HIMALAYA

Research Article

Reconciling the Varied Stories: Arniko Myths, (De) colonization, and Nationalization Between Nepal and China

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.2218/himalaya.2023.7521

Abstract

Arniko—the celebrated traveler, painter, architect, and sculptor—traveled to the court of the Yuan Empire in the 13th century, centuries before the modern states of Nepal and China came into existence. Arniko's journey traverses boundaries and borders, including those of modern nation-states. However, modern myths invented and circulated between the 1940s to the 1980s prune and flatten this complexity into a framework based on European languages and norms to impose order and control over diverse local viewpoints and interpretations. Nepaliness is constructed by attributing ethnicity and citizenship to Arniko, and projected onto an ancient past, to impute a long-standing friendship between Nepal and China. We investigate the myths through a transcultural lens and show how a variety of actors use Arniko to fulfill their agendas of decolonization and nationalization and how these nuanced agendas have affected their construction of Arniko. Moreover, based on an analysis of art that is attributed to Arniko, we introduce methodology from art history to provide an alternative transcultural method for "reconstructing" Arniko. We argue that the modern myths about Arniko are constructed, maintained, and performed as ideological and territorialization processes of control over disputed geography and ethnic cultural identities.

Keywords

Transculturation; Nepal-China relations; nationalism; decolonization; trans-Himalayan art

Recommended Citation

Yang, Z. and Chen, T. (2023). Reconciling the Varied Stories: Arniko Myths, (De)colonization, and Nationalization Between Nepal and China. *HIMALAYA* 42(1): 28-47.

Introduction

In the 13th century, before the modern states of Nepal and China came into existence, Arniko[1] traveled to the court of the Yuan Empire (the area now known as Beijing) and, it is said, built the White Stupa in the Miaoying Temple. In 1972, the Nepal government issued postal stamps featuring a youthful Arniko standing atop a mountain and in front of the White Stupa; dressed in a *topi* and *daura-suruwal* (the national outfit for Nepali men) and holding pens and paper in both hands (Bhattarai 2001). In 2001, the Nepal Arniko Society—a group of Nepalis who had studied in China—had a life size bronze statue of this image erected, and they donated it to the Miaoying Temple, in the hope that "Arniko's second journey to China will strengthen the historical bonds between the two countries" (Bhattarai 2001). Hari Prasad Sharma[2] displayed his oil painting *Arniko's Departure for China in Kathmandu* in 2015. The painting, too, depicts Arniko as a young man in traditional Nepali costume.

One may wonder why these depictions of Arniko, despite the differences in genre, closely resemble each other. Why is Arniko always depicted as a young man in a Nepali *topi* and *daura-suruwal*? Is there a literal or visual prototype this meta-figure has developed from? As far as we know, no preliminary record of Arniko exists in Nepal. What we know of him is from Chinese historical material that does not describe his appearance. The most important of the material is the epitaph inscribed on the stele in Arniko's tomb by Cheng Jufu, an official historian of the Yuan Court, in 1316,[3] containing information on Arniko's bureaucratic career and artistic achievements.

According to the Chinese source, Arniko was from *Tianzhu Niboluo* (Nepal of India). At the request of Kublai Khan, he traveled to Tibet in 1260 to build a golden stupa. In 1270, his Tibetan master, Phagpa, took him to *Dadu* (Beijing). In 1273, Arniko was appointed to the position of Yuan's first Supervisor-in-Chief of the Artisans of Various Ethnics (*Zhuse Renjiang Zongguan*), in which he remained until death. Cheng's epitaph for Arniko has become the primary source for other Chinese historical accounts about Arniko, such as an entry in the *Annals of Yuan Dynasty* (1976). The Ming dynasty followed the Yuan Dynasty; Ming scholars quoted Cheng's work Arniko in their official history of Yuan China—they did not add any information (Huang 1962).

Cheng and the Annals of Yuan Dynasty indicate that Arniko was from *Niboluo*. Modern scholars tend to treat *Niboluo* as a deviation in translation and consider it a reference to modern Nepal. But that neglects the difference in the concepts that the Late Imperial Chinese used to understand the world beyond their imperium and those that are used to understand modern states and countries. The transformative process from *Niboluo* to Nepal embodies a phenomenon that requires explanation; it is not the explanation itself. A variety of worldviews that may have concerned the modern Himalayan region and South Asia coexisted in China throughout history (Mosca 2013).

Long, complicated "transformatory processes" (Juneja 2011: 281) occurred between *Niboluo*-Yuan and Nepal-China that have not been properly addressed by the scholarly literature yet. The act of associating the empire with the nation state is contingent, conditional, and constructed, and the links between these processes invented. For instance, the exact name of Arniko reveals the transcultural invention. Since records about Arniko are exclusively in Chinese, the name appears in Chinese before it appears in Nepali is *Aernige* (in Cheng's epitaph) or *Anige* (in the *Annals of Yuan Dynasty*). In the early 20th century, the French Indologist Sylvain Lévi (1989) was the first Western scholar to translate the name into a European language; Lévi identified Arniko's name as *Aniko* on the basis of two Chinese texts that he obtained in Japan. Around half a century later, the well-known Nepali historian D. R. Regmi (1965), after reading European studies of the artist, introduced *Aniko* into Nepalese discourse. Twenty years later, Satay Mohan Joshi (1987), who worked with multi-lingual

resources, "Nepalified" the name as Arniko. The narratives in modern Nepal and China prune and flatten the complex, transcultural trajectories of Arniko into the so-called state-sanctioned dominant narrative and major trajectory—Arniko is an iconic cultural envoy between Nepal and China and represents their longstanding friendship—and most people are familiar with this narrative.

However, if one were to step out of the framework and look at it from a distance and wholly as a cultural product, they would discover that the master discourse itself is not stable and static but constructed through and circulated among various networked trajectories woven by actors with different agendas. European Orientalists, folklorists, historians of Nepal and China, and both state governments helped to entrench the framework gradually early in the 20th century and especially since the 1950s. Each group composed a myth, "a type of speech" (Barthes 1972: 107). These myths appear similar, even identical, but each is unique, because it "dips into it and brings out a unique crystallization, a new text with a unique texture and a fresh context" (Ramanujan 1991: 158). The circulationary trajectories of the myths of Arniko are neither linear nor continual: the modern intellectual history of Arniko did not evolve linearly as a cumulation of knowledge over generations but in a spiral, repetitive fashion, because the intellectuals who contributed to the Arniko myth were spatially and temporally scattered, had different agendas, and were mobilized by different institutes.

Two trajectories developed, therefore. One, the historical, focuses on his trans-Himalayan journeys, his role in the development of the so-called Nepali artistic style, and his mobility within the court of the Yuan Empire during the 13th century—before the modern states of Nepal and China came into existence. The other trajectory is modern, and Arniko is not necessarily the focus. The modern trajectory not only circulates myths only among academics and at conferences —and through artifacts such as stamps, statues, and the Nepal Arniko Society—but also through the naming of infrastructure projects: the Arniko Friendship Highway is an important motorable highway between Nepal and China.

Rather than attempt to establish which trajectory of Arniko is more authentic and accurate, our inquiry focuses on how these two trajectories intersect within the In-Between space (Lopes 2007) or the contact zone (Pratt 1991). As we will demonstrate later, the process of Arniko's emergence—involving the recovery of historically overlooked local materials and their organization within nontraditional frameworks—is an instance of the phenomenon of asymmetrical globalization that, facilitated by colonial powers, flows from Western metropolitan "centers" to the receptive "peripheries" in East and South Asia.

Nevertheless, Arniko journeyed to the Yuan Empire, not to the modern nation state of China. Arniko's journey as an artist, and the textual documentation on and contemporary myths about him, traverse boundaries and borders—including those of modern nation states—and his trajectories comprise "multiple networks interconnected through a multitude of contact hubs situated across various temporal and spatial dimensions" (Ouyang 2021: 63). The act of pruning this "chaotic" coexistence of multiple geographic information, informed by regional languages, into a definitive "scientific framework" that is based on European languages and norms represents an expression of colonial knowledge production that often endeavors to impose order and control over diverse local viewpoints and interpretations.

To challenge the essentialist notions of Arniko and problematize national and cultural identities associated with coloniality, this article emphasizes a "transculturally nuanced view of a contact perspective" (Viehbeck 2017: 13). "Transculturality" refers to the transformative process that occurs through prolonged contacts and relationships between cultures (Juneja and Kravagna 2013: 24) and defies

the cosmopolitan and diffusionist paradigms of cultural encounters, because these cultural encounters are framed largely by modern concepts wherein cultures are "constituted in the form of islands or spheres" (Welsch 1999: 194) and involve "social homogenization, ethnic consolidation, and intercultural delimitation" (Welsch 1999: 198). Such a contact perspective reveals not only the multiple ways of belonging, heterogeneity of meanings, and histories of difference that the dominant modern narratives obscure but also the asymmetries and power dynamics that shape the process, with particular attention to the roles of concrete agents.

In this article we ask how the Arniko myths helped different actors fulfill their agendas and how these nuanced agendas have affected their construction of Arniko. In particular, we examine the invention and circulation of three myths from the 1940s to the 1980s. We analyze and deconstruct the modern myths and narratives about Arniko and mobilize them to contextualize their own historical processes. We also introduce methodology from art history to analyze art that is attributed to Arniko to provide an alternative transcultural method for "reconstructing" Arniko. We deconstruct narratives about Arniko and reconstruct several of his trajectories—the paths, passages, and highways through which regional and global human and non-human transactions occurred.

To what extent are these trajectories transcultural? How are pre-modern transcultural trajectories converted to "the confines of monologically defined language, nation, genre, and historical period" (Ouyang 2021: 64)? To what extent do the homogenously defined master narratives of Arniko fail? How can we reconfigure Arniko's myth? In answering these questions, we argue that the modern myths about Arniko are constructed, maintained, and performed as cultural territorialization processes of control over disputed geography and ethnic-cultural identities. We explore how, with decolonial sensitivities, we can reconceive relations between Nepal and China.

(De)colonization and Nationalization: Arniko Myths in the 20th Century

In the 1930s, several modern Chinese intellectuals researched the English-language material on Nepal (Lei 1930, Gesangzeren 1931, Li 1934). Their work was motivated by dual-consciousness nationalist agendas mixed with a sense of humiliation and desire for progress. The scholars' attitudes to the collapse of the traditional Nepal-China tributary relationship were complicated, and they admired Nepal, regarding it as an independent nation that shared an equal position with European countries. By learning from Nepal's model, they tried to understand how China might attain independence and modernity. Some Chinese intellectuals regarded the Rana prime ministers as brilliant leaders who curbed British dominance and maintained Nepal's independence.

The modern Chinese scholarly work published in the 1940s explored anti-colonial and anti-imperial methodologies and produced local histories of other Asian neighbors. Part of the work was *A New Account of Nepal*,[4] an exploration of Nepal's history, geography, cities, nations, religions, and development. The last chapter analyses the prospect of relations between Nepal under the Rana administration and the Republic of China and proposes Arniko as an ideal template for the exchanges of the two countries in history. That is the first time Arniko appears in a modern Chinese academic publication—as far as we are aware.

Arniko's appearance in *New Account*, and other instances of idealized exchanges of cultures, imply that Zhang's attempt at decolonization was linguistically informed by local languages and epistemologically mediated by local histories. Trained as a geologist, Zhang published many articles in Chinese that introduced the general conditions of Nepal and other Asian countries to the Chinese public (Zhang 1943; 1944a; 1944b; 1944c; 1946; 1947). Although Zhang was sympathetic to the European discourse on nationalism, development,

and modernity, his work on Nepal asks his Chinese readers to understand Nepal from its own perspective and knowledge rather than from Europe's. In *New Account*, Zhang quotes the entire entry on Arniko from the entry in the *Annals of Yuan Dynasty* and comments that Arniko's leading a group of craftsmen to Tibet was unprecedented (1947: 81); Zhang does not comprehensively analyze the myths of Arniko or cross-examine historical material.

Zhang contributes to the Arniko myth and adds new meaning to existing records; he produces a local narrative between Nepal and China. By introducing Arniko and several other monks and diplomatic envoys, Zhang paves the way for his conclusion that China should establish diplomatic relationships with Nepal as soon as possible to help those who are vulnerable and in danger (*ji ruo fu qing*), accept that all nations are equal (*min zu ping deng*), and provide mutual economic benefits (*jing ji hu li*).

> [Establishing formal relations] will not only be a fortunate development for our two great Chinese and Nepali nations, but also a blessing for the entire Asian continent (Zhang 1947: 90).

Zhang's endeavor to "discover" Arniko as a symbol of reciprocal cultural communication embodies his persistent agenda of establishing a New Asia (Zhang 1944c). The agenda builds on the European concept of nations and focuses on reviving intricate, historical trans-Asian relations. Zhang's endeavor reflects a historical era in which local intellectuals sought to create imagined links and a roadmap of ideal exchanges that would affect businesses to empower and legitimate cooperation between modern Nepal and China.

Zhang was a member of the New Asia Academy, which advocated New Asianism. The Academy, appealing to traditional Asian morality and virtues, aimed to unite Asian nations, restore these nations' standing internationally, and uphold justice in oppressed nations (Ma 1930). Conceiving of Arniko as a cultural envoy was a minor attempt by Chinese scholars to resist European colonial and Japanese imperial expansion. These scholars could employ "Asia as method" and "transform the existing knowledge structure and at the same time … transform different Asian societies themselves" (Chen 2010: 212).

Zhang's ideological explorations involving Nepal and other Asian countries suggest that he viewed nations as fundamental units and actors within a broader, inter-Asian framework of cooperation. By envisioning historical cultural connections, scholars could concurrently imagine modern Asian nations characterized by traceable histories, distinct ethnic groups, homogeneous languages, internal coherence, and well-defined borders. These meticulously delineated nations could be functionally interconnected, as they would serve as stable units.

For Zhang and like-minded scholars, employing the borders of modern Asian nation states to delimit historical trajectories that transcended cultural context boundaries was a progressive approach because it advanced their goals for independent Asian nations. Their progressive methods relied on a structural, binary distinction that regarded old regional traditions governing state relations as obsolete and inapplicable. But the ideological experimentation of Nepal-China relations, which separated the modern Chinese state from its imperial past, did not receive support from state governments. Officials in the Republic of China still contemplated the restoration of the suzerainty-vassal relationship with Nepal and the Rana administration—while striving to maintain equilibrium between the North and South, favored non-relations.

The Kingdom of Nepal and the People's Republic of China (PRC) established an official diplomatic relationship in 1955. Around ten years after *New Account* was published, Zhang's model of Nepal-China exchanges received attention and support from the state. For the first time, the governments began systematizing and reconceptualizing their common history to both enhance their connection and to clarify and secure

their own standing as newly established states. Given the asymmetry in geopolitical power relations, and the variety of their needs, more concrete, imminent, and urgent nuances were added to the agenda of uniting Asian states once they had established diplomatic relationships.

Not only did the kings of Nepal negotiate strategically with India and China—and so avoided being assimilated into either nation—they also tried to create a unique national identity that served as a cultural endorsement for their political agendas (for example, to sustain royal power by maintaining independence). For China, a stable reciprocal relationship with its southern neighbor was vital for securing stability in the Tibetan borderlands, especially when its relationship with India deteriorated after 1962. These various needs led the Arniko myths onto different trajectories and enabled governments to deliver, negotiate, and reconfirm their agendas. In return, the myths about Arniko acquired nuanced variations.

As the governments of Nepal and China began diplomatic relations, a group of PRC scholars were diverted from their areas of expertise and tasked to study Nepal and write about the friendly relations between the countries during the pre-modern and colonial eras. The works portray recurring exchanges in art, music, religion, and agricultural produce throughout history (Huang 1955; 1961; 1962, Yin 1956, Chen 1961); Zhang's *New Account* is largely ignored, and cited only once (Chen 1961). The motifs were dusted off from primary historical records in China, including official and unofficial historical material, and based on unscholarly ideas exchanged by political delegations. A member of the Nepali cultural delegation mentioned that the litchi fruit in Nepal was imported from China because the Nepali word is a loanword from Chinese. This statement has been repeatedly cited as evidence of a range of exchange activities throughout history (Yin 1956, Huang 1962). Chinese scholars studied loanwords that span diverse linguistic families to focus on "historical word routes" and reveal "a multistage, multiregional transfer … that served as a testament to their ancient … friendship" (Chin 2021: 21) to construct a narrative of trans-Asian and Asian-African camaraderie, contesting the European discourse that portrayed global contact as a modern and Western phenomenon. These academic works depict the friendship as enduring and rooted in people-to-people connections and assert that only foreign invaders, imperialists, and feudal rulers have disrupted this rapport since the 19th century.

The narrative of friendship supersedes other forms of interaction. The transfer of Gorkha music to the Qing Chinese court is legitimized as a people-to-people cultural exchange (Yin 1956), overlooking Nepal's asymmetrical tributary relationship with Qing China, formally established after two wars in the late 18th century. These selective narratives diminish imperial China's hegemonic power and acknowledge Nepal's cultural contributions, and they distance both countries from their asymmetric positions in the imperial past, to construct an imagined trans-Himalayan solidarity. The *fan ni dao* (Tibet-Nepal Passage) supposedly connected Lhasa to the Kathmandu Valley but, rather than being a concrete route that can be clearly indicated on maps, it is an ideological route: shaped and sustained by frequent exchanges of monks, diplomatic envoys, princesses, and artists, it has only a few geographic spots. It was invented to embody the traditional, friendly links between Nepal and China (Huang 1962).

Early scholarly works do not substantiate Arniko's relationship with the White Stupa in Beijing (Huang 1955, Yin 1956, Chen 1961). Hansheng Chen (1961) agrees with Regmi that stupa-style architecture entered China through Tibet before Arniko's period. But Huang (1962) argues that Western scholars were ignorant of Chinese records, their examination of the stupas was superficial, and that their position reflects their bias and errors. Chinese scholars used local material to wrest control of the Arniko narrative and myths and embed these into a grand narrative of friendship to confront

and correct Western knowledge production and "mistakes", produce alternative knowledge, and create the "historical truth" that has rarely been critiqued since.

Given their positionality, the Chinese scholars' rendering of the Arniko myths focuses unequally on his career in China and so renders Nepal almost invisible in the China-Nepal discourse. The absence of information on Arniko's career prior to his time in China seems to legitimate this "invisibilization". By inventing a shared history, the scholars opened up possibilities for modern nation states to acquire territorialization power in history, as they were tasked. By acknowledging Arniko as a Nepali artist, scholars from both states can establish the existence of a stable Nepali nation from at least the Late Imperial times and assert a world history in which cultural communications link modern Nepal and China to their contemporary temporal and spatial locations.

Scholars from Arniko's hometown were not entirely satisfied with such trajectories, however. They required a more substantial connection between Nepal and him before they could accept the state's mobilization of Arniko as part of its cultural politics. Satya Mohan Joshi[5] was a member of Nepal's Buddhist delegation to Beijing in 1959. Some Chinese officers introduced Arniko to him for the first time (Joshi 1987). Joshi played a significant role in venerating Arniko as a national Nepali hero, but his initial motivation for researching Arniko was not primarily nationalist. The monarch dissolved the democratic government of Nepal in 1960 and assumed control of the state (Mishra 1982, Baral 2012). Joshi resigned from his position and spent five years in China as a political exile teaching the Nepali language in Beijing. With assistance from his Chinese students and friends, Joshi gathered substantial material related to Arniko and conducted ethnographic and archaeological research concerning Arniko's artistic contributions and published *The Well-known Nepalese Architect Arniko* in 1987. In contrast to articles about Arniko written by Chinese scholars, Joshi's work and other works on the subject emphasize Arniko's identity as a Nepali artist to whom Chinese artists owe a debt (Bhandari 2017).

Joshi's effort to establish Arniko as one of Nepal's *rastriya bibhuti* (national heroes) was intertwined with the state's Panchayat nationalism, which aimed to construct and sustain a homogenous Nepali nation on the ideological basis of one monarchy, one language, and one religion (Weinberg 2013, Pradhan 2018) or through modern concepts such as development (Hachhethu 2003). Part of the grand project aimed for a *rastriya ithihas* (national history) that could unite people who had different cultural and linguistic practices under a uniform Nepali identity (Onta 1996). Following Onta, we suggest that rather than being a rigorous academic work that carefully establishes Arniko's identity on the basis of original material or a coherent methodology, Joshi's work functions as a political and diplomatic playground for cultivating Arniko as a *rastriya bibhuti*.

The Wellknown Nepalese Architect Arniko opens with portraits of Nepal's king and China's president. Excerpts of political speeches that legitimate the state's perspective of Arniko's historical, cultural, and political significance follow. The following page presents portraits of Nepal's national heroes, including one of young Arniko, in a *topi* and *daura-suruwal*. The imagined figure of Arniko as a young man is doubtless based on records that indicate he was seventeen when he traveled to Tibet. It suggests that the young, authentic Arniko belongs to Nepal; he is in a *topi* and *daura-suruwal*, the clothing of the *Bahuns* and *Chhetris* of the middle hills, because the Panchayat-period national policy maintained that was the Nepali dress (Gellner and Karki 2007); whereas the mature Arniko is Sinicized. Interestingly, in the last chapter of his book, Joshi (1987) even argues that Arniko was a Newar from a Shakya clan from the Patan region. Joshi combines limited historical material (possibly mistranslated), modern newspapers, personal observation, and imagination to return Arniko to Patan and the Kathmandu Valley. Since 1990, Joshi's

ethnic parables of Arniko have been largely accepted as historical facts and are referred to in scholarly work (Shakya 2010, von Rospatt 2004) and retranslated.

The summary highlights the portrayal of Arniko as a *rastriya bibhuti*, to which Joshi contributed. Arniko is depicted as a *bir* (brave) young Newar artist and an essential member of the Nepali people. This representation of Arniko supports the formation of the Panchayat nation state in two ways. First, it legitimizes the Panchayat nation state's claim over a variety of ethnicities under the dominant rhetoric of Nepaliness, the sole native form of culture that fundamentally supports the political entity. This culture was, in fact, selectively based on the language and customs of the hill people (Burghart 1984). By attributing ethnicity and citizenship to Arniko, the representation projects the legitimacy of the modern state and the constructed Nepaliness into an ancient past, contributing to the production of a "protonational consciousness" that can be placed in the early stages of a consistent formative process of the modern nation (Tackett 2017). The comprehensive historical details and visual representations serve to concretize and iconize specific aspects of Panchayat Nepaliness.

Joshi's work on Arniko also contributes to emphasizing its significance in a broader international context. To accomplish this, Joshi's research explores various traces of Arniko in modern China that extend beyond historical records and archaeological sites and encompass modern news articles, religious activities, exhibitions, contemporary art creations, and official statements. By showcasing images of modern Chinese Buddhists worshiping at the White Stupa, Joshi compellingly argues that Arniko's enduring impact persists in present-day China.

Moreover, Joshi's work on Arniko assists in distinguishing Nepaliness from China and in affirming its uniqueness and independence. His work disassociates Arniko from the Chinese rhetoric while retaining enough aspects of the Arniko myth to serve the interests of both nations. Nepali scholars needed to maintain a cautious distance from the Chinese records of Arniko: while they had to respond to those records, they could exercise creativity in their interpretation, visual representation, and connection to specific national and Panchayat agendas.

The circulation of these nationalistic Arniko myths helps maintain a unified yet diverse Nepali national identity and a clear boundary between India and China (Bhandari 2017). The image of a young and courageous Arniko symbolizes a youthful but mature and independent Nepali nation. This representation not only aids the Nepali state in addressing its asymmetrical economic and political relations with China but also contributes to highlighting Nepal's independence and distinct status as a peaceful nation. In a semi-fictional epic, Joshi (2008: 67) imagines Marco Polo being confused about Nepal and Arniko explaining to him that

> The great Himalayas,
>
> Resided by Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati,
>
> Lie in northern Nepal.
>
> Dense forest of Kapilvastu,
>
> Nearby Lumbini the birthplace of Lord Buddha,
>
> Lies in the southern Nepal.

Just as the Himalayas on the north and the forests on the south function as Nepal's physical boundaries, Arniko symbolizes the state's specific location in history and modernity.

Restoring Arniko to His Transcultural Contexts

Our deconstruction of the trajectories of the modern myths of Arniko points to the constructed nature of the myth and does not offer an alternative for reconstructing the subject. By deconstructing the modern myths, we are not denying Arniko's existence in history. A transcultural art

historian approach offers a paradigm "that meaningfully address issues of multiple locations, palimpsestic temporalities, and processes of transcultural configurations" (Juneja 2011: 276). Considering Arniko's border-transcending trajectories in history, a transcultural approach captures how various power nuances, intersections, and complexities sustain the trajectories. We use an art historian's approach that addresses Arniko's trajectories prior to the emergence of modern nation states. The approach also highlights the articulation of Arniko's trajectories and other related processes.

We employ two interlinked methodologies. One methodology offers a conventional reading of the preliminary historical materials about Arniko; this reading will be contextualized and contested by the other methodology, which explores various kinds of artwork attributed to Arniko, including architecture, thangka paintings, royal portraits, and sculpture. Our analysis is informed by Appadurai (1986), particularly his work on the dialectical relations between meaning and trajectory through objects. We capture and analyze Arniko's trajectories by examining his art objects.

We propose three trajectories, which intersect with a unique focus: Arniko's trajectory as a court artist in Yuan China; his trajectory as a mediator between Tibet and the Yuan Court; and the trajectory of his status in Nepali art through Tibet and China.

Art historians agree that Arniko's works mix a variety of styles and are not merely the results of being inspired by Nepali art. The stupa of the Dashengshou Wan'an Temple in Beijing—the only artwork confirmed as Arniko's creation—combines Pala, Nepali, Chinese, and Tibetan art styles. Most non-Chinese scholars who study Arniko argue that he created a Yuan imperial style that had its root in the Pala, Nepali, and Chinese traditions (Jing 1989, Watt and Hearn 2010, Shakya 2020).

Chinese art historians call the Yuan imperial style *xitan fanxiang* (Buddhist images of the west land) (Xiong 2000, Ge 2002, Xie et al. 2010). The term privileges the Han ethnic perspective, and it was introduced to characterize the development of Buddhist art during the Yuan period. Nevertheless, as the attributed founder of the Yuan imperial standard style, Arniko is more than a cultural ambassador between Nepal and China because the Yuan Empire was vast and covered a much larger area than modern China, including regions in Inner, Eastern, and South-Eastern Asia (McCausland 2014).

The position of *Zhuse Renjiang Zongguan* (Supervisor-in-Chief of Artisans of Various Ethnics) oversaw the official institute of art and crafts of the Yuan Court. In 1273, Arniko became the first to be appointed to the position (Cheng 1970, Annals of Yuan Dynasty 1976), which equaled the Gongbu (Minister of Works) in rank (Jing 1989). The Imperial Manufactories Commission (*Jiangzuo Yuan*) was founded in 1293 to oversee the court's rare and valuable art and craft. Arniko was appointed the principal, an even higher rank; again, he was the first appointee to the position. Arniko was awarded several honorary titles and eventually reached the first grade of official ranks in the Yuan Court.

Arniko's output as the principal of *Jiangzuo Yuan* covered a vast range of art styles. Only a small fraction, Buddhist art, engaged the Nepali artistic tradition. As recorded in Arniko's epitaph, his major achievements in architecture include three stupas, nine grand Buddhist temples, two (Confucian) ancestor shrines, and one Daoist temple (Cheng 1970). Moreover, Arniko oversaw non-religious art, including textiles and jewelry design, seal carving, calligraphy, and portraits. Thus, focusing only on Arniko's Nepali art would lead one to his Buddhist artwork—they would overlook other contributions that are more wide-ranging, draw on art traditions from outside Nepal, and serve the political, cultural, and ethnic interests of a vast empire.

A pair of imperial portraits of Kublai Khan and his empress Chabi are attributed to Arniko (Jing 1994). The portraits were probably painted as detailed drafts for larger, full-length formal portraits to be used

Figure 1: Portrait of Kublai Khan (*Yuandai di banshen xiang ce Yuan shizu*).

Collected by National Palace Museum, Taipei.

Picture from Digital Archive, National Palace Museum, Taipei.

Figure 2: Portrait of Empress Chabi (*Yuandai hou banshen xiang ce Yuan shizu hou*).

Collected by National Palace Museum, Taipei.

Picture from Digital Archive, National Palace Museum, Taipei

during ceremonies (Yuandai hua su ji 1964, Jing 1994). These two paintings, on the one hand, are successors of traditional Chinese imperial portraiture. On the other hand, they embrace new techniques and styles in two major ways. First, as shown in Figures 1 and 2, both members of the imperial couple appear in an almost frontal position and look directly at the audience. However, in traditional Chinese imperial portraiture, figures are depicted in three-quarter profile and the models never make eye contact with the audience. Second, in these two portraits, the facial and physical features of the figures are highlighted, whereas Chinese painters before Arniko paid more attention to the spiritual aspect of the figures so to reflect the Confucian virtues (Jing 1994). Later court painters in the Yuan, Ming (1368–1644), and Qing (1644–1901) dynasties adopted Arniko's innovations. In contrast to these two long-lasting non-Nepali innovations, the distinctive Nepali-rooted element did not survive. The highlights on Chabi's jewelry (Figure 3) reflect the Himalayan Buddhist painting tradition insofar as the same technique occurs in contemporaneous Buddhist paintings from Nepal (Jing 1989). However, this stylistic innovation was lost by the end of the Yuan Dynasty.

The Yuan rulers were Mongolian, but they valued their identity as successors to earlier Chinese rulers (Jing 1994). Following the conventions of traditional Chinese portraiture would be one method to legitimize the Yuan Dynasty within the Chinese dynastic narrative. The creation of such portraits requires a comprehensive understanding of the concepts and techniques of traditional Chinese portraiture. Arniko's contribution to Chinese royal portraiture demonstrates his transcultural background; consequently, the so-called Nepali influences are not obvious and, instead, the portraits demonstrate Arniko's mastery of the Chinese and Tibetan art traditions. The modern narrative implies that China owes a cultural debt to Arniko. The portraits do suggest that. But the portraits suggest also he owed a debt to the Chinese and Tibetan art traditions; otherwise, Arniko would not have attained

Figure 3: Amoghasiddhi, One of the Five Cosmic Buddhas. Early 13th century, Central Tibet. Colors on cloth.

Collected by Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Picture from online collection database, Philadelphia Museum of Art

such a high rank in the Yuan Court that facilitated the spread of Nepali art.

Another consequence of confining Arniko to the modern Nepal-China imaginary is that one must neglect Tibet's peculiar position in mediating Arniko's transcultural trajectories. The Yuan imperial style attributed to Arniko is *xitian fanxiang*, but the location of *xitian* (the west land) is disputed. As with the ambiguity of Nepal's geography in Late Imperial China, *xitian* is an ambiguous and shifting geographic and cultural concept. "The west land" corresponds to modern South Asia in many cases, but it could also refer to Tibet rather than to India or Nepal (Xie et al. 2010). This ambiguity suggests that Arniko's contemporaries, and later generations, might have understood him and his artworks through Tibetan mediation practices.

During his decade in Tibet, Arniko became a disciple of Phagpa[6] and received training in Tibetan Buddhism and its arts (Xie et al. 2010), most likely under the guidance of Tibetan masters. When Arniko visited Beijing for the first time, he repaired a valuable ancient statue that other court artists believed could not be repaired, according to Cheng's epigraph. Arniko seems to have been transcultural, in that he had already mastered various art traditions beyond his own. His mastery of a variety of traditions might explain why he was assigned to produce Buddhist objects and establish Buddhist spaces at the Yuan Court; why he was tasked with establishing the "best and greatest government institution for the production of Tibetan Buddhist art at court", and why he continued to produce high-quality Tibetan Buddhist art to meet the demands of the Mongol authorities (Jing 2004: 226).

As an artist at the Yuan Court, Arniko acted as mediator between Tibet and the Yuan Empire. Their two trajectories intersect in the trajectory of the Nepali art tradition through which so-called Nepali art transforms and transfers across time and space; Arniko is a historical coincident in this trajectory. First, Arniko was not among those pioneers who brought Nepali art to Tibet and China: anonymous Nepali craftsmen constructed stupas in China before Arniko did, contemporary archaeological research of the remains of stupas along the Nepal-China border demonstrates (Huo 2000). Second, beginning with the Second Diffusion of Buddhism (about 1050), Tibetans rebuilt their spiritual and artistic Buddhist worldview on the basis of learnings from South Asia and Kashmir; Nepali artists were a strong presence in this movement. For instance, *Bal ris* (Tibetan for Nepali-style painting, or the School of Beri) had existed for centuries in Tibet before Arniko's time. After the Pala Empire, the last Indian Buddhist Empire, fell to Islamic Turks in 1203, Nepal became the strongest artistic influence on central Tibet (Jackson 2010). These historical trajectories connected and entwined various cultures that had been separate.

Figure 3, an example of a Nepali-style painting, depicts Amoghasiddhi, one of the five transcendent Buddhas. An enthroned Tathagata Buddha is attended by two standing Bodhisattvas and surrounded by secondary figures. The painting was produced in the early 13th century, before Arniko was active. The painting suggests the Sharri style, paintings from the East that refer to Indian-style Tibetan art (Jackson 2010); whereas the method of illustration is Nepali. The thin gold line that replaces the multicolored borders with inlaid jewels resembles the Pala style. The Garuda and serpentine creatures adorn the top of the nimbuses. The Makara's tails no longer consist of the outer head nimbus but are a part of ornament. Moreover, the arches behind the major deity, which are covered with fantastic animals, are depicted in a Nepali style and not how they would be depicted in an Indian temple. This example illustrates how the early Nepali style was developed in Tibet by integrating Pala elements and it refutes the concept of a pure, spontaneous, and self-generating Nepali art; instead, it suggests a hybrid style that emerged from border-crossing movements. The Nepali style is fluid and ever-changing in that it is in constant

Figure 4: Green Tara. c. 1260s, Central Tibet. Gum tempera, ink, and gold on sized cotton.

Collected by the Cleveland Museum of Art.

Picture from collection online, the Cleveland Museum of Art

Figure 5: Mahakala in form of Gur-gyi mGon-po. Dated 1292. Limestone, partially polychrome and gilded.

Collected by Musée Guimet.

Picture from the website of Musée Guimet

negotiation with other styles from India, central Asia, China, and Tibet.

From a theoretical perspective, Arniko could not have brought Nepali art to China. From a methodological one, a specific history of Nepali art interacted with other cultural flows through Arniko and resulted in alterations to other trajectories. The concrete embodiment of these alterations is how consistently the features of Arniko's paintings and sculpture change during his lifetime. Consider the thangka of Green Tara, attributed to Arniko (Figure 4). Similar to other early 13th century paintings, the thangka contains some distinctive Pala elements: the temple in the background is consistent with how other Pala paintings demonstrate Indian palatial architecture, and it incorporates the blue and red alternating lines in the details of the roof decoration. But the painting as a whole strongly represents the Nepali style. Figure 3 displays elements from both the Pala and Nepal traditions, but Figure 4 displays a dominantly Nepali style that contains a few Pala influences and indigenous Tibetan elements, such as the small Tibetan figure under the right palm of the Tara. Such transformations, as some art historians (Kossak 2010) argue, were most likely influenced by the Sakya patronage of Arniko.

At the Yuan Court, the influence of the mix of Pala, Tibet, and Nepali art traditions on Arniko was replaced by a new "Nepali" style influenced by Chinese and Central Asian art. A sculpture of Mahakala produced by a Tibetan artist who probably worked in Arniko's workshop is closely related to the miraculous Mahakala that Arniko crafted (Figure 5) (Stoddard 1985). Mahakala's jewelry is in the Chinese style. Some other obvious changes in style, compared to the Green Tara thangka, are in the curving foliate armlet inlayed with gems that becomes a figurate beading of bosses; the Tara also wears shin guards that cover the lower part of his legs (Kossak 2010).

The Yuan imperial style should not be ascribed solely to Arniko, therefore; instead, the style should be viewed as a convergence of artistic trajectories – spanning time, space, and an extended historical period – at a specific juncture. And regardless of their close association with Arniko, the trajectories of the Yuan imperial style were no longer under his sole influence; as numerous artists disseminated them across the Yuan Empire, the trajectories were transformed. Soon after Arniko's death in 1306, by order of the Yuan Emperor, his workshop renovated the Shalu Monastery in Tibet (Vitali 1990), where some murals are preserved. Their style resembles that of Arniko's Green Tara, but some nuances include Central Asian and Chinese elements in costumes, decorations, architecture, and landscapes (Figure 6).

Figure 6: A scene of murals in circumambulatory surrounding the assembly hall of Shalu Monastery.

Photo collected by Uranchimeg Tsultem Photographic Archive.

Picture from Himalayan Art Resources (Item no. 37424)

Between 1282 and 1292, before the Shalu Monastery was renovated, statues were being sculpted in the Southern Song capital, Hangzhou (in modern South Eastern China), in the theme and iconography of Tibetan Buddhism, and some in the style of jewel decorations attributed to Arniko. Compared to contemporary work from other areas, however, they are very Sinicized. The slender, curved body shapes of the Nepali style disappear gradually and are replaced by the plump, straight bodies of the Han style (Figure 7), the facial features and expressions of wrathful deities also became peaceful and resemble the Han Buddhist style, and the clothing of some deities has features of the Chinese robe (Xiong 2000).

The Sinicization suggests that political radiation at scale shapes and sustains art styles, and it complicates the narrow myth-making of Arniko' style. Arniko's style traveled from north to south: from the political epicenter of the Yuan Empire to its political and cultural peripheries. The art style had to be localized to serve its political agendas efficiently, and it is precisely during this process that the Han developed the concept of *xitian fan xiang* to describe Mongolian Tibetan art rather than Nepali art. This narrative differs dramatically from modern narratives.

Figure 7: Usnisavijaya and attendants. Sculptures of Feilaifeng Peak, Hangzhou, China. Carved 1282-1292, Yuan Dynasty.

Photo by Tianyi Chen

Conclusion

The cultural formations of modern Asian states cannot be fully understood without considering the context of colonial expansion (Dirlik 2002). In the case of the myths surrounding Arniko—one of the most influential cultural figures in the discourse of Nepal-China relations—coloniality is evident in postcolonial nations' adoption of colonial academic constructs for local knowledge. Such adoption is widespread and naturalized. Coloniality is evident in the attempts of postcolonial nations to create an "authentic" national culture and on their heavy reliance on nuanced colonial concepts of a single race, nation, history, and culture (Fanon 1963) because they fear that premodern transcultural trajectories may destabilize the foundational concepts of modern nations (Tackett 2017). The cultural histories of the Arniko myths epitomize the global entanglement of the (de)colonial and nationalist motivations, agendas, and tangible actions of a variety of actors.

European Indologists, Sinologists, historians, archaeologists, and philologists played the dominant role in uncovering these long-buried historical records of Arniko and in reevaluating their significance through Western academic language. The colonial knowledge of Nepal was overwhelmingly influential, rapidly supplanting local traditional knowledge as it represented a new, Western-dominated international order. For example, Chinese intellectuals such as Qiu Tong (1911) published articles claiming that the adoption of the Western translation of Nepal's name represented an epistemological shift in the understanding of not only the traditional relationship between Nepal and China but also of China's position in the emerging world order. The local intellectual elite, particularly those who received a systematic Western education, were instrumental in adhering to European theories and methodologies in producing the modern knowledge of Nepal and South Asia (Zhang 1930 (2018), Feng 1932).

While acknowledging the pervasive influence of colonial power, we recognize that the colonizer-colonized perspective can oversimplify complex interactions, because specific agents' relationships with colonial asymmetries differ. A variety of agents engaged with, negotiated, and rejected a certain colonial knowledge of Arniko to construct modern Asian nation states and foster solidarity as decolonial strategies. Particularly in the postcolonial era, under the direct or indirect support of both Nepali and Chinese states, numerous research projects utilized Arniko as a symbolic representation of shared history, retroactively applying the concepts of modern nation states to historical contexts and employing contemporary languages, races, state borders, and national cultures to accommodate and restrict alternative histories. This erasure of historical ambiguity driven by the modern state has "partition[ed] … the past into distinct nations, races, language families, and grammars" (Chin 2021: 21), creating connections that link seemingly separate and static entities. The extent to which these decolonial strategies are effective, and whether individuals from former colonies can genuinely liberate themselves from the colonial burden, remain subjects of ongoing debate.

By reflecting on the trajectories of Arniko myths, their conflicts, and negotiations between them, we show that the disjunctive flows of people, ideas, art, objects, religion, and politics have influenced contemporary Nepal, China, and their interactive zones; these processes can never reach completion. No matter how hard the modern states of Nepal and China try to construct an immutable history that explains "enduring and rather particular patterns of state-society interaction" (Lally 2021: 1048), the regional histories of Nepal and China suggest otherwise. Our article represents our efforts to construct a contemporary Arniko myth, one that urges us to shift our attention from trait geographies to process geographies (Appadurai 2000) to offer an alternative understanding of Nepal-China relations that is not isolated from accelerated globalization and nuanced regional dynamics.

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This article owes much to many people. An earlier version of this article was presented at the 19th Nepal Study Days and we are grateful for the insightful feedback and constructive criticism received from the participants, which significantly contributed to the refinement of this work. We would like to express our sincere appreciation to the editors of HIMALAYA for their meticulous review and constructive feedback. We would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their time and constructive comments, which helped to enhance the quality and clarity of this article. Any errors or omissions in this work are solely our own.

Endnotes

1. Celebrated traveller, painter, architect, and sculptor.

2. The modern Nepali painter is famous for rendering historical imagination in his work.

3. Although the original inscription has long been lost, a copy was recorded in Cheng's personal articles, *xue lou ji* (Cheng 1970).

4. Zhang Xilin published *A New Account of Nepal* (*Niboer xin zhi*; *New Account henceforth)* in 1947 with the New Asia Academy (*Xin Yaxiya*), an organisation established in 1931 to revive Asian nations.

5. Joshi, the most renowned Arniko scholar in Nepal, is celebrated for his contribution to re-rooting Arniko to his alleged home country and taking back knowledge production about Arniko from Chinese scholars.

6. As recorded in the *Annals of Yuan Dynasty*, Phagpa was the imperial preceptor of the Yuan empire and the personal guru of Kublai Khan. Phagpa and the Khan cultivated reciprocal relations: Kublai Khan would have power over secular issues, and Phagpa would serve as the supreme power in religious affairs. As the emperor, Kublai Khan relied on Phagpa's identity as the leader of Sakya sect of Buddhism to be the legal *Cakravartin* (universal ruler) to unite the vast empire, given that Phagpa and his Sakya sect was an important source of the Yuan emperors' legitimacy (Jing 2004). As a result, the Mongols patronized Tibetan Buddhism devotedly and it became their second largest expenditure after military spending.

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