

March 2020

**Review of *Trans-Himalayan Traders Transformed: Return to Tarang*. by James F. Fisher**

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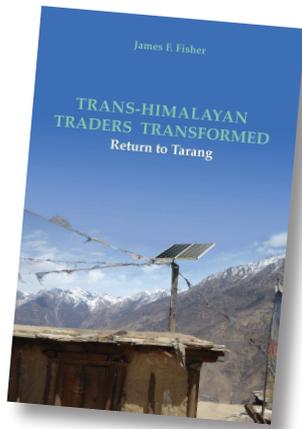
Daurio, Maya. 2020. Review of *Trans-Himalayan Traders Transformed: Return to Tarang*. by James F. Fisher. *HIMALAYA* 39(2).

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol39/iss2/22>



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***Trans-Himalayan Traders Transformed: Return to Tarang.***

**James F. Fisher.** Bangkok: Orchid Press, 2017. 252 pages. ISBN 9789745242029.

**Reviewed by Maya Daurio**

In *Trans-Himalayan Traders Transformed*, anthropologist James F. Fisher sets out to determine the veracity of his perception of impending change among a society of traders from Dolpa, the premise of his 1986 book *Trans-Himalayan Traders*. Fisher connects these two bodies of work and the lives of community members over four decades, offering a unique glimpse into both the development of a community over time as well as the anthropologist engaging with them. The two books together, representing two different points in time across a geographically dispersed area of study (Dolpa and Kathmandu), offer a unique perspective of a community in transition, of persistent cultural and livelihood patterns, and of the dynamism and fluidity of the social lives of an Indigenous community across its diaspora.

Fisher's book is organized into four independent sections. In the first, he presents the life histories of five businessmen and women. They reside in Kathmandu but originate from the

village of Tarang in the Tichurong Valley in Dolpa, situated along an old grain-salt-rice trading circuit between Tibet and India. Fisher lived in Tarang for a year in 1968 while conducting doctoral research, which culminated in his 1986 book *Trans-Himalayan Traders*. Instead of trading in salt or grain, these individuals have carpet manufacturing businesses or trade *yarsagumba* (*Ophiocordyceps sinensis*), a parasitic fungus highly valued as an herbal remedy in international markets that garnered nearly \$4,000 a kilogram in 2011 (p. 52). Fisher illustrates the ways they punctuate the urban landscape of their lives by engaging in the unique, place-based cultural traditions of the Tichurong Valley. There is a two-month period of worship, for example, for a deity (Choputa) who resides in a glacier above the Tichurong Valley, and individuals from Tichurong residing in Kathmandu and Dolpa alike concurrently observe rituals honoring this deity (p. 36). Fisher contextualizes those aspects of the religious, business, and social lives of individuals in Kathmandu within a socio-historical framework connected to the Tichurong Valley.

Importantly, his detailed life histories draw connections across space but also across time. The individuals he profiles are the literal children of community members among whom he lived for a year as well as figurative representations of how the “new generation of traders has expanded the traditional notion of transactions” (p. 34). He links the trajectory of individuals he profiles in *Trans-Himalayan Traders Transformed* with the enduring capacity of those from Tarang to engage in trade “between contrasting cultural, linguistic, and ecological zones” (p. 26). Their lives are also influenced by access to education, the ability to take advantage of economic resources

and opportunities, and kinship ties to influential people in the community.

In the second section, Fisher evocatively describes his return to Tarang in 2011 after forty-four years to find some aspects of village life seemingly unchanged and others considerably different. Fisher describes encountering people in the Tichurong Valley who had mythologized the anthropologist, believing that he spoke fluent Kaike (an Indigenous language in the Tichurong Valley) or that he had lived in Tarang for six years instead of one. Fisher writes, “It was enough to make me question the reliability and legitimacy of ethnohistory as a legitimate field of inquiry” (p. 61). The way in which Fisher reflects about this experience is emblematic of the way that Fisher situates himself in his own narrative throughout this book, not only as a participant but as an anthropologist critically examining his own growth and methodological assumptions.

This propensity for introspection is most apparent in the third section of the book, in Fisher's preface to Chapter 9. This chapter comprises a captivating first-person narrative of Chandra Man Rokaya, a man born into poverty and hardship in Tarang, improbably educated in Kathmandu, India, and Australia, and employed in the agricultural development sector in Nepal. Rokaya's lifepath defies the cultural and economic narratives exemplified by the other individuals profiled by Fisher and lacks “the structural, kin, vocational, educational, or transactional advantages” they enjoyed (p. 173). Fisher muses on the unique value of a first-person narrative in describing the complexity of culture as well as the “idiosyncrasies of an individual case” (p. 102). Citing Rokaya's unconventional pathway to achieving a higher education and professional

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employment, he presents Rokaya's story as a "refutation of the analysis I've been promoting thus far" (p. 102). It is through these kinds of reflections that Fisher weaves his own transformation as an anthropologist over many decades—and specifically within the context of his methodological approaches to researching cultural and economic systems in Tarang—with the transformational ways individuals have both reshaped and circumvented their traditional socio-economic pathways over time and space.

Finally, Fisher concludes with an interview of himself conducted by the anthropologist Gaurab KC in 2013, which Fisher offers as an exchange for the life histories of other individuals presented in his book. "Any account of individual lives should, for simple reasons of fairness, include an account of my own life, without which my account of their lives is one-sided" (p. 178). The interview provides an extensive overview of Fisher's tenure in Nepal (he was among the first group of Peace Corps volunteers to Nepal in 1962), his background in anthropological thought, and his experiences as a researcher in the Tichurong Valley in the late 1960s. The interview serves to contextualize the different methodological approaches of Fisher's two books about Tarang within the framework of his own development as an anthropologist.

Readers interested in the history of anthropological research in Nepal will find much to appreciate

about *Trans-Himalayan Traders Transformed*, a fascinating, interweaving narrative that follows in the steps of the anthropologist James F. Fisher as he re-examines the methodological underpinnings of his work over many decades in Nepal and provides a temporal ethnography of Tarang community members in Dolpa and Kathmandu.

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