

Trans-Himalayan Traders: Economy, Society, and Culture in Northwest Nepal. JAMES F. FISHER. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1986. xiii + 232 pp., maps, tables, figures, appendixes, notes, bibliography, index. \$35.00 (cloth)

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This is a well crafted monograph on an extremely remote village in northwest Nepal that the author calls Tarangpur. The study is primarily economic, concerning the ways in which economic choices determine cultural patterns and directions of social change. The theoretical frames derive from ecological anthropology, from a Barthian transactionalist approach, and from a Berreman-ish focus on impression management. (Fisher was trained at Chicago in the late 1960s but escaped the symbolic and structuralist approaches that were dominant there at that time. He thanks McKim Marriott and Manning Nash for intellectual guidance.)

Fisher begins by showing that the people of Tarangpur produce an agricultural surplus. He spends some time on the debate over the meaning of "surplus," and arrives at a definition that appears to suit the case (I will not review that discussion here). He goes on to argue that the things people do with this surplus are largely optional and culturally defined. With the exception of needing salt, obtained in trade with Tibetans, the villagers are self-sufficient in subsistence terms, and do not need to do all the things they then do with their "surplus": other trade activities, support of a ritual system, sundry social expenditures out of neighborliness and so forth. These, in other words, are arenas of "choice." It turns out, however, that both the support of ritual, and the obligation to be generous and neighborly, are not really arenas of choice, since the people of Tarangpur view them as irreducible requirements of normal social life. That then leaves trade (other than for salt) as the major domain of options: men (and trading is a purely male activity) may choose to put more or less energy into trading; they may choose (in modern times) to do different forms of trading; and they may choose to do different things with the wealth they garner from trading. These choices in turn, Fisher argues, have significant consequences for the local culture, particularly with reference to ethnic identity.

Fisher's case is in fact strongest on the ethnic identity question. He shows that the people of Tarangpur are situated at the interface of the Hindu Nepali culture and the Buddhist Tibetan culture, and that they have constructed and maintained an identity that is syncretic or, in less charitable terms, two-faced, over a long period of time. He has an excellent discussion of the contrast between the trade, which facilitates (material) exchange between the two regions, and the ethnic-interaction style, which blocks (cultural) exchange. He goes on to make the case that, with a relatively recent shift in trade patterns in the direction of one that is more purely oriented toward Nepali locations, goods, and needs, there is a corresponding shift to a more straightforward Nepali identity.

Fisher is on weaker ground in trying to derive

other changes from this shift. For example, it turns out that the men of Tarangpur, who used to avoid like the plague anything to do with the central government, have now got heavily into politicking for elective government offices. Fisher says that this change "is not comprehensible except as a consequence of the economic shifts" (p. 176, emphasis added). Yet Fisher has only shown that the shift in trade patterns has produced increased cash wealth, not that it has in any way (discussed in the book) dictated where that wealth should be put. Why Tarangpurian men are suddenly addicted to spending their wealth on political campaigning (and, it should be noted, these are *not* the men most heavily involved in trading) is never adequately connected with the trading shift of which it is supposedly a consequence.

Similarly, Fisher chronicles a number of areas of Tarangpur social life that have not apparently changed at all, despite the changes in the trading arena. In particular, the ethic of internal egalitarianism remains very strong, and is presumably either buttressed by other aspects of social and cultural life, or insulated from the external trade, or both, in ways that are not discussed in the book.

Overall, then, the explanatory claims of the book are somewhat larger than they should be. But the book is nicely constructed, well written, and has the virtue above all of actually having an argument that one can agree or disagree with. On all these grounds, then, it is a contribution to the growing body of quality anthropology being done in Nepal.

History and Magical Power in a Chinese Community. P. STEVEN SANGREN. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987. x + 268 pp., maps, figures, tables, photographs, bibliography, index. \$39.50 (cloth).

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For the past four decades, Taiwan has served as a stand-in for the rest of China for purposes of field research. By rough count, at least 30 Western anthropologists and sociologists have turned their scholarly lenses on that small island-province since the 1950s, and the number of local scholars is probably double that. Professor Sangren has dealt with the problem of finding something new to say by selectively focusing on a segment of religious practice and belief and subjecting it to analysis in light of contemporary ethnological theory. It is an ambitious book, and a difficult one.

His starting point is an objective account of the historical development of the market town of Ta Ch'i and its surrounding villages, the growth of the local economy, and the marketing area's relationship to provincial economic/political developments from the 18th century on. That segment of the book, if expanded, would have made for a highly interesting monograph in itself: Chinese expansion of empire and frontier settlement are topics on which far more work needs to be done. But perhaps that is a task for an economic historian with a passion for archival work. Sangren is an ethnologist, and he turns fairly quickly from a consideration of the "nested