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Research note

The Transnational Flow of Tourism and *Daigou* between China and Nepal before and during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Summary
Through various ethnographic research techniques, this article examines transnational *daigou* practices — meaning informal onsell practices — between two neighboring countries, China and Nepal. Linking *daigou* to debates on transnational flows, it analyzes the paradoxical implications of the dilemma *daigouers* find themselves in and their desired alternative mobilities among "flows," especially that of Chinese tourism to Nepal. I show how these *daigouers* disrupt the boundaries between the public and personal, virtual and physical, as well as local and global in an attempt to achieve upward social mobility by harnessing their bodies, information, products, and other forms of capital amid the tourism flow. Traveling in this capacity becomes a creative response to the tensions inherent to the various translocal structures wherein they are otherwise marginalized. I thus show how this tourism flow shapes, allows, and also restricts *daigou* mobility. While acknowledging the latter's dependence on this flow, specifically investigating how the COVID-19 pandemic has created a temporary site through which such mobility endured for some time even while tourism was suspended, I also show how these *daigouers* have claimed their subjectivity. Based on this case study, I refute hegemonic narratives of such flows being untethered, uniformed, faceless, and agentless. Instead, I argue that even though flows are powerful and influential regarding types of mobility and immobility they are still not dominant. Instead, different actors' grounded mobile and immobile experiences keep practicing, conditioning, and negotiating various flows, with those concerned maintaining their own characteristics in confronting them. As such, the article seeks to make the current discussion of transnational flows more nuanced by highlighting the structuring imperatives of (im)mobility, class, and capital vis-à-vis globalization.

Keywords: transnational flow, Nepal-China relations, COVID-19, *daigou,* globalization

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Introduction

In this article, I account for certain recent *daigou* movements between China and Nepal before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. A *daigou*, according to the Cambridge Dictionary (2021), is "someone who is outside China who buys goods for someone who lives in China." This definition is simple and static. However, it serves as a working definition of *daigou* for readers who are not familiar with the term. In the Chinese context, *daigou* refers to both such people and the related activities they engage in, and so the word functions as a both noun and verb. For the sake of clarity and consistency, however, I use *daigou* here to refer to their activities and *daigouer* to denote a specific group of people.

The movement of Chinese *daigouers* to Nepal, an updated snapshot of globalization in the inter-Asian context, has been profoundly shaped by the heavy flow of tourists. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, *daigou* had become a prominent type of mobility between the two countries, mainly living from the established routes, infrastructure facilities, as well as physical and social spaces sustaining that flow of tourists. The pandemic had put a halt to most movement between China and Nepal for at least 18 months at the time of writing (November 2021). During this health crisis, most routes between the two countries were closed. As a result, flows and mobilities in any form would be forcibly reduced. Many *daigouers* and their goods are stuck in Nepal. However, the immobility caused by the suspension of flows generated new kinds of mobility. While unstable and only temporary, the pandemic also created windows of opportunity through which Chinese *daigouers* oversaw the unusual mobility of medical supplies — primarily masks.

By investigating the particular types of *daigou* mobility before and during the pandemic, I explore the dialectical, imbricated, and symbiotic relationship between transnational flows, mobility, and immobility as an approach to a globalization disjunctive in nature. How do various transnational flows structure the mobility of *daigou*? Vice versa, what forms of immobility coexist with these flows? How does the transformation of such flows' underlying conditions serve to modify the types of mobility and immobility we see? Attempting to answer these questions based on a case study of Chinese *daigouers* in Kathmandu, the capital city of Nepal, I refute hegemonic narratives of such flows being untethered, uniformed, autonomous, faceless, and agentless. Instead, I argue that even though these flows are powerful and influential regarding types of mobility and immobility they are still not dominant. Different actors' grounded mobile and immobile experiences keep practicing, conditioning, and negotiating various flows, with those concerned maintaining their own characteristics in confronting them. People are world-forming instead of subsumed into hegemonic discourses and experiences of flows — whether these aim to empower or limit them. Understanding these flows in their full intricacy also reveals to us the complexity of globalization.

Since the late 1980s, scholars in the Social Sciences and Cultural Studies have employed the term "flow" widely and diversely yet without explicitly defining what

is meant by it. It represents and interrogates the processes of globalization, or, in Bauman's (2000) illustrative metaphor, "liquid modernity." Among these scholars, Appadurai (1996) and Castells (1989, 1999, 2004, 2009) have made significant contributions to theorizing about the concept and developing its close connection to global economic circulations and cultural productions. For instance, Appadurai proposes global cultural flows having five dimensions to them — ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes, and ideoscapes respectively — per a framework put forward to explore the tensions between homogenization and heterogenization in the contemporary globalized world. These flows represent "a historical break with 'place' as it has long been seen and experienced" (Rockefeller 2011, 561).

Castells, meanwhile, critically reexamines people's sited experiences and is inspired by the dramatic rise of information technology. He notes the contrast between "the space of flows" and "the space of places" that organize "the experiences and activity around the confines of locality" (Castells 2020, 233) via "flows of capital, flows of information, flows of technology, flows of organizational interactions, flows of images, sounds and symbols" (Castells 2009, 412). One implication here is the ideological construction of an autonomous space that, detached from grounded places, crosses many political, cultural, and religious boundaries. Flows also empower members of traditionally oppressed groups in their struggle to detach themselves from these structures by aiding their increased circulation and movement.

Another strand of research has critically examined the concept and practice of flows (Adey 2006; Appadurai 2000; Cresswell 2010; Rockefeller 2011; Schewel 2019; Sheller 2014; Turner 2007; Velde and Naerssen 2010). While acknowledging the importance hereof, these observers also recognize that flows' underlying conditions are not universally contextualized, and access to connectivity and mobility are not equally distributed — the latter depends on kinds of fixity. Based on the critical review of isomorphic flows, some scholars criticize the purported inclusive, equal, and empowering functions of being connected and in motion within the space of flows. For them, these creative spaces can create not only new forms of poverty and hierarchy but also are inclusive only for social and economic elites, who possess a variety of capitals and abilities that help them to navigate network societies and different flows (Crang 2002; Susser 1996). Moreover, to understand these flows, one should consider the dialectical relationship between mobility and immobility; as Hannam et al. argue, flows are not always about being in motion because "there is no linear increase in fluidity without extensive systems of immobility" (2006, 3). People, objects, and information may stop for either a brief time or for good for numerous reasons. In general, the critical studies of flows draw our attention to "specific groups' embodied experiences of place and movement, throwing into question the equation of transnational mobility with social and spatial mastery" (Martin 2017, 891).

In this article, I align myself with the latter strain of scholarship to localize and contextualize transnational flows between China and Nepal, as well as the mobilities shaped by them. I provide ethnographic data on the life experiences of a specific group, *daigouers*, who travel between China and Nepal for illicit commercial activities. This is done in analyzing flows' intricate relationship with mobility and fixity in the everyday world. The noted connection between *daigou* and flow is not innovative since its citing in the existing *daigou* literature is by no means uncommon. Many scholars (Xie 2018; Zhang 2017; Zhao 2020) have demonstrated how *daigou* have been shaped by different flows, such as money, people, consumer goods, cultural content, and values. As I will reveal, the mobility of *daigouers* is closely entangled with certain flows in the contact zone — especially those of tourism and industrial commodities. Although highlighting the deterritorialized aspects of *daigou*-related endeavors by embedding them within flows, I do not imagine related movements as "unbroken, agentless" (Rockefeller 2011, 560) or in perpetual motion.

When Chinese *daigouers* are in Kathmandu, they are both connected to transnationally mobile networks of related activities and to relatively static and localized structures in both the sending and host societies. Many *daigouers*' motivation to travel to Nepal is often informed by their material and immaterial "stuckness" back home. Moreover, those Chinese "moorings" (Hannam et al. 2006) already established in Nepal help facilitate their movements. For instance, the branch offices of Chinese express-delivery companies connect Kathmandu to numerous other mooring spots in China and elsewhere. Furthermore, "spatial fixes" (Harvey 2001) such as restaurants, hotels, and hostels backed by Chinese capital, enterprises that facilitate mulitple flows, also provide *daigouers* with familiar food, accommodation, networked communities, and forms of entertainment. However, the resources offered by mobile networks of Nepal-based Chinese *daigouers* are not equally distributed. I attempt to show how these individuals live at the nexus of social exclusion, orientalist imagination, and of unequal structures situated at multiple different local levels. They build and maintain transnational networks of alternative mobility, taking advantage of different flows of people, technologies, and social media content.

The article's contribution to the scholarship is the following. First, I offer updated empirical data on contemporary movements between China and Nepal. While the media has generally noted China's prominent presence in Nepal, micro-level academic discussion hereof remains absent. Second, I enrich the work on *daigou* through a case study of related practices across the Chinese-Nepali border. More importantly, I contribute to our understanding of the dialectical relationship between transnational flows, mobility, and fixity at the level of individual experience through case studies of Chinese *daigouers* in/to Nepal. By investigating the complicated ties between transnational flow and mobility, I aim to enhance the critical theorization of globalization with updated inter-Asian instances.

Research sites and methodology

The findings I present here are drawn from my fieldwork in Nepal between September 2019 and April 2020. The physical site of research into Chinese *daigou* practices in Nepal is Kathmandu. As a result of increased tourism, Chinese communities are emerging in the Nepali capital that center around tourism-related industries and infrastructures, such as restaurants, hotels, hostels, agencies, and stores. My methodological approach is primarily ethnographic, including participant observations, semi-structured interviews, and informal conversations held both individually and in groups. Not all interlocutors are "professional" *daigouers* who travel to Nepal for informal economic activity: *daigou* is, rather, a common practice and experience that many Chinese people traveling abroad engage in. Thus, scholars should contextualize the fluidity of *daigou* within a broader understanding of translocalities.

Most of the ethnographic material was collected from late December 2019 to April 2020, by when the COVID-19 pandemic had reached Nepal and rapidly spread through the country. On March 23, 2020, without any advanced notice, the Nepali government declared a national lockdown that was implemented at 6 a.m. the next day (Pradhan 2020). During this period, Nepal's borders to the south and north were closed and all international flights suspended. With people's physical movement now restricted, they increasingly took to virtual interactions and online communities instead. Informed by empirical fieldwork that demonstrates the key importance of digital sites in facilitating various types of flows between Nepal and China, I developed a hybrid research method that mixes observations of both virtual and physical communities.

I conducted virtual ethnography through the online platform WeChat, which is not only popular with Chinese people but also with Nepalis seeking to communicate with the latter. Work via WeChat mainly occurs through one of three methods: instant messaging with participants; discussion via chat groups; and, using Moments (a platform feature that resembles Facebook). Prior to and since the pandemic's onset, I would participate in ten WeChat chat groups, with their respective membership numbers ranging from dozens to hundreds of people.

The transnational flow of Chinese tourism and (im)mobility of *daigou*

For most of the time period since Nepal and China established official diplomatic relations in 1955, the exchange between the two countries has primarily comprised state-dominated geopolitical and diplomatic forms hereof (Sangroula 2018). Starting in the twenty-first century, Chinese tourism to Nepal has become a new flow between the two countries. In 2001, the Chinese government approved Nepal being one of its outbound-tourism destinations. From 2010 to 2019, the number of Chinese tourists visiting Nepal increased dramatically from 46,360 to 169,543 respectively.

In 2019 Chinese tourism accounted for 14.2 percent of all such international visitors to Nepal, ranking second globally only to India (Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation of Nepal 2020). Various media and government institutions in both countries have employed the term "flow of Chinese tourists" (Himalayan News Service 2019; Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2018; Xinhua News Agency 2018) to illustrate the increasing prominence of Chinese tourists in Nepal. Many of these institutions describe also the two state governments' significant role in enhancing the flow of Chinese tourism to Nepal by modernizing infrastructure, enhancing connectivity regarding roads and air travel, as well as by issuing favorable policies here.

However, despite the fact that from the above statistics, news items, and government statements we might describe this type of flow as dominated by state-sponsored infrastructures, policies, and technologies, it is crucial to avoid reifying these conditions as the only aspects of the space of flow. This is because heterogenous circumstances on the ground also shape it. For instance, the tourism flow not only runs through embassy compounds but also those hotels, hostels, restaurants, and grocery stores invested in by private Chinese and Nepali businessmen/women. Moreover, the above discourses of flow ignore the various agendas of Chinese tourists themselves, their different motivations, knowledges, and tourist practices. The notion of flow conveys a smoothness of motion that might not capture precisely how the movements of many Chinese tourists work. Many of the latter I encountered in Nepal were immature, budget travelers who lacked the money and knowledge to prudently navigate their travel-related activities abroad. Nonetheless the space of tourist flow between Nepal and China is not detached and independent from two entities that have clear boundaries, becoming a deterritorialized third space between the two countries. Instead, it extends into two national territories and is articulated via many nontourist aspects of both societies. Consequently, this particular space of flow is not only inclusive for tourists. The same networks, facilities, and channels of movement originally planned to serve tourists are appropriated by other actors too, including *daigouers*. In this way, the transnational flow of Chinese tourism shapes the mobility of *daigou* practices.

Most importantly, the state-sanctioned tourism exchange between Nepal and China offers *daigouers* a legal and manageable identity when traveling abroad. During my fieldwork, all the *daigouers* I interviewed held tourist visas. In 2015, Nepal waived visa fees for Chinese citizens. Although this tourist visa is originally only valid for 30 days, it can be flexibly renewed for up to 180 days at little extra cost in practice. Moreover, after entering Nepal a person holding this visa is not prevented from engaging in different types of nontourist activities, like *daigou*. However their covert identity concealed under the guise of tourism determines that these endeavors must stay low-profile, avoiding the state's gaze. To conduct these unregistered activities, *daigouers* must inhabit marginalized areas where neither state regulation nor protection dominate. In Kathmandu, the gray zone (Marginson 2012) that many *daigouers* occupy overlaps with the city's liminal tourist heaven, Thamel

(Grossman-Thompson and Linder 2014), which is also the Nepali capital's emerging Chinatown.

This is another way in which the flow of tourism sustains the mobility of *daigou*. It embeds *daigouers* in the material-infrastructure facilities designed for use by tourists. Many I interviewed and observed rent rooms in low-end hotels maintained by Chinese investors. In addition to being places of rest, the rooms are also where they store products before delivering them to the express-service dropoff points or personally carrying them with them to the airport. Those who choose not to stay in Thamel still spend much time there purchasing goods and building rapport with storeowners, friends, and fellow *daigouers* in shops, cafés, and restaurants. Part of the reason for remaining in Thamel is that many *daigouers* lack the basic linguistic, economic, and cultural abilities to explore areas beyond this district. In embedding them in Nepal's material tourist spaces, the flow of tourism also links *daigouers* with social networks that are mediated by Chinese-speaking local brokers, who have either failed to secure a licensed job in the formal tourist market or intend to extend their formal related business to the informal *daigou* milieu. For both groups, their relations — as friends, guides, partners, storeowners, and buyers — form valuable social capital from which they obtain subsequent opportunities to use other types of the latter (Burt 1992).

The recent popularity of online streaming activities in many stores in Thamel may more concretely demonstrate how *daigou* is embedded in touristic material and social spaces. In Thamel, visitors can easily find many stores selling tourist items such as cashmere goods, jewellery, and tea. During my latest round of fieldwork there, I found that although many stores were crowded with Chinese people these individuals were *daigouers* rather than ordinary tourists. And these *daigouers* utilized advanced real-time communication technologies to advertise their wares. For instance, they stand facing several smartphones and show in-store products to customers back in China. From time to time, Nepali storeowners or staff appear on-screen and greet, usually in Chinese, these potential customers. *Daigouers* use popular digital platforms for this, particularly Douyin (TikTok) and Kuaishou. The Nepali owners let the *daigouers* use store space and resources, in exchange potentially opening their businesses up to broader markets in China. The ordering process is instantaneous. Customers in China can place their orders through online portals while watching the live show. Once made, the products will be carefully packaged, taken to the nearby express-service dropoff points, and then delivered to different locations across China.

Online streaming belongs among *daigouers*' essential strategies to authenticate the products they sell commercially. Academic works on *daigou* have highlighted the branding practices involved, meaning "successfully annexing individuals' unique personalities and life experiences to commercial products through visual and discursive narratives" — as such, "attracting customers, enhancing 'stickiness,' and increasing profit margins" (Zhang 2017, 194). Zhao also demonstrates that "by

taking advantage of WeChat's timeline service, they [Chinese students] intentionally bring down the boundary between personal and professional networks to maintain and develop their relationships with daigou customers in China, most of whom they have never met in person" (Zhao 2020, 14).

Such branding is spatialized. The mobility of *daigou* functions around a number of peculiar geographic moorings in which a place is authenticated by aligning it with particular products. For the European countries, in Chinese eyes, these authentic goods are high-end luxury ones; Australia and New Zealand, meanwhile, are associated with healthcare items and powdered formulas. Nepal itself is associated with goods such as handmade cashmere scarves and Buddhist handicrafts. These products may enhance many Chinese people's inner-orientalized image (Shen 2016) by perpetuating the view of Nepal as both a sacred Buddhist land and a backward, less-industrialized country. Nevertheless, *daigouers*' presence in the source market is crucial to proving authenticity here.

In addition to the online streaming of goods, many Chinese *daigouers* also share snapshots of their everyday lives in Nepal with potential customers via digital platforms. The information embedded in these snapshots is comprehensive, highlighting their daily experiences and interactions with local people. Zhao (2020) indicates that this self-disclosure is not uniform but rather strategically employed and carefully calculated. The aim is to highlight that they actually live in Nepal, have extensive and reliable networks of local partners, and can secure high-quality products. While the sense of being present disclosed from the snapshots of everyday life contributes to fostering trust between *daigouers* and their customers, the contents of these photos and videos are also selectively chosen to satisfy people's imagination of Nepal as a primitive society. Doing so provides evidence, for example, that the handmade cashmere scarves they sell are genuine.

The above analysis demonstrates another link between the tourism flow and *daigou* mobility. While tourism physically facilitates many *daigouers*' movement back and forth to Nepal, it also offers certain cultural references and mobilizes specific cultural capital to be added to the various commercial products that they sell. While most *daigouers* I interviewed told me that they did not personally care about Nepal's exotism, they all realized how important highlighting it was to prove to potential customers the authenticity of their goods. As such, they made sure that this impression was fully conveyed to interested parties when branding their goods. By doing so, they demonstrate that they are not passive in the tourism flow because they can also mobilize personal resources and technologies to reconfirm and reshape the nature of it.

Elsewhere, Martin (2017) has characterized the *daigou* practices of Chinese international students in Australia as one creative method to confront the established discrimination of being underpaid they encounter in formal markets. Similar observations are also made by scholars like Zani (2018, 2020), who analyses how women from mainland China in Taiwan utilize *daigou* to earn emotional and

financial capital while they remain excluded from local formal-employment systems. While many Chinese *daigouers*' everyday lives are limited to the small geographic area of Thamel, my informants seldom complained about a sense of stuckness in Nepal. Few of them wanted to integrate into local society, and local opportunities were sufficient for them to exploit — especially for those only staying in Nepal for a few weeks.

Comparison of *daigouers* in Nepal and their counterparts in Australia and Taiwan reveals, then, it is embedment in different flows that leads to their varying perceptions, attitudes, and mobility practices. Chinese international students pay large sums (e.g. for visa fees, educational costs, airfares) to travel to and stay in Australia; Nepal-based *daigouers*' equivalent costs are minuscule meanwhile. Taking advantage of the flow of Chinese tourists to Nepal (e.g. via improved infrastructure, government support), *daigouers* can frequently travel between the two countries without becoming stuck in the host society. Moreover, while the state more systematically regulates international students, *daigouers* who take the form of tourists enjoy more travel flexibility because they are not required to report to formal institutions like universities. Many of the *daigouers* I met in Nepal simultaneously held tourist visas from other South Asian countries like India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. Martin characterizes *daigou* as "an opportunistic exploitation of temporary gaps" (2017, 905), with those engaged in such activities continually pursuing related opportunities by traveling to different overseas locations as tourists.

However, the above analysis is not to suggest *daigouers*' movement is totally uninhibited. A sense of stuckness, actually, is a prerequisite for the mobility of their bodies, money, and commercial products. Many of the *daigouers* I interviewed and observed are young people who did not possess much economic, social, or cultural capital in their places of origin in China. Many are not from the latter's metropolitan centers and did not acquire a higher education. Unable to secure promising careers in China's large cities and reluctant to remain at home, they turned their attention to Nepal and other less-developed countries in seeking alternative forms of upward mobility.

Disc (pseudonym) is a young *daigouer* in his early 20s. After graduating from high school, he "wandered in society for a few years" before traveling to Nepal, the first foreign country he had ever visited, on the recommendation of a friend who had *daigou* experience. He confessed that he knew nothing about the place other than the common saying "Nepal is friendly to China." Disc told me that, in addition to earning money, he wanted to see more of the world (*jian jian shi mian*).

Disc's stories and motivations are representative of others I met too. *Daigouers* mobilize the limited capital they have to hand, such as their savings and a few social relations, so as to generate practical capital — say, money. In many cases, this practical capital is more subtle and symbolic than a financial income however. By placing their bodies amid virtual and physical flows, they expect to connect with

transnational networks and thus satisfy some of their cosmopolitan desires. In some cases, the *daigouers* wish to earn this symbolic capital more than practical forms of the latter: the experience of traveling to many foreign countries, extended networks, and accumulated human resources offers them the feeling of being privileged and liberated.

In this sense, *daigou* resembles a specific travel practice like backpacking — as with those engaging in the latter, *daigouers* also utilize their movement as a rite of passage through which they can "upgrade" themselves. After the journey, they can be incorporated into their home contexts again (Cohen 2004) — potentially having now greater social capital. Many young *daigouers* I met in Nepal confessed that they would not do this kind of work for long. They wanted to gain as much money as possible while abroad and use it to invest in their own businesses in China, most likely in their hometowns. Nevertheless, when they start their journeys, many *daigouers* are comparatively vulnerable because they lack money, networks, and knowledge. Compared to Martin's (2017) international students from middle-class families, these Nepal-based *daigouers* are less likely to travel significant distances to places like Australia and stay there for prolonged periods of time. Some *daigouers* even told me that they had not visited any of China's big cities before going abroad. In this manner, the transnational flows of Chinese tourists to Nepal and other developing countries in Asia and Africa offer these marginalized actors low-cost, alternative systems of mobility that enable them to practice globalization with their own bodies.

So far, in this section, I have analyzed the dialectical relationship between the flow of Chinese tourists to Nepal and *daigou* mobility. I have demonstrated how that flow provides originally marginalized and vulnerable young *daigouers* with an affordable system of movement — as constituted by favorable state policies, accessible and comprehensive tourist infrastructures, and extended social networks. Instead of being "carried" by the flow, *daigouers* actively participate in confirming and shaping its nature via their own commercial activities. While promoting certain goods to their customers, and therein emphasizing the exotism of the source market, they contribute to shaping Nepal as a meaningful tourist destination in the Chinese context — potentially making their customers future visitors.

Moreover, I have analyzed many *daigouers*' fixity in their places of origin. Such spatial and social rootedness coexist with the tourism flow and will never be erased by it. Nonetheless, this flow at least presents these people with opportunities to confront stuckness. It is worth noting that while the tourism flow is proven to be able to mobilize *daigouers*, more comprehensive studies are needed to determine whether it actually empowers them as well. Not many I interviewed had earned enough hereby to start their own business back home. The typical situation is, rather, that they only manage to break even regarding the income and expenditure related to the traveling life. While many had established more extensive social networks during

the process of *daigou*, more evidence is needed if we are to prove the financial and social capital gained can aid their upward mobility on returning home.

This research puzzle emerging from my observation of *daigouers* in Nepal echoes Martin's warning that we should be cautious "against any simple equation of mobility with capital understood as an abstract, general and placeless form of value" (2017, 906). In the next section, I will heed this scholar's advice and thus depict a more nuanced relationship existing between tourism flow and (im)mobility. I examine the months from late December 2019 to April 2020, as a link moment of the mobility assemblages (Xiang 2021). Toward the end of this period, most cross-border flows were suspended and many *daigouers* stranded in Kathmandu. I argue that although the tourism flow contributes to shaping *daigou* mobility, the suspension of the former does not necessarily negate the latter. On the contrary, indeed: while old types of mobility may struggle to survive, new forms can emerge in such circumstances.

Moving masks and stranded *daigouers*

Trading medicine and medical supplies between Nepal and China was not entirely unfashionable before the pandemic. It constitutes a part of another flow between the two countries, that of industrial goods. This flow is almost unidirectional, given the industries in each country. For example, almost all the medical masks in Nepal are imported from China. According to an official report for the fiscal year 2019/20, Nepal imported therein a total 73,199 kilograms of face masks — of which 67,833 kgs came from China (Department of Customs, Government of Nepal 2020). Comparatively, Nepali industrial goods entering the Chinese market are minuscule. Although industrial flows share similar spatial material and social networks with tourism ones and with *daigou* mobility, they remained largely separate spheres prior to the pandemic — as the data from my fieldwork also suggests. However, as I outline below, the mobility assemblages induced by the COVID-19 pandemic brought these respective realms together, producing a new type of reversed mobility regarding medical masks – albeit only very briefly.

This pandemic first erupted in China in December 2019. Reacting to this looming health emergency, China quickly suspended most of its physical interactions with the rest of the world. However, attempts to contain the SARS-CoV-2 virus failed, allowing it to spread quickly around the globe. In Nepal, the first confirmed case occurred in late January. However, the government was slow to react to the health risks. For instance, it did not require masks until March (Kumar 2020; Poudel 2020a, 2020b). Toward the end of that month, as noted, the Nepali government eventually declared a national lockdown. Initially it was due to last a week but actually remained in place until July 21, 2020 (Nepali Times 2020), with the country's borders herewith closed and all international flights suspended.

The "mask mania" in Nepal mainly happened from January to early February 2020. Two reasons explain its emergence. One is the time it took for the virus — at around

one month — to cross the Himalayan mountains. During this window, the Nepali government did not pay much attention to adddressing if and how the virus would spread from China. Many Chinese people in Nepal even felt lucky because they were outside of their native country. The time gap between the virus's emergence in China and arrival in Nepal led to a mismatch between perception and information dissemination about associated risks. While the Nepali government did not initially require masks to be worn, Chinese officials maintained the opposite stance and consequently issued related regulations. Although most physical movement between Nepal and China was stopped in this context, digital information was free to cross borders. Chinese nationals in Nepal received numerous news stories about severe shortages of medical supplies of all types back home every day, whereas Nepali media paid much less attention to the pandemic initially. As informed by both my fieldwork data and local media (Poudel 2020b), when Chinese people began visiting local pharmacies the latter's staff felt more confused than anything about their related requests.

As the gaps in the flows of virus and information closed, so too did the cross-border movement of masks also ebb. At the end of January 2020, the Nepali government banned the latter's export to other countries, directly ending the aforementioned mask mania (Poudel 2020b). This decision was based on its evaluation now of COVID-19 as a serious threat to national security and its knowledge about low mask availability in local markets. Moreover, as the number of cases increased, the Nepali public began to understand the severity of the pandemic, thus acquiring masks, sanitizer, and other medical supplies. Prior to the pandemic, the price of a standard medical mask had been around NPR 10; it would reach NPR 50 at the peak of the mask mania. As a result, some pharmacies in Kathmandu issued related purchase restrictions.

We can conclude from this that the perceived dominant role of flows in shaping mobilities is questionable. The suspension of flows of tourism and industrial goods did not lead to the immediate suspension of *daigou* mobility. On the contrary, when most parts of the tourist system were shut down, *daigou* mobility survived for a while yet and even developed new patterns of engagement. To a large extent, forced immobility generated exploitable opportunities for onselling masks. Many stranded Chinese people, including tourists and expatriates, who were previously not professional *daigouers* started looking for masks in Kathmandu's pharmacies. Some engaged in mask-related *daigou* activities for profit — specifically, in compensation for their extra costs assumed due to forced immobility (e.g. for accommodation and similar).

Most people I talked with bought masks for two reasons: self-protection and for their family and friends in China. For instance, Lily and Back (pseudonyms) are both female Chinese tourists who were visiting Nepal to hike in the Himalayas. They arrived in Nepal before the pandemic's onset. However, in late December 2019 they were prevented from returning to China. For about a month, they were quarantined

in the same hostel from which I conducted fieldwork. It was closed to the public; residents could only leave the compound for reasons of essential business, which included purchasing masks. Their *daigou* activities with regard to medical masks were not influenced by a financial interest here, though being stranded in Nepal was an advantage in a business sense.

In addition to extending to new actors, forced immobility revealed the opportunities attached to fixity — something that has mainly been devalued in these flows. Many successful cases of onselling masks, as relevant *daigouers* told me, would be dependent on networks on the ground in China, Nepal, and elsewhere. The mechanisms of fulfilling a mask order were no different from other *daigou* activities: bringing them from China, looking for goods and trading in Nepal, as well as finding means of transportation. However, masks were specifically regulated commercial products that were not easily obtainable in a market dependent on tourism. For *daigouers* who sought large quantities of masks, locating and buying them was more complicated. They had to mobilize all their resources accumulated through their previous *daigou* experience to successfully complete orders. In other words, *daigouers* needed to utilize their local networks established and maintained prior to the pandemic. Doing this required these individuals to have long-term experience of living and trading in Nepal rather than just of occasional travel to the country for a few weeks at a time.

Moreover, preorders from clients in China were especially important because the need for masks was temporary and urgent. Thus, *daigouers* could not be entirely detached from their native country. *Daigou* is highly dependent on close, interpersonal relations indeed. These trustworthy networks established and sustained between *daigouers* and their Chinese clients not only guaranteed the availability of masks at short notice but also vouched for their quality – as dependent on the trader's reputation.

Kang Yang (pseudonym) was a professional *daigouer* in Nepal. Before coming to the country he had *daigou* experience in India, where he had established reliable connections with some local medical suppliers. On January 24, 2020, right before Chinese New Year, Kang received an urgent order from a client he had frequently helped prior to the pandemic demanding the express delivery of 30,000 masks to a small city in China's interior. After contacting his Nepali associates and visiting several pharmacies in Kathmandu, Kang realized that such a large quantity of masks could not be supplied by his local associates. So, Kang reached out to his contacts in India and learned that they could supply the masks as long as he visited Hyderabad and paid a deposit in advance. On Chinese New Year's Eve, he successfully secured the masks, which were then transported to China by his company. He earned around CNY 40,000 from this transaction, which both covered his costs and yielded a considerable profit indeed.

While "successful" *daigouers* like Kang could mobilize their transnational networks, many marginalized and vulnerable ones like Disc could only quarantine in their hotel

rooms and had no idea what to do business-wise. During interview, Disc discussed his ambitions to earn quick money. However his lack of experience, cash, customers, and contacts prevented him from doing so. Other *daigouers* shared more or less similar stories with me. Without much capital on the ground, many could only find medical masks by visiting local pharmacies one by one as each had only a limited supply thereof.

The *daigou* literature pays much attention to the transnational networks constituted by personal relations. For instance, Zani (2020) demonstrates how *daigou* women's personal networks help create new informal businesses that break down the boundaries between the virtual world and the real one. Similarly, Zhao (2020) finds that Chinese international students in Australia utilize circles of families and friends to establish and expand their *daigou* businesses. While scholars focus on the mobility and malleability of transnational *daigou* networks, they equally point out that the latter are not universal or placeless; rather, they are rooted in various geographies and cultures. The above-presented (un)successful cases during a particular brief time period further support these findings.

It is worth noting that though the examined *daigou* mobility regarding medical masks was supported and sustained by immobile people and their sited transnational networks, which can thus be described as dominated by states of geographic and social immobility, it is crucial to avoid reifying the practices as wholly fixed. To a large extent, the mask-related *daigou* did not form a type of movement that was totally autonomous from the tourist flow because it primarily lived from the infrastructures that facilitated the latter. For instance, some of the masks were transported to China through express-delivery services when still available. Most were taken there in people's suitcases however. Nonetheless, the infrastructures those masks moved through largely overlapped with those conditioning tourist and industrial flows. During this time, groups of otherwise mobile people — *daigouers*, tourists, expatriates, and others — were forced to confine themselves to various fixed spaces in Kathmandu. Limited movement within certain local areas was allowed, so that hotels, restaurants, and grocery stores became the daily spheres of many Chinese people. These initially tourist facilities offered many *daigouers* affordable accommodation and food during the challenging period in question when most of their income sources were cut off, proving crucial for sustaining their mask-related *daigou* activities.

Moreover, many people's movements, connections, and exchanges occurred via virtual communities such as ones on WeChat. This speaks to Urry's (2007) view that the digital constitutes a site of imaginative, communicative, and virtual travel. These physically confined people could hence move through social media, without the constraints of time and space. This represents a way to exchange information via communication technologies and to join the "powerful, interdependent knowledge-based systems that through new software are increasingly organizing production, consumption, travel and communications" (Urry 2007, 149). Before the pandemic,

WeChat groups were already popular among Chinese tourists and Nepali locals for establishing connections and exchanging information — representing critical virtual hubs through which the tourism flow ran. These virtual tourist hubs were then used to update people on pandemic-related developments every day. Many also used these WeChat groups to discuss potential ways to now leave Nepal and to urge Chinese authorities to aid those stranded there.

Such groups also provided arenas in which social, cultural, economic, and political issues were debated. These discussions involved criticism of the Nepali government and the Chinese Embassy in Kathmandu. Moreover, Chinese people shared hereby their dissatisfaction with the local Nepali populace, who to a large extent were portrayed as irresponsible and spreaders of the virus. *Daigouers* were often the target of criticism in these groups too. During the lockdown period, several protests organized by stranded Chinese nationals occurred in public places in Kathmandu (Dhungana 2020; Rajbhandari and Bhandari 2020). WeChat users blamed *daigouers* for organizing these activities and condemned them for ruining the relationship between China and Nepal. During lockdown, and because of the pressure ensuing from public discourses that condemned mask-related *daigou* activities as the merely exploiting of the pandemic, many *daigouers* chose to turn to business taking place between their own kind alone. WeChat groups thus offered other *daigouers* a full range of services — from advertising products, to discussions between dealers, to cash transactions.

The mobility of medical masks was consequently not only driven by temporary, forced immobility but also dependent on the mobile systems earlier established by other such flows. Without these, the new systems would have soon collapsed. In this sense, mask-related *daigou* mobility can be regarded as one of the methods by which cross-border flows between Nepal and China sought prolongment. By facilitating this specific type of mobility, the owners of restaurants, hotels, and other businesses who were initially closely dependent on tourist activities also tried to adjust their focus when ordinary tourists could not patronize them. However, the dynamics produced by the mask-related *daigou* mobility were minuscule vis-à-vis maintaining the entire system of movement here; in other words, it failed to constitute a flow by itself.

Conclusion

Drawing on the experiences of Chinese people in Nepal prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic, I empirically examined the *daigou* practices intermingling with social exclusion, immigration, hierarchical structures, and the virtual world here. Underpinning that, I investigated the intricate and dialectical relations between the flow of Chinese tourists to Nepal and specific types of mobility and fixity. Motivated by the pursuit of upward mobility through transnational movements, young Chinese *daigouers* choose to engage in frequent motion — crossing various physical and virtual spaces, and taking advantage of the tourism flow.

While the latter liberates many *daigouers* from their marginalization in places of origin, its key traits like frequent mobility and lack of deep connection do not support *daigou* activities. Such endeavors require sited interactions to a certain extent. Thus, many *daigouers* develop creative practices to cooperate with, navigate, as well as challenge these flows. In presenting young Chinese *daigouers*' forms of creativity and vulnerability amid various transnational flows, I have offered empirical evidence refuting the wholly positive conceptualization of cosmopolitan mobilities widespread in academic discourse.

My findings suggest a complicated picture of globalization, as constituted by increasingly competing yet also still cooperative links between flows, spaces, places, actors, and objects in both the physical and virtual worlds. Regarding a specific type of mobility, the tourism flow, my findings offer a snapshot of how globalization is perceived, imagined, and practiced by ordinary people in the inter-Asian context. Results also suggest that understanding globalization in all its complexity means observing the dialectics between flows and sited experiences. Here, mobility is conditional: it is only achieved through different actors' respective processes of negotiation, adaption, and transgression with regard to borders.

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