

The Friendship Bridge on the Nepal-Tibet/China border: Liminality and the nation(s).

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Abstract

The bridge was built in the 1960s as the border point between Nepal and China. It is still the only legal point of entry between China and Nepal along the over 1,400 kilometer common border. It has been the major trade transit point for Chinese goods into Nepal and India

The bridge is liminal, marking transition in a number of ways beyond the obvious. For most of the bridge's life, the red border line across its midway point was the closest many tourists could get to Tibet, and they walked to the red line, had their photos taken "in Tibet", and "shook hands across the border". The red line is the place of a physical transition for vehicles: in Tibet vehicles keep to the right, and in Nepal to the left, and at the red line drivers have to change from right side to left and vice versa. The red halfway mark also marks a difference in time zones: in the couple of minutes it takes to walk 25 metres across the bridge you can move ahead 2 hrs and 15 minutes.

Some Nepalis have also described the bridge to me as a place to look over (a kind of crossing) to "development", as opposed to the conditions of "our Nepal," remarking on its strength compared to many Nepali bridges.

In April 2015 a succession of earthquakes shook Nepal, and the roads leading to the bridge were badly damaged. Since then the bridge has been closed, suspended with an uncertain future, a ghost of the bridge it was, now linking two ghost towns. This paper is a biography of a 50 year old bridge, telling of the ways it figured in the history of a nation and in the imagination of nations.