective

10.45-11.15: Ayushman Baruah, University of Toronto
The Gurkhas and the making of an informal empire in Tibet (1855-1912)

Coffee break

11.45-12.15: Amish Raj Mulmi, independent writer, Kathmandu
The Gyalpo Affair: Himalayan geopolitics at the beginning of the 20th century

12.15-12.45: Zezhou Yang, SOAS, University of London
The unrecorded history of Nepal-China relations between 1910s-1940s

Lunch break

Panel 2: Artistic expressions, material culture and religious encounters

14.00-14.30: Niels Gutschow, Heidelberg University

Motifs in architecture: How the acanthus leaf from Corinth and the airborne wisdom bearer on a Chinese cloud arrived in Kathmandu

14.30-15.00: Christian Luczanits, SOAS, University of London

Mustang at the crossroads: On the entanglement of monastery collections

15.00-15.30: Alexander von Rospatt, University of California Berkeley

From the periphery to the center: Reflections on how the Nepalese Buddhist tradition came to situate itself between the Indian motherland and *Mahācīna*

Keynote lecture

Venue: Centre for Asian and Transcultural Studies, Building 4010, CATS auditorium HS05 (1. OG), Voßstraße 2, 69115 Heidelberg

18.00-19.00: Charles Ramble, University of Oxford / EPHE Paris

A yam or a sausage? Elastic boundaries, internal exotica and other features in the slow coagulation of a nation

Introduction by Ute Hüsken, Heidelberg University

Afterwards reception

Tuesday, 28 May 2024

Panel sessions (ctd.)

Venue: Heidelberg Academy of Sciences and Humanities, Karlstraße 4, Heidelberg

Panel 3: Encountering the West: Religious, military, and diplomatic engagements in Nepal's history

9.30-10.00: Marie Lecomte-Tilouine, CNRS, Paris

Distorting Christian presence in pre-modern Nepal

10.00-10.30: Alaka Chudal, University of Vienna

Why do we fight in the WW1? A response from the Rana government and the Gurkhas

Coffee break

11.00-12.00: Manik Bajracharya, Simon Cubelic, Rajan Khatiwoda, Heidelberg Academy of Sciences and Humanities

Sources on Nepal's foreign knowledge and diplomacy in the 19th century (reading-in-conjunction)

Lunch break

Panel 4: Crossing geographical and social boundaries in India-Nepal Relations

13.30-14.00: Christof Zotter, Heidelberg Academy of Sciences and Humanities

Transcending borders: Hindu ascetics as go-betweens

14.00-14.30: Martin Gaenzle, University of Vienna

Nepali Pilgrims in Banaras

Coffee break

15.00-15.30: Michael Hutt, SOAS, University of London

Indian influences on the development of Dalit literature in Nepal

15.30-16.00: Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka, Bielefeld University

From servants to academics: Trajectories of Nepal's Dalits in a comparative perspective

16.00: Madeleine Herren-Oesch, University of Basel

Concluding remarks

Book launch and reception

Venue: Völkerkundemuseum vPST, Hauptstr. 235, Heidelberg

18.00: Alban von Stockhausen, director, Völkerkundemuseum vPST

Welcome address

Book launch

Axel Michaels, *Nepal: A History from the Earliest Times to the Present* (Oxford University Press, 2024)

Introduction by David N. Gellner, Oxford University

Afterwards reception