

## Imagining the Good Life: Negotiating Culture and Development in Nepal Himalaya

by Francis Khék Gee Lim.

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Reviewed by Martin Saxer

Francis Lim's monograph on the Langtang valley in northern Nepal brings together a Tibetan Studies perspective with the Anthropology of Development. While the former tends to approach the valleys along the southern flanks of the Himalaya as realms of Tibetan Buddhist culture, the latter is concerned with the effects of development projects, conservation efforts, and tourism. Lim explores the nexus of these two conversations – a nexus he identifies as crucial for the ways in which the people of Langtang imagine and pursue a 'good life'.

Conversations about the good life centre around two notions: *kipu* (*skyid po*), the Tibetan word for happiness, ease, pleasure, or comfort; and *bikas*, the Nepali term for development. The friction between these two notions shapes dreams and aspirations, conditions local politics and informs ethical reasoning. In this sense, 'imagining the good life' means 'negotiating culture and development', as the book's title suggests. The title, however, also has a deeper meaning. Lim notes that the people of Langtang tell the settlement history of the valley in terms of immigrants in search of a better life; 'In local mythology, it is a hidden sanctuary where an ideal Tibetan society is sustained' (p. 25) – a *beyul* (*sbas yul*) that provides refuge but also demands virtue.

The book's argument is structured in an introduction (chapter 1), six main chapters, and a conclusion (chapter 8). In chapter 2 Lim argues that the notion of *beyul* remains intrinsically linked to the social and political organisation of Langtang; it fostered a ritual hierarchy, the rise of one particular clan (the Domari) and a system of land rights in the valley that continues to be relevant until the present day. Langtang, like other Himalayan valleys close to the Tibetan border, underwent radical economic transformations in the 20th century. Chapter 3 traces these transformations from the decline of the trans-Himalayan salt and grain trade

to the arrival of foreign aid, the advent of trekking tourism and the establishment of the Langtang National Park. Lim describes the latter as particularly important. Gazetting the National Park outlawed the collection of medicinal herbs and introduced much tighter state control and discipline, a process that Lim calls 'putting the Langtangpa in place' (p. 80). Delimiting the valley as a conservation area, however, also paved the way to the boom of trekking tourism, as Lim shows.

The making of Langtang as a conservation area and trekking destination carried the promise of a 'better life' but also created tensions. Lim analyses how these tensions manifest in the ritual life of Langtang (chapter 4), and describes how the notion of *bikas* became materially embedded in daily life in the valley (chapter 5). The hotel, he argues, has emerged as the main site where this embedding takes place. Lim's description of the design and construction of hotels as well as their prestige and socio-political role is highly informative.

In chapter 6 Lim brings another perspective into play, which he calls the 'tourist gaze', following Urry (2002). Lim describes how imaginaries of the happy (*kipu*) hidden valley (*beyul*) clash with the pragmatic business logic of the very real pursuit for a better life in Langtang. Meanwhile, the Langtangpa embrace an equally romanticised gaze of the imagined world of the Western tourists they encounter.

The multiple layers of morality at work in the pursuit of a better life are the theme of Chapter 7. Lim notes how misfortune, be it a severe storm or declining potato harvests, is explained in social and moral terms. Land conflicts and loans are the two areas where moral conflicts are most evident. Lim's fascinating ethnographic account of the ethical reasoning and the micro-politics involved make for one of the strongest parts of the book.

In the conclusion, Lim reiterates that the notion of *bikas* has not replaced *kipu* in the pursuit of a better life. Community autonomy and social unity, both important values associated with *kipu*, have been 'severely compromised by the imposition of restrictions by powerful agencies, all in the name of *bikas*' (p. 211). Lim advocates a truly bottom-up approach that takes the cultural notions and their changes into account.

The argument as a whole is well sustained. However, there are a few details I find problematic. Based on the narratives of his conversation partners, Lim initially paints a dark picture of the hardship of life in Langtang

before the arrival of tourism. In the conclusion, however, he notes that it is 'precisely this new experience of Langtang as a developmentalist/tourist space that has enabled them [the Langtangpa] to interpret their pre-tourism history as one marked by poverty' (p. 201). This qualification seems highly pertinent to the overall theme and argument of the book, yet it is only added as an afterthought.

In a similar vein, describing the ecological constraints of high altitude farming, Lim argues:

Rather than saying that the Langtangpa and other similar peoples are 'natural' traders, it would be more accurate to describe the situation as 'enforced trading', for they almost have no choice but to trade in order to survive. (p. 63)

Given the wealth and prestige historically derived from trans-Himalayan trade, this raises more questions than it answers. Why would people choose to settle on land that does not guarantee subsistence needs were it not, at least in part, for the prospect of a good life based on other sources of income?

Finally, there is an unfortunate error in the calculation of the dollar amount of the costs of building a hotel. The NRS 4-8 lakhs are equalled to USD 530 – 1,100 instead of USD 5,300 – 11,000. This typo may let readers less familiar with Nepal underestimate the scope of local enterprise and give a false impression about the stakes involved. Such details, however, do not question the importance of the book – both as a monograph on contemporary Langtang and as an effort to fuse, ethnographically and conceptually, Tibetan Studies with the Anthropology of Development.

## Reference

Urry, John. 2002. *The Tourist Gaze*. London: Sage Publications.