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# THE LIVES OF THE TIBETO-NEPALESE CARPET

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## *Abstract*

The popularity of the Tibeto-Nepalese carpet in the European hand-knotted carpet market created a modern industry in peri-urban Kathmandu, Nepal, that established the Tibetan refugee population there as well as a new class of Nepalese entrepreneur. This paper employs Igor Kopytoff's (1986) perspective on the social life of things and Keith Hart's (1982) definition of commoditization to argue that the short career of the Tibeto-Nepalese carpet as an export commodity has been one of increasing homogenization that has transformed the materials, weaving techniques, and meanings of the carpet. Easy access to the lucrative 'middle' markets of Europe has meant that Tibeto-Nepalese carpets are now standardized to compete with other categories of floor coverings, and that the unique hand-knotted quality desired by connoisseurs and collectors is slowly being eliminated.

*Key Words* ◆ commoditization ◆ Nepal ◆ Tibetan carpets

On the main road that leads out of Kathmandu, Nepal, to the sprawling peri-urban carpet weaving centre of Boudha, there are a few small carpet shops that sell carpets to tourists and locals. The carpets sold in these shops are not for export, nor are they considered export quality, and have virtually no place in the massive volume of carpets that are annually exported to Germany and the United States. Nevertheless, these carpets are closer to a traditional Tibetan carpet than those lavishly spread out on Western hardwood floors. Here small carpets with medallion, thunderbolt and dragon designs are found woven to traditional sizes; some shops specialize in coloured saddle carpets specifically designed to fit the wooden saddles of China and Tibet. While some market for these

carpets as useful objects exists, as saddles used on ponies in the highlands and mountains, they have a limited use-value in modern Kathmandu, except perhaps as a tourist curiosity.

Others of these carpets are found in Nepalese and Tibetan homes as floor and seating carpets, as those of export quality are too expensive for most people in Kathmandu and are in any case usually exported. In many Tibetan or Nepalese homes the carpet is spread out as a symbol of prosperity and hospitality now as it has been traditionally. The contemporary prosperity of Boudha is now amply displayed in the profusion of expensive shops, supermarkets and in the Japanese four-wheel drive autos plying the pot-holed roads. This new affluence has been earned from the international popularity of a Tibetan carpet that is genealogically far removed from the Indian carpets of these shops. The export quality carpet is now the true Tibeto-Nepalese carpet, a category that is critical to distinguishing a style that competes in an international field of Oriental carpets.

In what ways is this contemporary Tibetan carpet related to its ancestor, and why is such a relationship so frequently invoked by carpet dealers and buyers as a criterion of authenticity? What makes a Tibetan carpet Tibetan? While this question is central to a relatively small number of historians and collectors of Tibetan carpets, for most consumers the identity of the commodity is a criterion of lesser importance than the desirability of price and fashion. Just as the saddle carpet was used by Tibetan nomadic peoples and other forms of carpets by settled Tibetans unconcerned with the Tibetan-ness of the product, today Tibetan carpets lie on European floors for reasons that have less to do with authenticity than the qualities of colour, durability, and design flair. Yet the genealogy of the Tibetan carpet remains an organizing principle around which the whole vast Tibeto-Nepalese carpet industry is woven, from the handful of carpet shops to the large networks of exporters and subcontractors that produce tens of thousands of square metres of carpets monthly.

While a nomad from the Tibetan plateau would find the Tibeto-Nepalese carpet a meaningless jumble of dull colours, a Tibetan carpet weaver would probably recognize that some familiar materials and processes went into its making. In this paper I will detail the material transformations of the Tibeto-Nepalese carpet through its career to its current importance. This career, or 'cultural biography', I take as being one of partial homogenization, of moving from a once unique and singular production towards one that shares qualities with many other like commodities (Kopytoff, 1986). The nature of the carpet as a handcrafted production, however, prevents total homogeneity from ever being completed, and elements of traditional processes continue to define the authenticity and distinctiveness of the Tibeto-Nepalese carpet.

## CARPETS AND THE TIBETAN TRADITION

Carpets in pre-revolutionary Tibet were generally not things made for sale to outsiders, although there were some earlier but poorly documented attempts to reach an outside market. They were largely unknown to the growing trade in Oriental carpets that began during the Industrial Revolution in Europe (Lorentz, 1972). Carpets in Tibet were made to be used, and things made only for use have been analytically distinguished from those things made for exchange, as exchange is thought to set into motion a process of commoditization that eventually culminates in the homogenization of all things under the money form (Hart, 1982; Appadurai, 1986). Too often an ideological rift between use-value and exchange-value has been overstated, and where traditional things are transformed into things for sale, the origins of the latter in the former are forgotten or thought lost to advancing modernity. Although the hand-knotted Tibetan carpet is now produced predominantly for exchange, and in quantities far greater than traditional Tibetan production ever approached, in each carpet a singular quality distinguishes it from all other like things and makes it desirable. The choice between carpets is a choice between commodities that the anthropologist Mary Douglas believes is a critical cultural function in consumer society, 'a choice between two different views of the human condition and between metaphysical judgements lying just beneath the surface of the question' (Douglas and Isherwood, 1979: 74). The practice of choosing between things is, according to this view, an act of classifying reality, and defining a meaningful world.

According to H.A. Lorentz, for whom the Tibetan carpet was 'Chinese, but with a difference', carpets were used in pre-revolutionary Tibetan homes as seating, or as saddle padding. Many traditional Tibetan carpets were to be found in monasteries, where long, multicoloured knotted carpets served as seats for lamas or adorned chapel walls and pillar posts (1972: 160). Philip Denwood's survey of traditional Tibetan carpets disputes Lorentz's claim that Tibetan carpets are basically Chinese, but agrees that they were used for seating, unlike the carpets of Central Asia, which were predominantly floor coverings (1974: 9). Denwood also concludes that the Tibetan carpet tradition, unlike that of China and other Asian carpet weaving traditions, was an art that 'reached down to . . . a popular level' (1974: 94).

H. A. Lorentz distinguishes three main types of Tibetan carpet, based on the regions of their origin, as well as material and design differences. The first is the Central Tibetan style or Gyantse style, so named for the town from where an early attempt was made to export carpets to markets in India. This early attempt to begin an export market for Tibetan carpets played no role in the development of the modern Tibeto-Nepalese industry, and Lorentz adds that it 'had an extremely

deleterious effect on the craft as a whole' (Lorentz, 1972: 156). Secondly, carpets came from the Chinese border regions, and shared design and structural features with Chinese carpets. Thirdly were the '*gya-rum*' carpets of Chinese origin that were found in the houses of wealthy Tibetans (1972: 160). Denwood classifies the Gyantse type as the true Tibetan type, as the method of weaving was (and remains) distinct from the Chinese, despite obvious parallels in design motives (1974).

Ugen Gombo (1985: 96) states that carpet weaving in pre-revolutionary Tibet remained a household-based industry, even though many of the historical carpets that remain today were woven in artisan workshops sponsored by Tibetan nobility and monastic elites (Myers, 1984: 30). The hand-knotted Tibetan carpet was a prestigious and beautiful thing that was spread out for sittings of a specific kind – as seats for Buddhist lamas who sat in meditation, and for people and their guests to engage in important social events. In the lives of many Tibetans occasions arose in which the hand-knotted carpet was called for, but as their brightly coloured wool and finely knotted designs suggest, these were distinctive occasions. According to Denwood a variant of a looped carpet ('*kha-g'dan*') was made for most everyday uses, such as for setting on beds as a bed cover. These carpets were simpler in design and execution, and are woven on domestic horizontal or back strap looms, unlike the hand-knotted variety, which were woven on vertical looms. Denwood noted that these looped carpets are less sophisticated, and tended to be inferior copies of hand-knotted carpets ('*rum-g'dan*') (Denwood, 1974: 60). It is these distinctive '*rum-g'dan*' which are the basis for the contemporary folk art, and not the looped carpets woven on smaller, household looms.<sup>1</sup>

The Tibetan '*g'dan*' was a cultural category that included various distinctions of things, from grass cushions to ornate handwoven temple carpets. Women in individual households did weave, but to a great extent what they produced was influenced by artisans who wove for social institutions beyond the household. Ugen Gombo's characterization of the Tibetan carpet weaving as a 'home industry' (1985: 97) misses the important dynamic of the early industry between home production and the production for monasteries and nobles, who presumably were important consumers of luxury carpets. The predominance of religious iconography in Tibetan carpets as documented by carpet historians Denwood and Lorentz demonstrates institutional influences on the craft. But the relationship between weaving women and the designs they wove is often taken as an individual and unstructured communion with a cultural tradition; often, in the case of Tibetan weaving, put in near religious terms:

The finished rug wasn't the end. Once it was trimmed, sheared and cut from the loom, they strung up again. Weaving was well practised; the rug, well used. Carpets wore from the centre out, and were replaced like their very clothing, by putting another over or under the worn piece, depending on

occasion. The rugs were worn down to a pileless sheen. The final tribute to their craft was that almost nothing survived.

What survived was the practice of hitching, tying off, and cutting through. In it they grounded their vision, and perfected their view. In the space of one knot swooping down over the bar, they listened to wisdom's descent. It rolled off their looms, spilled out of the doorways to mix with life's great tangle. (Guta, 1992: 68)

Life is tangled, but carpets are woven. This romantic view of Tibetan weaving provides an important clue as to why Westerners should desire Tibetan carpets at all. Just as kinds of '*g'dan*' reflected the order of Tibetan society, with increasing value being placed on beautiful carpets that were then assigned distinctive social roles, so kinds of Oriental carpets take their respective place in a hierarchy of goods which reflect an ordering of the modern world. And an unproblematic dynamic between a weaver and his or her tradition stands as an important criterion for the most prestigious of these kinds.

Oriental carpets are valued for their hand made quality which, unlike the mechanically reproduced floor coverings readily available in the market, remain singular productions that embody for their owners a sense of tradition that is unique and desirable. At a level of pure theory the commodity, as Hart puts it, 'grows out of and transforms that which it is not . . .' (1982: 39), but this level the Oriental carpet can never reach without being stripped of the singularity that defines it in the first place. Spooner argues that the Oriental carpet is 'imperfectly commoditized', as it is able to communicate multiple meanings to many people, whereas a pure commodity is reduced to an abstract homogeneity expressed only in the money form (Spooner, 1986: 200). In traditional Tibetan carpets, swastika design patterns on temple carpets may have been seen as symbolic of the Buddhist principle of impermanence, while on a wedding rug a sign of good luck (Myers, 1993: 25). To a collector of antique carpets in Europe or America, attention may be paid to the purity of design origins, while a carpet integrated into a middle-class living room marks its owner's appreciation of both the skill of the weaver's craft and the ease with which it can be adapted to individual tastes.

Apart perhaps from some of the more abstract negotiations for stock on the stock exchange, modern consumer culture shares with traditional cultures the characteristic that commodities are socially necessary to classify a meaningful world. But meanings change, and are constantly being renegotiated by correspondents who are variously positioned in a shifting structure of power. The traditional Tibetan carpet, though influenced indirectly by the Western market, was in pre-revolutionary times produced to mark meanings only associated with Tibetan society. Once the Tibetan carpet entered directly the world Oriental market, however, the structure of those meanings began to change, as did the physical carpet itself.

## THE TIBETAN CARPET IN EXILE

One of the of the most profound changes ever to overtake Tibetan society occurred in 1959, when the fourteenth Dalai Lama, along with his family, much of the religious hierarchy, and over 100,000 Tibetans fled their homeland into India and Nepal. In India, the government of the time welcomed the Dalai Lama and his followers and assisted them in establishing a refugee infrastructure of settlements that still exists today. While the majority of refugees fled to India, Nepal became home to about 12,000 refugees who were mainly settled at camps at Jawalakhel in the Kathmandu valley, Chialsa in Solu-Khumbu district, Pokhara in the mid-west and at several smaller centres in the far west (Gombo, 1985). Refugees in Nepal could not directly benefit from the generosity of the Indian government, as sovereign Nepal, itself emerging from over a century of isolation and economic stagnation, needed to rely more on Western aid agencies to relieve the economic burden of the Tibetans. It was these Western relief agencies which identified the Tibetan carpet as a potential cornerstone of economic self-sufficiency for the refugee population.

In 1961, the Swiss Aid and Technical Assistance organization (SATA) set up the first refugee carpet weaving workshop at Jawalakhel; weaving centres were subsequently set up in Pokhara and Solu-Khumbu. In 1962, SATA set up the Tibetan Carpet Trading Company (TCTC) in conjunction with the Dalai Lama's government in exile at Dharamsala, India, to bring all Tibetan carpet weaving under a single marketing arm (Odegaard, 1987; Worcester, 1992a). At that time, a very modest export market was identified in Europe for Tibetan carpets from those sympathetic to the plight of the refugees, and subsidized by SATA. The first products were woven from hand spun Tibetan wool and 'in typical Sino-Tibetan designs' (Odegaard, 1987: 10).

At the outset SATA hired refugee master weavers to train others at carpet weaving. These people brought with them into exile traditional weaving skills that were unique; most refugees arriving in Nepal were either farmers or nomads, and had few other skills with which to adapt to refugee life (Gombo, 1985: 35). These weaving masters were said to be from the Gyantse region of south Tibet, a region many Tibetan producers identified as the source of traditional Tibet's finest carpets.

Although these carpet masters came from the region that was the heart of traditional carpet production and imparted the Tibetan weaving technique to others, SATA also contributed towards developing modern weaving practices, most notably the introduction of carpet design graphs. Design graphs have been a common feature throughout the export Oriental carpet industries of other countries, and ensure the uniformity of the product. Weavers need not draw on imagination or tradition while weaving; instead, they follow a paper graph on which someone else has painted the design in 1:1 ratio, a division of labour that Ugen Gombo

claims has taken the artistry from the hands of the weavers, leaving them 'no room to inject individual artistic innovations' (Gombo, 1985: 157).

The weaving technique that these early masters taught to other refugees is unique among Oriental hand-knotting techniques, and was in many ways complemented by the requirements for a modern weaving industry to standardize production. Tibetan hand-knotted carpets are woven on vertical looms that have expandable beams to control the tension of the warp, around which it was continuously wound (see Figure 1). This preliminary process, known as 'dressing' the loom, was performed prior to weaving, with the loom laid on the floor, the threads of the warp being straightened after it had been set back up. The warp was traditionally made from hand-spun wool, according to Thomas Guta (1978: 287), and the texture of this wool warp was in older Tibetan carpets extremely variable, making it:

... individualistic to the extreme: the unique method of mounting the loom and tensioning the warp led to more irregularities that were peculiar to each weaver's tension. It is in this connection that we hear statements from weavers that for two or more people to work together on the same loom they must be of the same mind, the same tension. (Guta, 1978: 287)

Most early Tibetan carpets were small, and woven by a single person. An end binding is formed by throwing four or five wefts before the actual knotting of the pile begins. Then a process of knotting began which was, and is today, a technique that remains exclusive to Tibetan carpet weaving.

Generally, the piles of other Oriental hand-knotted carpets are formed by wool threads looped around the warp and weft one at a time and then cut to length. The pile of Tibetan carpets is formed instead around a metal gauge rod which is tied to the warp, and the wool is looped continuously



around both the warp and the gauge rod until there is a colour change, when the wool is cut and the new colour tied in (see Figure 1). When the gauge rod has been completely covered by a row of loops, it is driven down to the previously knotted rows and then a flat knife is slid across the face of the cylindrical rod, cutting the loops to form the pile. This technique of 'cutting loops' was thought by Denwood and other historians of the Tibetan carpets to be an archaic method which adapted South-East to Central Asian

**FIGURE 1** Contemporary Tibetan upright loom showing the steel rod used to make the pile. The carpet is of an 'open field' design, for export to Germany

styles of weaving, and was not found anywhere but in Tibet (Denwood, 1974: 93; Eiland, 1992). Although an archaic method, this technique does have the advantage of regulating the length of the pile; by varying the thickness of the gauge rod, producers can vary the thickness of the pile and create different textures. It also speeds up the knotting process considerably, particularly where a single colour field is being formed.

The first carpets to be produced by the refugee weaving centres were predominantly standard Tibetan '*kha g'dan*', small (3ft by 6ft) carpets that were generally used as seat carpets. These, however, were woven on upright looms and employed the knotting method associated with the classical Tibetan carpet. According to an American importer who was working with the Tibetan community at the time, the early products were 'garish caricatures of lively old Tibetan carpets' (Worcester, 1992a: 8). In addition, SATA developed smaller seat carpets, only about 1 ft<sup>2</sup>, which were intended for Nepal's then nascent tourist market. These featured elements of traditional Tibetan design – medallions, dragons and the auspicious symbols associated with Tibetan Buddhism. These design elements were pronounced in larger carpets by contouring, or trimming around their edges with sharp scissors to set them out from the carpet's field in an almost three dimensional look. Although this method of contouring was a feature in both traditional Chinese as well as Tibetan carpets, it came to be used more extensively in contemporary carpets woven for export or tourist sales (Denwood, 1974: 52).

In 1968 the Boudha Handicraft Centre (BHC) was opened with funds that came from the Dalai Lama's government-in-exile and private investors, both Tibetan and Nepalese, in order to provide more employment for the growing number of refugees. Unlike the Jawalakhel Handicraft Centre and the other operations that were begun by SATA and other relief agencies, no foreign aid money went into the establishment of the BHC, as by the end of the 1960s the aid agencies had begun to withdraw from directly supporting the refugee operations (Worcester, 1992a). At first, carpet weaving was only one activity among several at the BHC, which included weaving handbags and articles of clothing for the tourist market, but eventually carpets came to dominate all other production. In 1969, a second marketing agency, Himalayan Carpet Exports (HCE), was set up to find export markets for the Boudha facility, which was experiencing slow and painful growth, and by 1974 HCE had exported a modest 1,500 m<sup>2</sup> to Europe (Gombo, 1985: 113). Despite the slow success of exports, it was the tourist market at this early stage that provided the bulk of sales.

At the outset, all of the Tibetan weaving centres used 100 per cent Tibetan wool in their carpets. Tibetan wool distinguished Tibetan carpets in the Oriental field, and ultimately expanded their appeal far beyond a comparatively small tourist market. This wool was from a breed of sheep unique to Tibet that grazes on the high altitude Chunlung plateau and produces a wool that is thick, strong and, as it is sheared

only once a year, extremely long. These longer hairs are spun into a strong wool that is ideal for carpet weaving. Moreover, sheep raised on the grasses of the plateau developed a more robust coat than those crowded into Tibetan towns, which ate less grass and more refuse, so the wool raised by Tibet's nomadic peoples was the more desirable (Odegaard, 1987: 51). Prior to 1986, when the first cash payment for Tibetan wool was made, all wool was traded across the Himalayas through informal barter transactions between Tibetan highland nomads and Nepalese traders (Odegaard, 1987: 18). The wool was at that time entirely hand carded and spun, unlike the wool being used in most contemporary Oriental industries. This not only provided additional refugees with employment, but it gave the wool itself a thick but not uniform texture that wool carded and spun by machine does not have.

In 1976, the carpet buyer Bryan Huffner of OCM Ltd, a large company which had been producing carpets in India, recognized that the texture of the Tibetan carpet had enormous potential in the European domestic market, largely because of the qualities of Tibetan wool (Worcester, 1992b). What Huffner envisaged went far beyond the tourist market, and he began to develop prototypes of carpets that combined Tibetan materials and processes with European design and colours. He developed the 'open field' carpet which has, since that time, become the most important export product and has displaced the traditional 'Sino-Tibetan' carpet as the authentic 'Tibetan' carpet on the international market. The traditional Tibetan motifs that had covered the entire field in the traditional carpets were moved to the borders in the carpets developed by OCM, or replaced altogether by abstract geometrical designs, leaving the central area in one solid colour – hence the 'open field' label. Huffner and OCM developed trade links with both TCTC and HCE, and began developing designs with them for a slowly growing export industry that was distinct from a tourist market of traditional '*kha-g'dan*' and seat rugs.

Traditional sources of Tibetan wool were erratic, however. Because of this poor access, the practice of using Tibetan wool for the warp string was discontinued, and cheaper Indian cotton was substituted instead. Tibetan wool came to be used for the weft pile yarn only, which according to Guta 'signals the loss of traditional texture' (1978: 287). By 1979, HCE had increased its foreign exports to 11,000 m<sup>2</sup>, the bulk of which were developed with the participation of Huffner and OCM, and Tibetan wool was diverted to the production of these carpets. For the production of tourist carpets, which were then being sold in small carpet shops in the tourist districts of Basantpur (Freak Street) and Thamel in Kathmandu, as well as in Boudha, producers began to import much cheaper and widely available Indian wool, which is of inferior quality. The carpets made for tourists were (and continue to be) reproductions of Tibetan originals, but were not considered of high enough quality for export because of the materials they are made from.

In the late 1970s, two American expatriates living in Kathmandu helped to reintroduce the practice of using vegetable dyes that had been abandoned in favour of easier-to-use chemical dyes earlier in the century, long before the Tibetan diaspora into India and Nepal (Denwood, 1974). Antique vegetable-dyed Tibetan carpets were the inspiration for both Thomas Guta and Tom Glenn, who hoped to recreate the unique colours afforded by the use of vegetable dyes. The carpets they produced were considered by them to be more works of art than commodities, but they became very popular by the end of the decade and commanded a much higher price than those being woven by independent Tibetan producers. Vegetable dying hand-spun Tibetan yarn was enthusiastically taken up by Tibetan independents, who rediscovered the art of using walnut shells, madder root and rhubarb to colour wool (Worcester, 1992a: 24). Thomas Guta, a highly respected American weaver and artist, wrote optimistically at that time about the carpet industry as a vehicle for retaining what was traditional and valuable about Tibetan culture:

There is also much to learn from carpets produced in the present day by Tibetans. The carpet weaving industry is developing at a rapid pace among refugees . . . Here there is a trend toward private enterprise, of weavers who are independent of larger factories. Tibetan wool is trucked down from the Tibetan border and its use is becoming more widespread. At present there are four separate weaving houses which employ vegetable dyes in Kathmandu and one that uses it exclusively so on looms strung in wool warp and weft. The tradition of weaving is experiencing a revival . . . If this trend continues and standardization is brought down to the family level it is very possible that carpet weaving will continue as it has for centuries – as a well-practised folk art. (1978: 288)

Guta's optimism was short lived, however. The 'vegetable dye revolution' caused the first real set-back for the industry, when the Tibetan carpet gained a reputation for poor quality at the German trade fairs which were (and are still) critical to export success. More and more independent entrepreneurs tried to exploit the opportunities presented by the new popularity of the vegetable-dyed carpet, but few really mastered the complex art of cooking the colours properly. Also, vegetable dyes were not colour fast, and were often washed away in the chemical washing process then being used in Europe to bring out the lustre of carpets. In 1984, exports stalled as European buyers cancelled orders from independents making vegetable-dyed carpets. TCTC and HCE, however, retained most of their market, as OCM enforced the use of chemical dyes and high quality control (Odegaard, 1987: 12). It was the independent producers who suffered a set-back. While a few factories continue to make vegetable-dyed carpets, their market is limited to the high end of the market for traditional products which is lucrative, but small. The back streets of Boudha are now littered by disused and crumbling brick yarn pots where producers once vegetable dyed their carpets.

By 1984, the Tibetan carpet, originally introduced as a traditional craft to temporarily support a refugee population, was being profoundly influenced by foreign evaluations of what that 'tradition' meant. The early '*kha-g'dan*' made at refugee weaving centres were at first sold to tourists – replicas of the '*kha-g'dan*' that were a part of everyday pre-revolutionary Tibetan life. But if the looped '*kha-g'dan*' was, as Denwood states, a poor cousin to the knotted '*rum-g'dan*', the hand-knotted replicas purchased by tourists had already transformed the categories of traditional carpets. Bryan Huffman and OCM, the predecessor to a vast number of predominantly German carpet buyers, saw in the Tibetan carpet physical qualities that could be moulded into a product ripe for the European market. Thomas Guta and Tom Glenn, on the other hand, saw the carpet tradition as a folk art, individualistic and creative. Both of these evaluations, as contrary as they are, would in the next ten years come to define the ethos of the Tibeto-Nepalese industry.

### THE TIBETO-NEPALESE CARPET BOOM

The export market contraction of the 1984 season ended the popularity of vegetable-dyed carpets and forced a change in direction for the industry, particularly for a newly established class of independent Tibetan producers. OCM and its Tibetan partners were successful with a style of carpet that combined the unique qualities of wool and weaving technique with contemporary European designs, and this hybrid product became increasingly popular throughout the 1980s and 1990s. The transformation of the carpet from its traditional form removed it further from its refugee origins, but few refugees saw any need to comment on this by the turn of the decade. Rebounding from the setbacks of 1984, Tibetan and Nepalese entrepreneurs saw steady growth throughout the last half of the 1980s as the European market expanded. But in 1990/1991 it exploded, as Tibetan carpets became widely fashionable in Germany, breaching traditional Oriental carpet markets to become popular in department stores and discount furnishing shops. The quantity of carpets exported increased over 300 per cent in the first five years of the new decade; foreign exchange earnings increased by nearly 600 per cent.<sup>2</sup> Tibetan and Nepalese carpet producers realized previously unattainable margins of profit, which was reflected in a new found affluence for both the refugees and a second wave of Nepalese entrepreneurs.

What made this sudden and spectacular growth possible was a combination of steady product development by German buyers and Tibetan refugee or Nepalese owners, and the coincidental popularity of Tibeto-Nepalese carpets in Europe. Tibetan carpets were no longer only luxury goods displayed by connoisseurs; they became available at inexpensive prices to consumers not as concerned with authenticity as with physical and aesthetic qualities. The 'open field' carpet, developed first by Bryan

Huffner, OCM, and the original refugee carpet factories, was a practical commodity for the European living room. Early experiments with admixing Tibetan with New Zealand wool were successful, thus increasing the wool supply while approximating the quality of Tibetan wool and making this new style of carpet available to more Europeans than ever, and at prices that compared favourably with machine manufactured carpets.

The flow of carpets to Germany was also enhanced at the time by the introduction of carpet washing in Nepal. The washing of carpets is a chemical process that removes excess oils and impurities from the wool, and brings out the vibrancy of its colours. Prior to the late 1980s, all carpets had to be shipped to Europe for washing, which created a bottleneck in the export flow as independent European buyers were forced to deal through larger German and Swiss importers who operated the washing facilities. In the late 1980s, numerous small washing facilities began to operate in Kathmandu that were operated predominantly by Indian labourers who took advantage of Nepal's open border policy to take up hand washing in Kathmandu (Shrestha, n.d: 30). Independent producers could produce a completed carpet in Nepal, and independent German buyers could deal directly with them without the intermediary import house. Carpet producers were by the end of the 1980s controlling most of the processes of carpet production: being able to ship washed carpets meant that trade could be established with a growing number of independent German buyers as well.

The introduction of a local hand washing capacity itself does not account for the increased popularity of Tibeto-Nepalese carpets in Europe. Viewed from a connoisseur's perspective, the carpets that became popular in Europe were recognizable as Tibetan only by their construction – the wool continued to be mixed in order to simulate the texture of Tibetan highland wool, and the carpets were woven on vertical looms using the traditional 'cutting loop' method. The looms changed, however, to accommodate the increased production. Traditional wooden looms were largely replaced by iron looms that could be dressed for a variety of carpets, as orders now were for various sizes and shapes that reflected the many diverse uses the carpets were being put to in Europe. Most of the carpets woven were of a standard 60 knot per square inch weave which produces a thick and flexible pile, but carpets woven for the connoisseur or one-of-a-kind market came increasingly to be woven in higher knot ratios, 80 or 100, which is believed to allow for finer detail in design. The designs of many 60-knot carpets became more geometric and abstract, occasionally employing Tibetan motifs along the border only, but often omitting these altogether.

The increased popularity of the carpet also meant that qualities valued by connoisseurs were eliminated from most standard 60-knot carpets. European buyers insisted that carpets consistently remained true to the

designs. Slight colour variations in the colour field of Oriental carpets – the abrash – were a desirable quality for connoisseurs, as they gave a carpet an almost three dimensional appearance, but these had to be made uniform for the popular market (Odegaard, 1985: 11). The abrash resulted from the same colour wool being dyed in different batches, the slight variations between batches accounting for the variations in colour. But what connoisseurs saw as a quality of a hand-made folk art, European consumers saw as a flaw. Similarly, slight imperfections in the weave and shape of the carpet, forgivable to connoisseurs as indications that their carpet was hand made, was in the Tibeto-Nepalese carpet seen as a flaw indicating poor quality. Tibetan carpet entrepreneurs found that what once made their carpets unique now necessitated a whole range of new techniques of quality control. As one refugee exporter put it:

A perfect carpet is usually impossible to come by . . . For instance this carpet has a fault [POINTS TO THE CARPET ON OFFICE FLOOR], you can see a line running right through . . . You get that problem. No one will buy that carpet. Because when someone is paying the money he wants to make sure everything is alright. Then the other factor is when you, [get an uneven pile] this problem only arises in our carpets because of our weaving technique. We use a steel rod, as you must have seen, and the pile has to be made by cutting the wool that has been wrapped around the steel rod. Now you can either cut it straight right in the middle so that you get two even piles, or you can cut it lower and have one long and one short. That's what gives you these lines here. This is bad cutting, see? Initially this was considered a good thing. It characterized our carpets from the other carpets, see? Our carpets initially right in the beginning came out as a product that was different from all other products. It had a rough, rustic look and colour variations were allowed, little mistakes were allowed, the carpets were crooked, they allowed all that, and in fact these faults in the carpet were sort of a selling point. It's a unique carpet, I mean, you know, every carpet doesn't look crooked at that exact spot, and you know, the weaver doesn't make a mistake at this exact spot, the colour variations were not at that exact spot. So what you are getting is a very unique carpet which cannot be duplicated.

The problem now for the Tibeto-Nepalese carpet industry was to ensure that its product could be duplicated, or reproduced to accurately translate the carpet design on the carpet. Customers could choose a carpet size, shape, colour or design by catalogue, and expect to receive goods that looked just like what they had chosen, and as a number of carpets of the same design were produced, it was expected that they be identical. Quality control came to be enforced by a system of categorization that distinguished carpets of varying quality and assigned a price according to that evaluation. 'A' quality carpets were near flawless, and could be sold for top dollar in Germany, whereas 'B' and 'C' level carpets indicated that weaving errors necessitated either sale for a lower price or that the carpets



FIGURE 2 Copying designs onto the graph

be repaired after weaving, which was an additional cost for producers.

Sectors of carpet production became mechanized during the early 1990s, to ensure uniform quality of wool and colours. As carding machines came to be introduced in larger factories to blend Tibetan and New Zealand wool, wool dyeing plants were set up in

these same factories or in independent companies serving a large number of independent producers. Wool, previously dyed in individual dyeing pots, was now dyed in large vats using chemically controlled processes that ensured even colouration. The designs on the carpets were sometimes colour-faxed to Tibetan or Nepalese suppliers from Europe and copied meticulously to graphs before being issued to weavers (see Figure 2). Graphs were painted to represent specific colours of wool that were then available to weavers in factory wool stores.

The processes of wool weaving and washing were being standardized and controlled, but there was a corresponding diversification in the designs for carpets beyond those of the original '*kha-g'dan*'. The 'Tibetan' carpet, however, had not disappeared entirely. 'Traditional' carpets still were made, particularly for one-of-a-kind production for connoisseurs, and, ironically, in lower quality Indian wool, for the remaining tourist market and for local consumption (see Figures 3 and 4), but most export carpets were woven in a wide range of designs ranging from Bauhaus to Meso-American. Many lower grade carpets were woven in simple geometric borders that admitted no creative identity, while some higher grade carpets, at the time of this research, were reproductions of William Morris' hand-knotted 'Hammersmith' carpets of the 19th century.

While some designs for carpets are created in Europe and then sent to Nepal for weaving, most are created in Nepal by producers or, more often, their design staff. Many entrepreneurs, particularly more established exporting producers, travel widely to the West to understand trends in carpet design, and some bring Western designers in to work on the company's repertoire. Others, with less knowledge, attempt to anticipate foreign tastes as they design, and these designs stand on their own merits on the international market. Although the material processes of carpet weaving are based on traditional ones, even to the extent of simulating Tibetan wool, creating representations for exchange outside of their own culture is what makes contemporary Tibeto-Nepalese entrepreneurs distinctly different from their ancestors. Contemporary Tibetan and Nepalese

entrepreneurs operate in a different social landscape, and produce designs that have little or no reference to the traditional world. Colours are no longer keyed to the aesthetics of Tibetan Buddhism, but rather to trends in contemporary European interior design. This often invokes a sense of loss among Tibetan



FIGURE 3 Traditional use of a Tibetan carpet as a seat

producers, as well as theories about what the new social landscape that they weave for is like. As one veteran Tibetan producer puts it:

At that time, it was more traditional design, Nepali and Tibetan and all kind of, this type of designs are over there. As the market grew up then the tradition was lost, you see. So, now it is according to the buyer's interest. Whatever design they produce, we have to make that carpet . . . I think this is a market tactic. What I feel is if we keep the traditional design you see the carpet might have some value and people might not throw it away. You make this type of carpet, you see, as soon as the carpet is old, they get thrown away and buy new one. What I feel, I don't know exactly what the seller's idea is, this is my view only.

Tibetan and Nepalese producers assume that the carpets they make will be discarded in a few years' time, and that the European consumer will be looking out for a new one to replace it. Value, for the vast majority of carpets exported in the first half of the new decade, is no longer to be found in traditional elements – the consumer, so the theory goes, cares little for traditional designs or colours, or whether the carpet is made by a Tibetan or not. Some believe that the homogenization of the Tibetan carpet as a European floor covering has meant a declining level of skill among the weavers, particularly as the boom has meant that, increasingly, many weavers are neither Tibetan nor their Nepalese co-religionists.



FIGURE 4 A traditional carpet for sale to tourists in Namche Bazar

Modern abstract designs and large single colour open fields, it is thought, do not require the weaving skill that was needed in older styles of carpet. Vegetable dyeing, a difficult skill to master, had been replaced by chemical dyeing, so that virtually anyone could acquire coloured wool that previously was very difficult to get. During the boom, anyone could operate a weaving facility and sell carpets either to another exporter who could not keep up with demand or even sell to independent German buyers who were by then supplying directly to department stores and discount home-furnishing houses. Many did, and this was perceived by some as compromising the integrity of the tradition.

The carpet boom of the early 1990s was accomplished by making the physical qualities of the Tibetan carpet predictable to buyers and consumers in the West, and by the popularity of that carpet on the European market. But the wool and weaving processes remain distinctively Tibetan, and preserving that distinction is important as the Tibeto-Nepalese carpets must compete with numerous other Oriental carpets on the market. The increased volume of exports also means that the bulk of exports is no longer of connoisseur carpets intended for consumers concerned with the authenticity of the carpet's origins. Most carpets now are intended for a vast popular market in Europe, where colour and design preferences change from year to year. The concern for authenticity is now more about fidelity to an industrial standard of weaving processes and materials. The flexibility of the industry to satisfy European demand, which enables it to produce a variety of carpets, is based on that industrial standard.

## CONCLUSION

Tibetan carpets, once distinctive seating in traditional Tibet, now lie underfoot in European homes, and while undoubtedly some may appeal to their owner's desire for artifacts that communicate a sense of Tibetanness, many look quite different from either the '*rum-g'dan*' or '*kha-g'dan*' of pre-revolutionary Tibet. For contemporary weavers the relationship with that tradition is complex. Design and fashion is not shaped by institutions of Tibetan religion or society, but by modern institutions in which they only ambiguously share. A comparatively new class of entrepreneur must mediate and interpret these institutions for the people who manually execute them, and they must control that labour so that individual idiosyncrasies once thought of as signs of a rustic, traditional origin are not now identified as mistakes by European buyers.

Industrial standards, however, are aimed at preserving the importance of manual labour at all stages of the industry. One reason for this is national pressures for employment, but another is the perception that a vital part of the distinctiveness of Tibeto-Nepalese carpets is that they cannot be created anywhere but in the Tibeto-Nepalese industry. The mechanization of the wool carding process was made necessary by the blending of New

Zealand and Tibetan wool, and chemical wool dying by the need for consistent colouring, but any further mechanization of production processes is effectively illegal. The passing of Tibetan wool through Tibetan, and later Nepalese, hands and into the carpet's weft is thought by buyers and producers to be what distinguishes their carpets from all others:

What makes the product singular? First and foremost, the quality and unusual characteristics of the carpet can only be achieved by following the production methods employed in Nepal. These would be difficult to implement from a strictly organized approach and perhaps only achievable in Nepal given all the variables which would be impossible to adequately describe.

The second most important input contributing to the quality of the carpet is the wool itself. Again, before explaining the complexities surrounding the wool, it is necessary to point out that from the moment the sheep is sheared, it would not be possible to plan, in an organized manner, what happens before it becomes a carpet. Given the above mentioned factors regarding the production of wool, it is unlikely that anyone outside Nepal can truly duplicate the original article, without going back in time, adding the Nepalese humour and business acumen, and recreating the whole Nepalese-Tibetan scenario. (Odegaard, 1987: 17)

Paradoxically, according to this view, both Tibetan and Nepalese entrepreneurs must organize production that cannot be strictly organized without losing the identity and desirability of the product altogether. Something like tradition is still seen to inhere in the carpet, although this is no longer only Tibetan tradition, and eliminating this in the interests of making the Tibeto-Nepalese carpet more like others would mean abandoning the category that distinguishes them in the first place. Yet the life of that category has been one of increasing standardization and organization. Efforts to make the Tibeto-Nepalese carpet competitive with other Oriental hand-knotted carpets and with other types of floor covering also risk reorganizing the lives of those who weave them. Tibetan and Nepalese entrepreneurs bear those risks in eager anticipation of new markets and livelihoods.

## Notes

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1. Denwood notes also that knotted carpets of what Lorentz would have called the Gyantse style were also known in Tibetan as '*grum-tse*', a Tibetan word that does not indicate seating. I have chosen to use forms of '*g'dan*' here to emphasize the relationship of knotted carpets to other forms of seating in traditional Tibet, as this was the association most often suggested by contemporary Tibetan producers in Boudha.
2. From data collected by the Nepalese Trade Promotion Centre, October 1995.

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