

Vijay Kumar Manandhar. 2004. *A Comprehensive History of Nepal-China Relations up to 1955 A.D.* 2 vols. New Delhi: Adroit.

Though there have been relatively few publications whose titles specifically mention Nepal-China relations, the long-standing connections between Nepal and Tibet and the dynamics of the India-Nepal-China

triangle mean that any analysis of Nepal's past or present foreign policy gives China plenty of attention. With so much already said, both in Leo Rose's classic *Strategy for Survival* (1971) and many less well-known but still valuable studies, it has become difficult to come up with anything radically new.<sup>1</sup> One can, however, dig additional detail out of the archives, reinterpret some of the evidence for particular episodes or simply provide a handy synthesis of what has already been published in many scattered places or remains unpublished in other researchers' theses. Manandhar has done some of all three in this lengthy study, which incorporates much from his earlier publications, *Cultural and Political Aspects of Nepal-China Relations* (1999) and *A Documentary History of Nepalese Quinquennial Missions to China 1792-1906* (2001), as well as extensive new material. The first volume, written mostly from secondary sources, starts with the earliest recorded contacts, including travels by Buddhist scholars in both directions and the early diplomatic contacts between the Licchavis and the Tang dynasty. It ends with Nepal's role in the 1904 Younghusband Expedition and the negotiations for the withdrawal of Chinese forces from Tibet after the 1911 revolution. Volume two, offers a detailed history of the quinquennial missions and a survey of Nepal-China relations from 1906 to 1951 (largely omitting for 1906-1912 the Tibetan issues already discussed in volume 1). Both these chapters are based on the author's own archival research. Finally, there is an account (necessarily from secondary sources as the relevant archives are not open) of the establishment of full diplomatic relations with the People's Republic in 1955 and a discussion of Nepal's status until 1906 as a 'tributary' of China.

Manandhar's main analysis confirms the general picture presented elsewhere. China's concern has normally been with maintaining her position on her side of the Himalayas and she has intervened on the other side only when she perceives a threat to her security north of the mountains. The assault on Megadha in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, carried out by a Chinese official leading Tibetan and Nepalese troops, was a one-off response to an earlier attack on the official whilst he was leading an embassy, not an attempt to secure a permanent presence. The Chinese invasion of Nepal in 1792 was provoked by Nepal's aggressive policy towards Tibet just as the invasion of India in 1962 was triggered by India

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1 The most important include monographs by Ramakant (1968, 1976), Hussain (1970), Mojumdar (1973a, 1973b), Muni (1973) and J. Sharma (1986).

appearing to threaten Chinese communication with Tibet across the Aksai Chin plateau.

The result for Nepal is that China has had some usefulness as a counter to India but this is limited and intermittent. In the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, China always rebuffed Nepal's requests for military or financial support against the British, but the latter's apprehension of what China *might* do was a significant factor. Manandhar cites with approval Ludwig Stiller's suggestion (Stiller 1976: 104-5) that a wish to appear non-aggressive in Chinese eyes was probably one reason for Lord Hastings returning most of the Tarai to Nepal in 1816. From mid-19<sup>th</sup> to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, China's weakness left little scope for playing one giant neighbour off against the other and the Ranas opted instead for alliance with British India. Then the establishment of the People's Republic of China and its re-assertion of control over Tibet enabled King Mahendra to revive the old policy. In 1962, seven years after the end of Manandhar's period, the outbreak of the Sino-Indian border war allowed the king to avoid having to come to terms with his Indian-supported Nepali Congress opponents. However, China was of no assistance to King Birendra during the 1989-90 'blockade' and King Gyanendra's recent hopes that India will back direct royal rule for fear of China's gaining influence in Kathmandu are unlikely to be fulfilled. If India swallowed its dislike of Gyanendra's neo-Panchayat approach it would be because of worries about Nepali and Indian Maoists, not about China.<sup>2</sup>

Manandhar has done a thorough job of filling in the background to a well-known story. His bibliographical coverage is good and he has made a particular effort to find material on the Chinese side, something that has always been a problem as few who write on Nepali history are also experts on China. He has made use of a contribution by American Sinologist John Kiligrew (1979) on the 1792 war, which should have been cited in at least two of this reviewer's publications.

When discussing the 1792 events, Manandhar follows Kunjar Sharma (1973: 138-139) in arguing that there was no formal peace treaty between Nepal and China, despite the fact that the supposed text was one of the

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2 Brahma Chellaney (2005) argues that India's opposition to Burmese military autocracy allowed China to increase her influence there and that, therefore, she should not risk putting too much pressure on King Gyanendra. One American commentator (Weinstein 2005) has also recently suggested that the king's China gambit might succeed. However, this does not seem a widely shared view among analysts and, in any case, Burma is not dependent economically on a single neighbour to the extent that Nepal is on India.

documents forwarded to the United Nations in 1949 in support of Nepal's application for membership. The document given in Naraharinath's *Sandhi-Patra Saṅgraha* (2022 v.s.) appears to be based on the spurious text presented in Pudma Jang Bahadur Rana's biography (1909) of his father, Jang Bahadur Rana. All this may well be so, which leaves it unclear what the understanding actually included. Manandhar, like Sharma, lists *de facto* terms (vol. I: 134), not citing specific documents but claiming they can be reconstructed 'from various primary and secondary sources.' His own list differs from Sharma's and, crucially, it does not include any undertaking from China to come to Nepal's defence if attacked by a third party. However, Nepal itself did later claim that it had received a pledge of Chinese protection. In 1842, according to a Chinese source Manandhar later cites (vol II: 307), King Rajendra told the emperor that an imperial decree of 1793 had promised Nepal assistance 'in men, money or horses' against a foreign attack.

Manandhar does cite specific evidence of the *amban* (Chinese representative in Lhasa) and other imperial officials urging the emperor to accept Nepal's offer to attack the British during the Opium War of 1840-42 (vol.I: 226-7). He juxtaposes this with Rose's version (1971: 100) according to which the *amban*, Mang-pao, himself told the Nepalis not to make such suggestions and refused to forward their letter to the emperor. Although Manandhar does not explicitly endorse either version, Rose is almost certainly more reliable here as the source is Meng-Pao's own *Si-Tsang Tsou-Shu* ('Tibetan Memorials'), a collection of his letters sent to and received from the emperor. Writing in the 1850s, John Francis Davis, one of the other authors Manandhar cites, gives a purported extract from a letter in which Meng-pao does appear to endorse the Gurkha request but no source reference is given and garbled translation or willful distortion is probably the reason for the discrepancy.

There certainly was a group of scholar-officials who believed that China could resist British encroachments by encouraging South and South-East Asian rulers to attack them. At the head of this group was Lin Tse-hsu ('Commissioner Lin'), whose actions to suppress the opium trade in Canton precipitated the Sino-British conflict but also earned him a reputation as an honest and patriotic official. In summer 1842, just before the war ended, a member of the group, Yao Ying, who was governor of Taiwan during the war and had learned something about conditions in South Asia by interrogating British prisoners, wrote to the emperor urging

acceptance of the offer of Gorkha help (Polachek 1992: 201-2).<sup>3</sup> However his letter apparently never reached the court whilst the recommendations of Wei Yuan, who is cited by Manandhar, were made in a book completed just after the war ended and published in 1844. Lin Tse-hsu himself had fallen out of favour with the court as a result of the initial reverses in Canton. The views of Lin and his circle were important in the post-war debate over how China should respond to future foreign threats but they were not part of the crucial circle of advisors to the emperor during the conflict.

Despite China's growing enfeeblement, Nepal's 'tribute' missions were not formally ended until the 1911 revolution ended the imperial system. Though some in Nepal still saw them as a counterweight to British influence, they were now more valued for the opportunities they afforded to take duty-free goods into China than for any strategic significance. Manandhar explains that this was also an important motive for similar missions from Korea, a state certainly regarded by the Chinese as much less peripheral than Nepal. He also discusses at length the question of whether the system implied that Nepal was a Chinese dependency. Drawing particularly on the work of the celebrated American Sinologist, John Fairbanks, he argues that for the Chinese, their emperor acted as a representative of all mankind in offering sacrifice to the gods. In consequence, from the Chinese point of view, all other centres of power were in some sense subordinate to the Chinese ruler. It is not really possible to 'translate' a concept of this type into the dichotomy of political independence/dependency central to modern concepts of international law.

In the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, when Nepal was still trying hard to use China as a counterweight to the British in India, the Nepalese themselves were not unhappy for the British to believe that they were indeed the emperor's dependents. Hence the elaborate ceremony in which the king and his court traveled out of Kathmandu to greet the returning envoys and to ceremonially receive the imperial letter.

Manandhar gives a detailed account of each mission to Beijing and, as an exercise in cultural history, the most interesting is perhaps the last,

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3 Polachek's 1992 book – the only one which I can add to Manandhar's impressive list – is a revisionist study of Lin and his circle, arguing that they acted out of factional ambition and clung to the hope of raising an Asian coalition as a way of avoiding the painful internal reform which China really needed.

which took place in 1906. Its leader, Kaji Bhairab Bahadur had fluent English, which he used both to read every English work on China he could find and also to correspond with Chandra Shamsher Rana. On the return journey he appears to have had some kind of temporary nervous breakdown. He first threw himself on the protection of a British citizen, claiming that both the Chinese and his own Nepali colleagues had been trying to kill him, and subsequently he was seen walking along the road with a Buddhist-style prayer wheel – strange behaviour for a high-caste Hindu. The kaji's behaviour soon returned to normal and Manandhar suggests, perhaps correctly, that the Briton may have exaggerated in his account, but there is corroborating evidence from another member of the mission and the story in the British records does thus have some basis. The inconveniences of the journey, tension within the mission, failure to sell the opium he had brought from Nepal and perhaps just the strain of coping with too many cultural variables had evidently unhinged him.

Overall, Manandhar's book is a valuable addition to the literature, and one that I am certainly glad to have on my shelves. There are, however, a number of shortcomings. First, a work as detailed as this will inevitably have a largely specialist readership yet its usefulness as a research tool is reduced by the failure to include a fuller index. Anyone seeking information about a particular individual who might have been on one of the missions to Beijing will therefore have to trawl through the narrative for the relevant years instead of homing in at once on the relevant name. There is a similar, though less serious problem with the bibliography, which omits some of the titles cited.

Second, a comprehensive history of Nepal-China relations should have included more discussion of just how important economically the Kathmandu Valley's entrepôt trade across the Himalayas actually was. Nepal's most celebrated economic historian endorsed John Pemble's characterisation of this commerce as "a peddling business in luxury goods, carried on mainly at the behest of the wealthy and the curious" (Pemble 1971: 58) and also asserted that this trade had "attracted attention as a field of historical research beyond any proportion to its contribution to Nepal's economy" (Regmi 1988: 186). Against this, we have Kunjar Sharma's (1973: 60) conclusion that "trans-Himalayan trade was one of the important links in the chain of continental trade of Asia in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, supplying in the process the markets not only of Nepal, Tibet and India, but also of Central Asia, Mongolia and parts of China." Regmi is probably right that trade across the mountains was not a large proportion of what would now be called Nepal's GDP.

However, Sharma points out that, on Kirkpatrick's (1811: 211) figures, imports from Tibet, together with the profits from the minting of gold and silver coinage for the Tibetans, made up about 25% of the state's income in the 1790s. Its importance for Nepal's political economy was therefore considerable.

Manandhar also fails to discuss fully the process of decline in the entrepôt trade. It is still not clear whether the effective ending of this was more the result of the British opening of the route through the Chumbi Valley in Sikkim or of the liberalisation of Tibet's import policy forced upon the country by Younghusband's 1904 invasion. This question in turn affects our assessment of Chandra Shamsher's policy of co-operation with Britain on the Tibetan question. The Maharaja appears to have believed that the growth of Russian influence in Tibet, which Younghusband's expedition was intended to forestall, would lead to Britain seeking greater control over Nepal. Just how great an economic price Nepal paid for the supposed geo-strategic gains is difficult to say.

The author could also have given more space to cultural relations as opposed to high diplomacy. He does look briefly at food crops which may have been introduced into Nepal from China, but he decided not to discuss early migrations from what is now Chinese territory. As shown by George van Driem's work (van Driem 2002), this field of study is a fascinating one, even though conclusions must inevitably remain highly speculative.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, one small point of detail – the only such error which I detected. The author consistently refers to the disputed border claimed by the British in the north-eastern Himalayas as the 'MacMohan' line. This Indo-Scottish hybrid has a delightful ring to it, but 'MacMahon Line' is the correct spelling.

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4 For a review of van Driem (2002), see Whelpton (2004).

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**John Whelpton**  
Hong Kong

