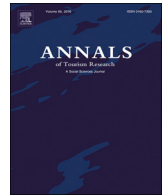


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Tourism and the geopolitics of Buddhist heritage in Nepal

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the intricacies of geopolitical imagination at a heritage attraction in Nepal, when a Chinese NGO proposed an investment project to develop it as tourism hub. It seeks to investigate the discourses and reasons deployed by Nepali tourism stakeholders in explaining the Chinese plan. The study applies qualitative methodology and the primary data which were collected through 20 semi-structured interviews. The study shows that in articulating the project aim, the agency of national actors is shaped by the regional power struggle and a ‘nationalist’ sentiment originated from perceived threat to the heritage in question. The finding is useful in understanding the complexities of geopolitical constraints that can influence tourism development projects.

Introduction

There is a strong connection between tourism, heritage and geopolitics. Tourism is a strong medium to understand the world around us and through the combined logics of institutions, discourses and practices tourism “helps to illustrate how the ‘geo’ is ‘graphed’ in tourism by place and space making processes” (Mostafanezhad, 2018, p. 343). Whereas geopolitics is associated with “a discourse that describes, explains and promotes particular ways of seeing territorial powers” and how they are formed and experienced (Kearns, 2003, p. 174), heritage is an important resource in the formation of geopolitical imaginations and is often used for making cultural references, for example, “in the definition of the values, signs, supports and markers of identity” (Lanfant, 1995, p. 8). In such cases, the nuances of international engagement in heritage tourism settings can provide a useful insight to the interchange between tourism and geopolitics.

Some scholars take the view that “tourism is part and parcel of state geopolitical programs” (Rowen, 2016, p. 392), because both tourism and geopolitics have a philosophical commonality, and an epistemic link in that both are associated with international exchange and the outcome of its repercussions. For example, geopolitics is concerned with the way we view the world; how the global landscape is structured into various nation states and is informed by various agendas and discourses that are represented in media (Dodds, 2005; Kraxberger & Paul, 2013; Toal, 2000). West (2006) believes that the focus of contemporary geopolitics is on the dynamics of “power to” produce things, induce pleasure, form knowledge or produce discourse. In the same way, tourism plays a role in the evolution of the viewing of a nation or producing a distinctive narrative of it (Hughes, 1992). Such viewing can happen through the reading of the cultural icons and images of the nation presented to visitors, which is why “political geographers have long noted how both political and spatial realities are created vis-à-vis the social imagination of place” (Ashworth, 1994 cited by Mostafanezhad & Norum, 2016, p. 227). In such a scenario, tourism as a geopolitical entity can act as a platform for the intersection of the above reading, and provide a means through which people define who they are in both historical and political senses.

However, first I must outline the background for this study. In 2011, a Chinese non-governmental organisation named the Asia

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Pacific Economic Cooperation and Exchange Foundation (APECEF) came up with a proposal to invest three billion US\$ in Lumbini, the birthplace of Gautama Buddha, aimed at making it a tourism hub and a “Mecca for Buddhists” (Economist, 2011). The tourism development plan included building an airport, hotels, convention centres, a highway, Buddhist temples and a Buddhist university in Lumbini and was backed by Nepal’s Maoist Communist Party, though the party has no relationship with the Chinese Communist Party. The proposal received wide condemnation in the international media, especially the Indian media that labelled it a Chinese design to hijack Buddha, the “fountain of Buddhism”. It drew considerable public interest among tourism and other stakeholders in Nepal and was seen as an encroachment on its national identity and that the proposal superseded long-standing cooperation with the UN agency, UNESCO, to implement the already existing Lumbini Master Plan. Though the Nepali government tried to revive the project, owing to the huge controversy and opposition to the project in the media, the project was shelved for good.

This study looks into the above case through a geopolitical angle because there is a view that India and China are in competition with each other across Asia (Reeves, 2012; Scott, 2008; Fuller & Arguilla, 1996; Manson, 2010; Upadhya, 2016). Situated in-between the two giant countries, Nepal assumes an importance in the geo-political theory, in particular since China’s direct hold on Tibet since 1950. China has built up its military presence in Tibet and permanent long-distance highways and railway lines have been built, which is an indication of China’s anxiety about Tibet (Scott, 2008). Tourism scholars have appreciated a need for studies of the “Chinese Dream”, amongst others, through the perspective of geopolitics because, firstly, tourism can function both as manifestation and facilitator of the Dream, and secondly, because China projects itself as a responsible Great Power through the modification of external perception and behaviour (Weaver et al., 2015). The ‘Chinese Dream’ refers to the social and political ideology proposed by Chinese President Xi Jinping, which entails aspirations like attaining well-being and happiness to achieving respected Great Power status, social unity and national success. Additionally, according to Hall (2017a) geopolitics is important in tourism because; i) tourism is implicitly geopolitical activity; and, ii) on many occasions tourism is subject to the outcomes of geopolitical activity. In such a situation a geopolitical approach to tourism allows us to better “understand world politics in terms of the ways in which elites and publics actively construct the spaces of political action that are then the medium for the policies of states and other actors” (Agnew, 2010 cited in Hannam, 2013, p. 184). This study engages with the above conversations.

The aim of this paper is to explicate the discourses used by tourism stakeholders in analysing the externally funded tourism development project at a World Heritage site. The paper argues that the geopolitical imagination of the heritage can encourage the articulation that can stimulate complexities underpinned by a mix of factors including geopolitics and nationalism. The main proposition is that the Chinese project has significantly established the perception that Indian and Chinese rivalry has come to Lumbini over the claim relating to Buddhism, transforming the heritage attraction from being merely an object of tourist consumption to one that can be associated with an ideology or philosophical meaning. Additionally, this study also argues that Lumbini has huge geopolitical significance for Nepal, as Buddha’s dominance extends beyond Buddhism in Nepal and he is an important icon of Nepali national identity. The project became perceived as a site for regional geopolitical contest and an attempt to encroach upon Nepali nationalism, demonstrating that tourism at times can act as a non-state actor in geopolitics.

Geopolitics and tourism

In the contemporary usage, geopolitics is equivalent to political geography and refers to a real variation in political phenomena at all scales (Agnew & Corbridge, 2003; Boedeltje, 2011; Corbridge & Agnew, 1991). This orientation of geopolitics is strongly associated with the field of international relations and political economy (Gritsch, 2005). Political economists “take account of the complex and variable economic, political, social, technological and cultural forces which shape the organisation and dynamics of domestic and international economies” (Gilpin, 2001: 40 cited in Bianchi, 2017, p. 2). This approach has a huge relevance within the domain of geopolitics because it includes “the value, importance, and effect” of the “political and economic programs of states or international institutions” on the geopolitical representations (West, 2006, p. 283).

Tourism scholars have put great emphasis on the political economy of tourism and focused their attention on the socio-economic forces that are constituted in the process of the production of commodities and the divisions, conflicts and inequalities that arise from this (Airey & Chong, 2010; Nunkoo & Smith, 2013; Chheang, 2008; Altinay & Bowen, 2006; Wan, 2013; Bianchi, 2017). These studies have stressed the role of governance and are centred on changes in the roles and capacities of government and what drives the changing roles and strategies of government, including in the wider institutional and political setting (Zhang, Chong, & Ap, 1999; Timothy & Nyaupane, 2009; Chambers & Airey, 2001; Cantalops, 2004; Bramwell, 2006; Dredge & Jenkins, 2013; Dredge & Jamal, 2015). There are also studies on the engagement of international agencies in the development of tourism that have drawn interest from scholars of political economy and other perspectives both in Nepal and elsewhere (see Bhandari, 2018; Bhattarai, Conway, & Shrestha, 2005; Lacher & Nepal, 2010; Nyaupane, Timothy, & Poudel, 2015; Nyaupane, 2009).

The above studies have shown the distancing of government from direct policy interventions and that the role of the state in recent years has a diminishing capacity to directly lead in public policies (Wan & Bramwell, 2015): as such, governance and community have remained their main focus. Scholars have also noted that from a political perspective, the political economic structures and the political ideology in the destination state plays a part in defining the nature of state involvement in tourism (Sharpley & Knight, 2009; Elliott, 1997; Chambers & Airey, 2001; Bramwell & Meyer, 2007; Krutwayshe & Bramwell, 2010; Hazbun, 2004). However, it has been critically accepted that the political economy approach puts too much emphasis on market and inequalities, is based on an unrealistic and incomplete view of political dynamics (Lacher & Nepal, 2010) and does not consider the role of international powers and politics.

Given that the political-economic relationship between nation states and of one nation with the wider international community can represent a great stimulus on tourism development, studies that look into this from a geopolitical perspective are very limited.

This is remarkable because almost three decades ago Richter (1989) made a very useful note on the role of tourism in international relations as a means of initiating or enlarging the scope of international cooperation. Her contention was that in the international arena, where most relations between nations have a political component, it would be naïve to assume that tourism development would not have strong political implications. Despite such appreciation of tourism's significance in international engagement, the existing studies on tourism in the international sphere relate to offering expertise in the design and development of specific tourism projects (Telfer & Sharpley, 2008; Hawkins & Mann, 2007), and the role of geopolitical factors in the shaping of these projects has traditionally been absent (Seyfi, Hall, & Kuhzady, 2018; Timothy, Guia, & Berthet, 2014). Considering that the contemporary world is becoming more globalised and interconnected, geographical forces play a significant part in shaping debates surrounding the interface between tourism and international relations (Hall, 2017b). According to Hall (2017b), in such cases the application of a geopolitical lens contributes in two ways: i) it sheds light on tourism's interface with political geography and international relations, and ii) it provides insights to the interactions between political imaginary, territoriality and tourism. Both of them are largely left out in tourism scholarship.

Geopolitics is also about the modes of knowledge, of ways of representing the world that have political consequences (Dodds, Kuus, & Sharp, 2013; O'Tuathail & Dalby, 1998). Commenting on the interface between geopolitics and environmental tension, Dalby (2013) suggests that discourse plays a huge role in creating our popular imagination about nature: our interpretation of the typical invocation of nature is largely shaped by how the world is made known to us. This can also be strongly related to China's pursuance of soft power (Hollinshead & Hou, 2012), which is defined as the capacity of populations and governments to achieve what they want to attain through influence and understanding rather than through the hard power techniques of coercion (Nye, 2004). In this case, narratives at heritage or tourism attractions can be a useful medium to represent a 'national' discourse, and this is an area that can provide useful insights to understanding tourism and its role in international relations.

Lately, tourism scholars have started to engage with geopolitical discourse and practice in tourism (Hall, 2017c; Dowler, 2013; Saarinen, Rogerson, & Hall, 2017; Hannam, 2013; Hazbun, 2004; Mostafanezhad, 2018; Ojeda, 2013; Rowen, 2016; Weaver, 2010; Weaver et al., 2017; Bianchi, 2006). According to Hall (2017b), some of the key themes under which the existing studies could be organised are: i) identity in relation to tourism and geopolitics (Saldanha, 2002; Zhang, 2013; Attanapola & Lund, 2013; Ojeda, 2013); ii) geopolitics and hospitality (Dowler, 2013; Fregonese & Ramadan, 2015; Craggs, 2014); iii) geopolitics in events (Puijk, 1999; Silk, 2002; Giulianotti, 2015; Traganou, 2010). However, there are some studies that have looked into broader aspects of the interface between tourism and geopolitics. For example, Rowen (2016, p. 385) studies the geopolitics of China, Hong Kong and Taiwan to explore the mutual constitution of tourists and the nation-state and argues that tourism is affecting the "spatial, social, political and economic order throughout the wider region", reconfiguring popular political discourse and geopolitical imaginations. Similarly, Weaver et al. (2017) report that there was a strong emotional reaction and elevated patriotism along with a worsened attitude towards Japan in a Japanese-era dark tourism site that projects hegemonic anti-Japanese social representations. Most other studies have examined "the manifold relationships between tourism, power and space, and a few have explicitly addressed the powerful connections between geopolitics" (Mostafanezhad & Norum, 2016, p. 226) and the shaping of tourism development projects.

Thus, a geopolitical perspective in tourism can provide important insights "on these interrelated practices by enabling nuanced studies of how, for instance, issues of territoriality, representation and power over destinations become critical sites of struggle for economic and political sovereignty" (Mostafanezhad & Norum, 2016, p. 227). Such an approach becomes interesting especially in the context of understanding Chinese goals where "authorities have used tourism as a tool of foreign policy and a tactic of territorial projects" (Rowen, 2016, p. 392). For example, scholars have suggested that "tourism is being used to project Chinese state authority over Taiwan and consolidate control over Tibet and Xinjiang; it has also triggered popular protest in Hong Kong (including the pro-democracy Umbrella Movement and its aftermath)" (Rowen, 2016, p. 387). In such cases "tourism can help re-conceptualise geopolitics as a discursive practice that represents international politics as a social landscape comprised of heterogeneous constellations of people and places" (Mostafanezhad & Norum, 2016, p. 226), which is why scholars have taken the view that tourism cannot be divorced from state-scale geopolitics and there is a greater need for future research to pay closer attention to its unpredictable political instrumentalities and chaotic effects (Rowen, 2016).

The geopolitics of heritage

It is well appreciated that the concept of heritage is a cultural practice that involves both construction and regulation of meaning and understandings (Smith, 2006). Nation states have deployed heritage to project a desired narrative of a nation and the values it represents, sometimes through manipulation or coercion, and at other times through genuine efforts of heritage conservation (Zhang, 2017; Timothy & Nyaupane, 2009; Conway, 2014; Weaver, 2011; Tucker & Carnegie, 2014; Goulding & Domic, 2009; Nuryanti, 1996; Chhabra, Healy, & Sills, 2003). Thus, the construction of heritage is not determined by resource endowment alone, but is largely subject to interpretation which is processed through mythology, ideology, nationalism, local pride and other factors (Schouten, 1995). As a result, heritage often becomes an emblem of its national culture, fraught with contestation and conflict when different groups compete in the production of heritage narratives (McDowell, 2008; Constantinou, Demetriou, & Hatay, 2012; Naef & Ploner, 2016).

This gives power to heritage, as it can embody a discourse, "a specific ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categorisations that are produced, reproduced, and transformed" (Hajer, 1996, p. 44). The discourse produced by heritage not only reflects social meanings, relations and entities, but it can also constitute and govern them (Foucault, 1991), and the power relations underlying the discourse identify those who have the authority to "speak" about or "for heritage" and those who do not (Smith, 2006). For the above reason,

heritage assumes considerable importance as a social construct (Hall & Jenkins, 1995), and the designation of UNESCO World Heritage Site status can speed up the process by creating institutions and aiding the development of heritage protection (Conway, 2014; Brumann, 2014; Meskell, Liuzza, Bertacchini, & Saccone, 2015). Though this can enhance the use-value of heritage, such attempts downplay and depoliticise local heritage practices, silencing the dialogic nature of its universalism and rootedness and endorsing the singularity of the concept of universal value (Tucker & Carnegie, 2014).

Additionally, the inscription of heritage sites on the World Heritage List elevates them to the status of global icon and national treasure (Smith, 2002, 2006) which can have political or ideological significance (Wangkeo, 2003; Maurel, 2017; Bianchi & Boniface, 2002). This enhances their symbolic value (Smith, 2002, p. 142) and heritage sites become icons of history and culture whose importance transcends their current political status. The iconic stature of heritage is often exploited by tourism where heritage is mobilised as a political tool to represent the desired ideology of the country in the various world regions (Timothy & Nyaupane, 2009). Robinson and Smith (2006) provide an analysis that global structural realities are very much framed by the idea of the nation state and have their roots in recent modern political geographies and nation-building (Dijkink, 1996). They argue that each nation promotes heritage tourism as an actual and potential source of external revenue, a marker of political status drawing upon cultural capital as a means to legitimise itself as a territorial entity (Robinson & Smith, 2006). In this way, heritage symbolises nationalism and there are numerous examples that show the symbiotic relationship between heritage and nationalism (Aitchison, 1999; Bhandari, 2014; Graham, Ashworth, & Tunbridge, 2000).

Interestingly, the premise of Nepali nationalism is strongly founded on the consciousness of its geopolitical position. The reason for the above is because Nepali “national identification is not formed independently but it is strongly informed by the nation’s interaction with and perception of the external “Other”, mainly India and to a lesser extent, China (see Bhandari, 2016, p. 417). Because of this, considerable reference is made to external elements in the articulation of Nepali national identity. Gellner (2016) agrees to a similar notion of Nepal being an “interface” between two major cultural areas to north and south, referring to China and India. This brings in the strong presence of a geo-political ingredient in the expression of Nepali nationalism. Since geopolitics is concerned with how contingencies of various geopolitical actors and processes shape the dynamics of interstate relations, it is imperative to consider this in the case discussed here.

The historical context of Nepal’s geopolitics with China and India

Gellner (2016) suggests that no reasonable assessment of Nepal is possible without an understanding of Nepal’s history of interaction with India and China and particularly its geographic situation. Nepal is a country strategically located, sharing a border of 1236 km with China in the North and 1690 km with India in East, West and South. Historically, the relationship between Nepal and Tibet is centuries old, though the bilateral relation between Nepal and China has been defined by a treaty since 1960. Nepal’s engagement with China is constrained by the Himalayas in the north; however, because of the Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1950, Nepal’s strategic significance lies in its close proximity to that country and as a result Nepal constitutes a vital part of the inner security ring of China (Dabhade & Pant, 2004). There is a large number of Tibetan refugees living in Nepal and securing Nepal’s active cooperation in preventing Nepal being used for anti-China activities is one of China’s prime strategic interests in Nepal.

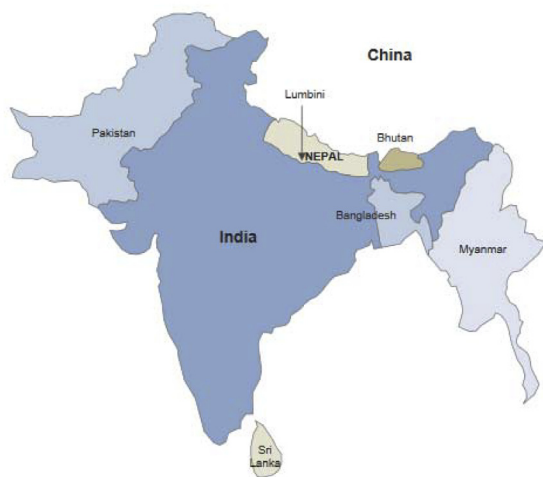
On the other hand, Nepal’s interaction with India has been more vibrant because of common religious and cultural ties, age-long friendship, and open border between the two countries. Most of Nepal’s trade and transit happens via India, and because of this Nepal is highly dependent on India for its daily supplies. For India, Nepal remains a strategic land between it and China, as well as some of its own states in the north east region of India (Dabhade & Pant, 2004). However, Nepal’s relation with India is fraught with challenges. For example, there is a widespread belief in Nepal that India interferes in Nepal’s politics and some instances of the past have contributed to this perception. For example, India imposed a trade sanction in 1989 when it was unhappy with Nepal over the procurement of military supplies from China (Garver, 1991). In 2015, India imposed an ‘unofficial’ blockade objecting to Nepal’s new constitution, leading to acute shortages of fuel and medicine (BBC, 2015).

There is a great significance of the issues of sovereignty and influence over the bordering regions to both China and India and as a result China-India bilateral relations strongly inform Nepal’s relations with the two countries. One of the constant sources of conflict between the two countries is the presence of the Dalai Lama and his government-in exile in Dharamsala, India (Manson, 2010). China’s concern is that activities in Dharamsala are ‘aimed at splitting Chinese territory’ (The Economist, 2008). Because of Nepal’s geographical and strategic position, China has speeded up its influence in Nepal by maneuvering the control of the future course of its history through various initiatives, and the project discussed in this paper was considered one of them. There are other instances: for example, recently Nepal was made part of One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative. The OBOR is a proposal by Chinese President Xi Jinping to create a trade and infrastructure network connecting Asia with Europe and Africa along ancient trade routes (Jessop & Sum, 2018). Similarly, China has increased its Foreign Direct Investment commitments to Nepal in recent years (NRB, 2018), and has been projecting itself as a benevolent power as against the patronising attitude of India towards Nepal.

Study region

Lumbini is the birthplace of Gautama Buddha. The place was very much unknown until the late nineteenth century (Bidari, 2004), when in 1896, a group of archaeologists rediscovered it. The site was not properly looked after until the United Nations General Secretary visited it in 1967. In 1972, a Japanese architect Kenzo Tange was hired by the UNDP to prepare a master plan for the development and preservation of the site. With global interest and the importance of Lumbini, the UNESCO World Heritage Commission named Lumbini a World Heritage Site in 1997. The Nepal Tourism Board, the national body for tourism promotion, has been

promoting tourism in Lumbini rigorously in all international travel trade shows like any other mass tourism destination. This is somehow contradictory, because such promotional endeavours are focussed on development and commercialisation, while UNESCO avoids over-development based on the master plan (Nyaupane, 2009). Nepal received 7,50,000 international visitors in 2016 of which Lumbini received 1,36,000 excluding Indian tourists (MoCTCA, 2016). More than 1,34,000 Indian tourists visited Lumbini that year.



Map: Location of Lumbini.

Lately, China has assumed a greater role in Nepali tourism. The percentage of Chinese visitors has grown from 5.4 per cent in 2007 to 13.81 percent (1,04,005 visitors) of the total arrivals in 2016 (MoCTCA, 2016), making China the second biggest tourism market for Nepal. There is a geopolitical explanation for the growth of the Chinese market. According to Rowen (2014, p. 388), “China’s construction and deployment of Approved Destination Status (ADS) is another example of tourism’s political instrumentality”. Since 1995, the Chinese outbound market “has been regulated by a system that confers ADS on countries that have signed bilateral agreements with China. ADS allows outbound group tourists to apply for visas through travel agencies, saving them a trip to the consulate” (Rowen, 2016, p. 388). Nepal has witnessed constant growth in the number of Chinese tourist arrivals after it was given Approved Destination Status (ADS) in 2002.

Methodology

This exploratory research draws on the researcher’s five visits to Nepal after the start of the Lumbini controversy in 2011. Exploratory research is useful when there is little or no scientific knowledge about the research area or group, as such studies can help determine the nature of the problem and provide a better understanding of it (Stebbins, 2001). No academic study has yet looked into the engagement of China in Lumbini. This study takes the social constructivist approach which views knowledge as a collaborative intersubjective construction and is appropriated by individuals from the socially organised practices of the group in which they participate (Cobb, 1994). Thus, the study applied a qualitative methodology and primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 20 participants, 13 male and 7 female, who met one of the following three selection criteria: i) academics; journalists and commentators who engaged with the conflict by contributing to the media on the issue; ii) professionals from Nepali tourism and heritage management; iii) policy makers from the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Civil Aviation and the Tourism and External Affairs Ministry (see Table 1).

The interview respondents were purposefully chosen because they were “information rich” actors on account of their positions, involvement in key policy processes, and reputations as influential and “informed” insiders (see Bramwell & Meyer, 2007). These individuals were identified from the researcher’s own long engagement with Nepal, reports in the media and other documents, and from snowball suggestions made by respondents who were contacted during the early stages of the study. The interviews were carried out in various time periods between 2011 and 2017, and lasted between 30 and 60 min. Respondents were first contacted via email and interview venues, date and time were set. All interviews were conducted face-to-face and revolved around their views on the project and Chinese motives and the project’s implications for tourism in Nepal and Lumbini heritage. Since the aim of qualitative research is to gather an “authentic” understanding of people’s perspectives (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), in order to ensure data authenticity, interviewees were encouraged to speak their mind with minimum interruption or prompts from the interviewer, so that their views were not interrupted or influenced by the researcher. Similarly, all transcribed interview texts were conducted in Nepali, and were translated and transcribed by the researcher and sent back to the interviewees for verification. Some researchers advocate analysing texts without transcribing them as this allows researchers to focus on the bigger picture and not get bogged down in the details of what people have said (Gibbs, 2007). However, this was not considered because the sample size was manageable and it was

Table 1
List of people interviewed.

Sn	Participant Designation	Gender	Code
1	Journalist	M	R1
2	Lumbini Development Trust	M	R2
3	Tourism Industry Professional	M	R3
4	Heritage Expert	M	R4
5	Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation	M	R5
6	Ministry of Foreign Affairs	F	R6
7	Media Commentator/Columnist	F	R7
8	Heritage Professional/Archaeologist	F	R8
9	Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation	M	R9
10	Tourism Entrepreneur	M	R10
11	Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation	F	R11
12	Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation	F	R12
13	Journalist	M	R13
14	Journalist	M	R14
15	Nepal Tourism Board staff	M	R15
16	Heritage Expert	F	R16
17	Lumbini Development Trust	M	R17
18	Nepal Tourism Board	F	R18
19	Media Commentator	M	R19
20	Ministry of Foreign Affairs	M	R20

felt small details could provide a useful insight into the study.

According to Karnieli-Miller, Strier, and Pessach (2009), the hierarchical relations of power between researchers and participants play a huge part in qualitative inquiry, in which the researcher's personality, worldview, ethnic and social background, and perceptions derived from the researcher's professional discipline can be important. This researcher took various measures to minimise power relations. All respondents were chosen based on their expertise and experience in Nepal, and a full self-disclosure was made so that participants were not swayed by the researcher's professional background. All interviews were held in the Nepali language so that there was a sense of equality between the researcher and the participants. Interviewees were given the choice of interview venue, for example, whether they preferred their own office or somewhere outside such as cafes or a restaurant. According to Elwood and Martin (2000), participants who are given a choice about where they will be interviewed may feel more empowered in their interaction with the researcher. In instances where participants were reluctant to suggest a place, interviews were done in a café nearby or place of work so that the interview place was not unfamiliar to them. The interviewees were also given a chance to contribute anything that was not covered in the interview at the end.

Data analysis was conducted in a multistage process. First, inductive thematic analysis was applied to develop initial codes and themes from the analysis from interview data. The development of themes and thematic categories is a helpful way to extract meaning from the data (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). This was done using conceptual analysis, by establishing the existence and frequency of concepts in the text (Flick, 2014). The emergent themes that were identified in this stage were shown to the respondents for cross-checking to see if there were any additional explanations of their interview text (Barbour, 2001). However, the researcher was also aware that the selection of data and the identification of theme in qualitative research are subjective and can be contested. Thus, prior to the interviews the researcher extensively looked into the both national and international online media reports on the conflict, so that important issues raised in these reports could be covered during the interviews; one of the most important issues identified during this phase was the geopolitical significance of Buddhism in Lumbini. At this stage particular attention was given to identifying semantic and latent meaning in the data. Analysis was focused on latent meaning, to find out underlying ideas and assumptions prevalent in the interview narratives. Additionally, secondary data in the form of previous studies, reports and archival records were widely consulted throughout the research process. Each emergent theme was organised into and presented under three sub-sections in the Findings section of the paper.

Findings

India – China geopolitical rivalry and the contest for Buddhism

The perceived India-China competition in the region remained the main narrative in the conflict. For instance, an influential Nepali journalist who closely watched the Lumbini “controversy” took the view that the project was trapped in the India-China rivalry, and accused China of instigating a geopolitical race in Nepal. He commented (R1),

The Chinese Government is deeply involved with this proposal. The project document mentions the Chinese Ministry of Commerce as the government coordinating agency. We all know that Lumbini is less than 4 km from the Indian border, the project is likely to draw a reaction from India and that it could trigger a geopolitical competition in the region.

Another respondent (R4) presented a similar conclusion. He stated,

China's geo-strategic interest in Nepal is not unfounded and from the Chinese perspective Tibet has been an instrument through which major external protagonists have sought to pursue their wider objectives...that there has been increased presence of pro-Tibet activists in Lumbini in the last couple of years, most of them funded by the USA and other European countries.

Some respondents took the view that the conflict is over the ownership of Buddhism and its philosophy. They believed that Lumbini's importance in the Buddhist world is very great. According to a participant (R10),

For Tibet, this is even more important because Buddhism forms the core of its culture and tourism and the issue of Tibet goes beyond the freedom of a land, the liberation of a culture, and a celebration of a way of life.

Another respondent (R16) expressed a similar view and commented,

It is very much usual that China's involvement in a tourism project close to the border with India can cause discomfort in New Delhi. We know that the Indian government believes itself as a patron of the Buddhist world because it has been hosting the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government in exile since they 1950s.

The above statements are important because geopolitics involves "framework": the work of creating frames for interpreting events and making them meaningful (Chattopadhyay, 2013). The use of the term "the Buddhist world" by one of the participants is a good example of creating such a framework. Geopolitical writers openly display national partisanship (Dodds, 2005) and their analysis of global geopolitics is thus approached from a very nationalistic point of view in that they rarely embrace cross-cultural or cross-regional understanding or perspectives (Hepple, 1986). This is why all forms of geopolitical writing and interpretation are invested with values, conceits and prejudices. According to Dodds (2005), claims to one particular way of knowing have been exposed as either misrepresentation or as excluding a variety of histories, places and contemporary experiences. However, the above commentaries show that Nepali respondents' views on the geopolitics of Chinese involvement conforms to the above. This is in agreement with the opinion that geopolitics provides a way of seeing the world through geographical factors (Agnew, 2002; Berger, 2006).

A respondent (R12) opined that "India's concerns for an international presence in Lumbini have not been visible on those projects identified by the original Masterplan". However, the semiotics of Lumbini as apostle of Buddhism makes it a centre of geopolitics, because according to the theorists of critical geopolitics, many states focus their attention on geopolitics to use it as power to form knowledge and construct a discourse (West, 2006). Most respondents took the view that Indian concern on this occasion has been that China should not get involved in Nepal because it is India's sphere of influence. Additionally, India does not want to lose Lumbini to China because Buddhism forms an important part of Indian diplomacy with Southeast Asian countries. For example, a respondent associated with Nepal's foreign ministry stated,

Although Buddha was born in Nepal, it was in India that all the other important milestones in his life... also that from India Buddhism spread to other parts of South, South-East and East Asia. Buddhism forms an important constituent of India's soft power diplomacy in Asia and would definitely want to be a part of any project in Lumbini. (R20)

The above view is clearly relevant because despite Nepal's assertions that Lumbini is the birthplace of Buddha, India sees itself as the "homeland of Buddhism" (Singh, 2010, p. 194) or a global torchbearer for Buddhism, which is not groundless because three out of four places which a pious Buddhist should visit are in India (Hall, 2006). Additionally, Indian geopolitical interest in Buddhism also emanates from an understanding that the persecution and exile of Tibetan Buddhism have contributed towards revitalising Buddhism in India (Singh, 2010) and it sees the internationalisation of Tibetan Buddhism as an opportunity that could benefit it in two ways: i) promoting "spiritual tourism" in an increasingly globalised world; ii) improving bilateral ties and pan-Buddhist sentiment. For example, India has been mobilising the regional forums where it has a dominating influence such as South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation and Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation. Similarly, India has been collaborating with the World Bank Group through the International Finance Corporation (IFC) to develop the Buddhist Circuit by attracting higher-spending tourists and linking them to local goods and service providers.

An important element in the geopolitical argument is the timing of the project and the association of Maoist Chairman Prachanda with the APECEF's apex body. The Lumbini proposal came to media attention after the government, led by the Maoist party, was ousted by the Nepali Congress (NC) with support from India and the Maoists declared they would fight against Indian interference in Nepali politics. However, the inter-party feud between the NC and the Maoists was not visible when, after the APECEF-led project had failed, the second Maoist government of Nepal formulated another Committee on Lumbini in 2012 chaired by former Maoist Prime Minister Prachanda with the aim of getting the United Nation's Secretary General's backing for the project. The committee had support from the NC party and was represented by a senior politician.

There is a monastic zone in Lumbini where different countries have built their monasteries, with the exception of India. The absence of India's monastery raises a doubt about Indian support for Lumbini. However, according to a respondent (R17), the reason India does not have an 'official' monastery is because the Government of Nepal did not propose to India that it have one, as India does not recognise itself as a Buddhist state, though there is a monastery managed by the Mahabodhi Society of India. According to the respondent, the absence of an Indian monastery should not be read as India's challenge to the legitimacy of Lumbini because Indian support for Lumbini has been witnessed in various other forums, for example, India was instrumental in establishing the International Committee for the Development of Lumbini in the United Nations. He also added that Nepal's application for the inscription of Lumbini as a World Heritage property was strongly supported by India.

Similarly, the geopolitical explanation for this conflict can be challenged on three grounds. First, it is founded on the argument that the Chinese project is a bogus plan to enter 'the region' because there is no place for religion in China. Even Indian commentators

refute such allegations and agree that China is keen to project a Buddhist-friendly image of itself not only in Tibet but also in other Asian countries (Ramachandran, 2011). Ramachandran (2011) reports that China has renovated scores of Buddhist shrines destroyed during the Cultural Revolution and is involved in the revival of the Nalanda project in India. Second, the geopolitical explanation presumes that China and India's increasing international clout could contribute to regional conflict. Scholars believe that this is an overestimate (Malone & Mukherjee, 2010). Analysts have characterised China's new diplomacy as 'less confrontational, more sophisticated, more confident, and, at times, more constructive' in its approach to regional and international affairs than it has been in the past (Medeiros & Fravel, 2003). There are numerous global forums like Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) where India and China are working together. Third, treating the Lumbini conflict only as geopolitics undermines the other social and philosophical factors that have a role in the project but are not necessarily associated with inter-state competition between India and China. The above limitations of a geopolitical approach take us to another important dimension of the conflict: the role of Nepali nationalism.

Lumbini and the geopolitics of Nepali nationalism

The assertion of Buddhist cultural heritage appeared strongly in the interview narratives. Despite being one-fifth of the total population, Buddhists do not enjoy equal status and power in social and political spheres in Nepal. According to Tewari (1983), since the 13th century Buddhism has been waning and losing its vigour because of the ascendancy of Hinduism. Tewari considers that the process of its decline started during the medieval period, but accelerated after the advent of the Shah dynasty in the latter half of the 18th century. Though Shah rulers followed a policy of accommodation and tolerance towards Buddhism to some extent, this policy received a setback with the rise of the Ranas in the mid-19th century, who relentlessly pursued a policy of vigorous Hinduisation. It was only after the end of the Rana regime in 1951, followed by the establishment of democracy in Nepal, that a policy of liberalisation was instituted by the state and a more favourable atmosphere was created for Buddhists.

Until the early 1990s Lumbini never received much attention from the Nepali state for various reasons. According to a participant (R16),

Nepal took pride in being the only Hindu kingdom in the world and all state machineries were mobilised to maintain this status. Other religions that did not comply with the larger national narrative of Hinduism either became part of it or were never included in the Nepali national imagery. Though it was not constitutionally defined as such, Buddhism was viewed as part of Hinduism.

Lumbini had another geopolitical issue. It is located in the southern plains, the region close to India. According to the Nepali 'nationalist' mind-set, the entire southern plain looked more akin to India, which has remained the 'Other' in Nepali nationalist discourse (Gauge, 1975). Because of its cultural proximity to India, Lumbini never made a significant mark as a national icon until the late 1980s. Additionally, surrounded by a Muslim majority population (Nyaupane, 2009), the heritage landscape of Lumbini did not go well with the earlier identity of Nepal as a Hindu country, as there is greater social distance between people's religious faith and their relationship with the cultural heritage site (Nyaupane, Timothy, & Poudel, 2015). However, in 1990 the Nepali national character changed after it adopted parliamentary democracy and after the designation of WHS status, the visibility of Lumbini increased to such an extent that Nepal's national iconography is incomplete without the Buddha and Lumbini. Dijkink (2006) states that the main issue in critical geopolitics is the construction of 'self' versus "the other". India's quest with its Buddhist heritage in recent years has aroused much disapproval in Nepal since Nepalis have always believed that Buddhism belongs to Nepal more than to India. According to a respondent (R7),

...(S)ome states (read India) seem to misinform people that Buddha was born in India. This is threatening and marginalising Nepal's Buddhist heritage and we should refute such claims and shout aloud that he was born in Nepal through all avenues at our disposal including tourism.

The above information was confirmed by a respondent who was affiliated with the Nepali government. According to him (R9),

India is developing its own 'fake' Lumbini on the Indian side and pushing Lumbini as an alternative to Indian plans to revive its ancient Nalanda civilisation. The Government of Nepal's decision to celebrate 2012 as Visit Lumbini Year 2012 was a nationalist response to India's Buddhism plans and was aimed at promoting Lumbini to the international community and inviting national and international tourists.

In his analysis of geopolitics, Hazbun (2004) argues that globalisation does not necessarily result in erosion of territoriality, but it can lead to the reclaiming of power and regulatory influence of state and societal control. He takes the view that the above process, which he calls "reterritorialization", can happen through various mediums including cross-border tourism that can generate its own domestic political and cultural tensions. According to Hazbun, tourism development characterised by the reterritorialisation process is more vulnerable to such tensions because they can over-write carefully crafted place-myths with images of insecurity, creating a geography of territorial fear made worse by increasing political tensions between the regions involved. The case of Lumbini is an example of this situation because lately the Nepali government has been more vocal in claiming Buddha for Nepal. For example, since 2012, the Nepali Tourist Board has been aggressively representing Lumbini in travel trade shows. When the researcher visited the Nepal stand in the World Travel Mart in London in 2012, "Lumbini is the Birthplace of Lord Buddha" was its central theme. A member of the Nepal delegation at WTM confirmed that the reference to Lumbini in the stand was to protect Lumbini from India's 'offensive'. The following view from him also confirms the geopolitical role of tourism. He stated (R15),

Indian media is definitely misleading people by saying India is the land of Buddha, that could be read as if he was born in India. We share the same culture and tradition and because of this we always get overshadowed by India, and Indian media tries to take our historical identity. In such a scenario, it is incumbent upon us as a national tourism promotion agency to fight this geopolitical inaccuracy...I have also heard that the project is China's way of having a forward-looking strategy to deal with a post-Dalai Lama.

Some respondents took the view that India was using the pretext of China to oppose the Lumbini project to advance its own alternative plan to revive the ancient Nalanda civilisation and establish Bodhi Gaya as a Buddhist hub. In 2010, the Indian Parliament passed the Nalanda University Act which is conceptualised as an international university involving 16 Southeast Asian countries. As India is aware of the existence of Lumbini University in Nepal that has a similar aim to that of Nalanda, the respondents recognised that India does not want the Lumbini project to go ahead as the two projects are major competitors fighting for the same donors and future funding.

An important but less vocal voice in the conversation was the positive opinion about the project. Some participants indicated that it would not be prudent to invalidate the claim that the project could be a genuine attempt to develop Lumbini as a heritage tourism hub. A government respondent (R9) said,

from whatever I have heard and read the project components are in line with the master plan except for the world's tallest Buddha statue proposed inside the 4 km of the heritage site.

This respondent felt that Nepal could benefit from the project. An official (R2) at the Lumbini Development Trust also viewed that overall there is nothing wrong with the project, though he has some doubts about whether the APECEF is a bogus organisation, as it has been six years since the APECEF first showed interest in Lumbini but has done nothing concrete for its development. Both of the above respondents believed that the project succumbed not because of its insincere motives but due to propagandist media and extremely bad public relations handling by the government authorities and the project promoters.

Discussions and conclusion

This study has discussed the vulnerabilities of tourism emanating from the geopolitically informed articulation of heritage complexities. The study has shown how a proposed tourism project founded on heritage attraction can at once be a part of global and local geopolitical competitions and reflect a political discourse appraised by geopolitical systems. It has also identified that Buddha's global significance has assumed a special place in Nepal's national imagery and this has played a role in the articulation of the tourism project in Lumbini. Participants considered the geopolitics of the tourism project as a threat to Nepal's claim over Buddha and an attempt to encroach upon Nepali nationalism, which preceded the debate over the project's merits. The case discussed here shows how the development of tourism at times can become contingent upon geopolitical sensitivities, especially in a context where there is an increasing political contest between regions sharing a common heritage.

The study also shows the complexities of "universal heritage": on one hand the idea of world heritage is a key arena for contemporary world-making and the production of "globality" as "a consciousness of the world as a single place" (Robertson, 1992, p. 132). The idea of world heritage rests on the assumption that the world's most prized natural and cultural sites belong to all of us, ensuring shared responsibility for their care. On the other hand, the case of Lumbini shows that many important monuments and sites constitute repositories of national and regional memories, and their incorporation onto the World Heritage List accentuates tensions around universal values of cosmopolitanism, discourses of citizenship, patterns of exclusion and the symbolic meanings attached to these sites. It can be construed that heritage is concerned with the ways in which very selective material artefacts, mythologies, memories and traditions become resources for the present (Graham et al., 2000), drawing international interest, and varies from being just an object of tourist consumption to one that can be associated with an ideology or philosophical meaning.

This study provides some practical insights to the tourism and heritage industry by highlighting how imperative it is for tourism development agencies and stakeholders to carefully attune the narratives emanating from tourism attractions that are founded on heritage, so that conflicts can be minimised. For example, in reviewing the failure of a Chinese development project in Myanmar, Kiik (2016) identifies that the project's failure did not originate from inter-state geopolitics but was the casualty of under-management of social and ethno-political factors in that country by the Chinese authorities. The study contends that Chinese developers were only informed by China's domestic politics and state heuristics, and was not able to comprehend other externalities when facing a foreign social world (Kiik, 2016). The Lumbini case points to a similar conclusion. It suggests that the project's failure did not necessarily culminate from inter-state geopolitics alone but was also the outcome of the 'nationalist' sentiment associated with Lumbini.

The paper makes useful contributions to the literature by furthering the understanding of the role of geopolitical realities in the expression of tourism and heritage and vice versa (also see Koch, 2015). This study appreciates that both tourism and heritage landscapes are spaces where trans-local and transregional social realities merge, are rearticulated (Tolipov, 2001), and are mediated by the political processes of representation laden with a particular ideology that could constitute and reflect international political discourse. The complexities of the above process can mean that the site of universal heritage is caught between the two ideals, suggesting that, notwithstanding the tag "universal", the tourism potentials of heritage can cause it to be the subject of regional power struggles. The paper also exemplifies that the geopolitically informed politics of belonging guide the agency of national actors, notwithstanding the inscription of the World Heritage status given to the site in question.

The case discussed here also indicates how tourism is related and synchronises with other different mobilities that can hinder, encourage, regulate or inform mobilities at various levels and scales (Hannam, 2017). It suggests the importance of the relationship between India and China for the growth and development of tourism in the South Asian region. As witnessed in this study, future

tourism mobilities in the region are likely to be shaped by geopolitical factors, which was also witnessed in 2017 when Indian and Chinese tourists travelling to each other's countries were interrupted by more than two-month long military standoffs at the India-China border in Doklam (Economic Times, 2017). In such a situation, it is important to note that there are heritage attractions in the geopolitically important border regions that connect Nepal, India and China. One such attraction is the pilgrimage to Mt Kailash and Mansarovar in Tibet which is of great religious significance to a large number of Hindus in India, and to which Nepal offers a more convenient travelling route. It would be interesting to study the geopolitics of pilgrimage tourism at Mt Kailash through the narratives of Indian pilgrims and local tourism stakeholders. Such studies can shed additional light on the interface between tourism and geopolitics in the border region.

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