

Cultural Brokers and Other Historiographic Metaphors: Perspectives from Indo-Tibetan Cultural History

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This contribution discusses the two analytical concepts of »Indo-Tibetan« Buddhism and »cultural broker«, and shows how both can (still) be usefully applied. The term »Indo-Tibetan« Buddhism, though today outdated, can help us to describe specific configurations in the history of Buddhism. The use of the concept of »cultural broker«, which developed in the field of social anthropology and was adopted in the field of historical studies, is shown as problematic when its scope becomes very wide. The more detailed operative definition that is offered as a result of this in-depth analysis is then tested on the case of the iconic early Tibetan Buddhist monk, translator, and traveler Vairocana. When delimited by precise criteria, the broker concept can structure and guide our investigations and helpfully illuminate pivotal moments in history, as it does in the case of the history of »Indo-Tibetan« Buddhism.

Keywords: cultural broker(age), knowledge exchange, Indo-Tibetan Buddhism, Vairocana

In this brief essay I will explore the contours and the potential usefulness of the concept of cultural broker in the context of the long history of Indo-Tibetan Buddhism. I will begin by sketching the two intersecting domains of thought here: »Indo-Tibetan« Buddhist history and its historiography, and the history and varied meanings of the concept of cultural broker. Then I will offer an operative definition of cultural broker. Next, I will present one example drawn from the history of Buddhism in Tibet that we can use as a case study for using the broker concept to best effect. Finally, I will suggest that even if the concept of cultural broker might be found, in some cases, to be limited in its scope and application, the very process of defining, refining, and applying this and other concepts is a key aspect of the challenge of explaining cultural change over time.

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It is my hope that this modest survey and case study may assist others as they reflect upon how the broker concept has served, or may serve them, in their own work as they labor to better understand intellectual change in the time and place that captivates their attention, or how grappling with the value and utility of similar key terms has been of benefit to their work.

»Indo-Tibetan« as a Term of Cultural Change and Continuity

I use the hyphenated term »Indo-Tibetan« in the title of this essay because I sense that the term »cultural broker« tries to cover the same ground as that neologism. The modifier »Indo-Tibetan« or the phrase »Indo-Tibetan Buddhism« are not really in favor these days, despite their popularity in the 1980s and 1990s. Whereas in 1987, one scholar could still name a book »Indo-Tibetan Buddhism«,¹ courses could be so named, and it was possible to speak as if there were a demonstrable object that this term denoted, in 2007, a major survey of the spread of Buddhism in Tibet does not use the term once.² It is used less today because it suggests a synthetic whole that, at best, is an abstraction. It is difficult to assert with any degree of precision that there is some distinctive form of Buddhism that is equally South Asian and Tibetan, for it is difficult to define and decide upon what criteria should go into that designation. Are we talking about languages? Tibetan Buddhism is a religion of translation, while Indian, or better South Asian, Buddhism is often defined by the mere fact of being in Sanskrit or a related Indic language. There is no (well, almost no) Buddhism that is engaged in the two languages at once; Indo-Tibetan Buddhism is not »Tibeto-Sanskrit« Buddhism. Or perhaps we are talking about regions? This does not work all that well either. The Himalayas have and do serve as a formidable geographic boundary of cultural worlds; no one would mistake an instance of Buddhist life and thought in Western Tibet – at Sakya Monastery, for instance – with the Buddhist culture of a temple in Kathmandu. There is, regionally speaking, more that separates South Asian Buddhism from Tibetan Buddhism than links them. But perhaps we are not talking about language or region, but about thought or practice. Though we seem to be getting closer, here again things are not so clear. For when it comes to practice, context is determinative; a deity evocation ritual meant to identify a teacher with the student's tutelary deity in a teaching context is quite different than the same ritual performed by a head of state to identify the state with an image of transcendent power. If it is easy to distinguish what we deem to be »Indian Buddhism« versus »Tibetan Buddhism«, it is not so easy to identify something called »Indo-Tibetan« Buddhism, something that sits distinctly between these two in a way that helps us to understand the history of Buddhism throughout these regions.

I suspect that scholars working in other areas may also have regionally based dyads such as this that go in and out of fashion and have more or less conceptual purchase on the material at hand. Yet even if the term »Indo-Tibetan« (or the cognate term in one's own area of research) is less used today than in decades past, the term still points to a complex of histories and cultures that many understand themselves to be studying, and still names something that scholars feel they can *see*, even if the vision is hazy.

1 Snellgrove, *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism*.

2 Kollmar-Paulenz, *Buddhist way into Tibet*.

In its most famous usage by David Snellgrove, »Indo-Tibetan« refers to the long interface between South Asian and Tibetan polities, peoples, and cultures that gave rise to one of the world's great transfers of religious thought and practice. From the seventh to the twelfth centuries CE, Buddhists moved back and forth across the Himalayas between South Asia and Tibet, and between Central Asia and Tibet, exchanging – and changing – forms of Buddhist thought and practice on a massive scale, and with substantial long-term effects for Asia. A thousand works from the Indian Buddhist corpus were translated from Sanskrit and other Indic languages into Tibetan in the decades around the year 800 alone, and another four thousand were translated and collected within the next several centuries – and that is just the work we know of. New forms of ritual practice, institutional organization, philosophy, literature, and science were channeled from South Asia to Tibet. And by the seventeenth century, these in turn were exported from Tibet to China, Mongolia, Russia, and back down to the southern slopes of the Himalayas. On the eve of global modernity, what started out as a relatively simple network between Buddhists in South Asia and leadership in Central Tibet had become a complex web of political, cultural, and economic relationships stretching from Kalmykia to Kathmandu, from Sichuan to Saint Petersburg, from Baltistan to Beijing, both to and from the early Buddhist heartland of central Tibet.

The Buddhism mapped out by this long period and wide geography scholars may with some good reason still think of as, in some sense, being »Indo-Tibetan«. For its Indian roots are so apparent even in a temple in Saint Petersburg, a ritual in Beijing, or literary narrative in Lhasa. The rituals, the clothing, the classic philosophy, the literary aesthetics; all have their antecedents in India and are easily traceable. Yet in the wake of what was essentially the failure of the concept of »Indo-Tibetan« to help us explain these mechanisms by which these profound connections took place, we are still left with questions that this idea sought to answer. How did cultural exchange between India and Tibet take place? How did intellectual change occur? What were the causes of this change? What were the results? How do we relate what came before with what came after? What are the contexts that we should pay attention to, and what role does context itself play in successful cultural change? To what extent should we focus on the individual? Or the institutional? What are productive metaphors with which to form basic models of exchange and change? Center and periphery? Network? Chain? Giving and receiving? Succession (as Snellgrove evokes in his subtitle)? Each of these questions and the range of possible responses to them begs considered collective thought today, decades after the term »Indo-Tibetan« has fallen out of favor. The implicit challenge of »Indo-Tibetan« was for scholars to explain how intellectual change took place during this massive transfer of culture across the Himalayas and throughout Asia. That challenge is still operative today, and it typically remains as implicit as it did then. Which brings us to the idea of »cultural brokers«.

»Cultural Broker«

If the terms »Indo-Tibetan« and other such place-based neologisms are meant to direct attention to cultural change and continuity but do this poorly or at least only implicitly, it is worth identifying more precise key terms that do similar sorts of work with greater precision. »Cultural broker« is one such term. It is at once more focused than region-based terms because it centers attention upon human agents of change rather than abstract entities – upon »Buddhists«, for instance, rather than »Buddhism« – and sufficiently broad and flexible to be useful in multiple contexts. The term has a mostly traceable history, with a nearly singular

origin and only several paths of usage across a handful of disciplines, and it is worth knowing this history if one wishes to assess the utility of the idea in one's own work.

The term cultural broker entered anglophone scholarship primarily through the social sciences, from where it migrated into disciplines as diverse as medical anthropology, historiography of various times and places, education, and multicultural theory. Historian of indigenous peoples of the Americas, Margaret Connell Szasz, characterizes the broader scholarly interest of which the broker concept is a prime example as a post-war development, stating that »contemporary interest in cultural intermediaries has coincided with grown concern for cultural pluralism... This concern began shortly after the Second World War, when historians and cultural anthropologists crafted the interdisciplinary approach of ethnohistory.«³ As will become apparent, both ethnographers and historians have developed and deployed the broker concept for use in their fields, and it has been adopted in multiple spaces in the social sciences.

The term »cultural broker« took about a decade to develop out of this larger set of emerging scholarly interests (see a usage estimate generated by the Google Books Ngram Viewer in Figure 1 below). It appears prominently in a 1960 article by anthropologist Clifford Geertz,⁴ though the formation of the concept in all but name is generally traced back to anthropologist Eric Wolf's 1956 article, entitled »Aspects of Group Relations in a Complex Society: Mexico«. Wolf, who was born in Vienna and spent his career in the US, argued that brokers are »groups of people who mediate between community-oriented groups in communities and nation-oriented groups which operate primarily through national institutions«.⁵ He goes on to say that the broker's

»basic function is to relate community-oriented individuals who want to stabilize or improve their life chances, but who lack economic security and political connections, with nation-oriented individuals who operate primarily in terms of the complex cultural forms standardized as national institutions, but whose success in these operations depends on the size and strength of their personal following«.⁶

Finally, he notes that »the position of these ›brokers‹ is an ›exposed‹ one, since, Janus-like, they face in two directions at once. They must serve some of the interests of groups operating on both the community and the national level, and they must cope with the conflicts raised by the collision of these interests«.⁷

Three features stand out in Wolf's portrayal of the broker and can be fashioned into the beginnings of an operational definition. First, cultural brokers are fundamentally *social* mediators, even when brokering »culture«. This, I suggest, is an important highlight of the anthropological definition of the broker, one which I will turn to when we return to Indo-Tibetan Buddhist history below. Second, they mediate between small, often local social groups and large, often translocal social groups (or perhaps better networks). Finally, brokers must attend to the needs and desires of both the smaller and the larger groups.

3 Connell Szasz, Introduction, 6.

4 Geertz, Javanese Kijaji.

5 Wolf, Aspects of group relations, 1075.

6 Wolf, Aspects of group relations, 1075.

7 Wolf, Aspects of group relations, 1076.

Geertz followed this lead in his 1960 article, arguing that Wolf's characterization of brokers in Mexico helps him to understand the role of local Muslim leaders in Indonesia. Geertz argues that such leaders, the *kijaji*, stand between local and translocal traditions and institutions. He states,

»Insofar as Java has in fact been part of the great, Mecca-centered international world of Islam – and it has been so only in part and to a degree – it has been the *kijaji* who has been the main connecting link, who has joined the local system to the larger whole. And it is upon his performance of this broker function that his enormous prestige and power in the countryside has rested«. ⁸

Geertz elaborates on the impact of this work in the local context, arguing that the broker stands »between those villagers who had come to think of themselves, under his tutelage, as more pious and orthodox than the mass of their animistic neighbors and the great international civilization of Islam«. ⁹ Here Geertz adds two related features to Wolf's characterization of brokers. First, the mediating role confers authority upon the mediator. Second, the work of mediation also confers prestige and distinctiveness upon members of the local group who work with the broker to gain the cultural resources they offer. For simplicity's sake I will treat this two-way prestige as a single feature below.

One tension between Wolf's and Geertz's portrayal of brokers is worth pointing out here: Wolf's brokers are often marginal figures within their local spheres of operation. They may be considered cultural, social, or economic outsiders relative to the local situation and are not always accorded broad authority for their mediating work. Geertz's broker, by contrast, is a figure of authority. The *kijaji* is a teacher and moral leader within the local context and does not stand outside of this context despite their representation of translocal entities. This distinction, which goes back to these initial moments in the concept's history within anthropology, is worth bearing in mind when considering the utility of the term for our own purposes. Interestingly, in the example I will work through below, the central figure, the broker, is both an insider and an outsider; he is a product of Tibetan imperial work, and he is also an exile at the moment when the events of the narrative begin.

Ethnographer Irwin Press moved the conversation along among anthropological scholarship in a 1969 article on cultural change and innovation in the Yucatan peninsula of Mexico. Press takes a wide-angle view on the concept of cultural broker, stating that it »is one among many concepts utilized by social scientists to explain the process of change and the nature of its advocates«. ¹⁰ (Even in 1969, it can be noted here, the idea was taken to be one among several models available to scholars of cultural change, rather than a singular explanation that might trump others.) Press reviews the work of Wolf and Geertz, though he is interested specifically in how social and cultural innovation occur. To explain when and why innovation occurs, he argues that the dual identity as both a local and translocal figure affords the cultural broker a measure of ambiguity in how the groups they are beholden to expect them to conform to social and institutional norms.

8 Geertz, *Javanese Kijaji*, 230.

9 Geertz, *Javanese Kijaji*, 233.

10 Press, *Ambiguity and innovation*, 205.

This ambiguity allows for, and in some cases even mandates, cultural innovation. The culture broker has »a mandate to innovate and expectations that he will both represent the community to outside interests and represent the outside within the community«. ¹¹ So, to the emerging depiction of cultural broker in anthropology Press adds a fifth feature: the cultural broker has the capacity, and perhaps even the obligation, to innovate.

From this moment at the dawn of the 1970s, the term proliferated in anthropology, finding itself in medical anthropology, applied anthropology, and from there it spread into other fields such as multicultural theory, education, ¹² folkloristics, ¹³ and history. In history, the route that the term and its by-now diverse elaborations took have been more varied. Taken up by scholars of distinct times, peoples, and places, the »cultural broker« has become an almost kaleidoscopic figure in historiography. Historical scholarship on North American indigenous populations' encounters with Europeans has made significant use of the idea, ¹⁴ as has work on the history of the Mediterranean. ¹⁵ Mutual knowledge of these respective fields' use of the concept is partial. Historians of the Mediterranean cite historical scholarship on indigenous peoples of North America, for instance, though the reverse appears not to be the case. Mediterranean historiography offers particularly robust usage of the idea that may serve well the interests of those working in other Eurasian contexts, so I will linger here for a moment.

A 2013 volume on the courts of the Mediterranean polities, entitled *Cultural Brokers at Mediterranean Courts in the Middle Ages*, serves as a good place to glimpse the term's utility for historians and the diversity of its meanings in twenty-first century scholarship. The volume's editors, Marc von der Höh, Nikolas Jaspert, and Jenny Oesterle state that »diplomatic envoys and scholars, artists and merchants encountered administrative officials, royal confidants and interpreters as well as religious and legal experts«. ¹⁶ They claim that »By centering on these go-betweens – persons here referred to as »cultural brokers« – we are directing the focus of research on cultural transfer and interreligious contact toward the agents, places and ways of exchange, cross-fertilization and communication. Such brokers«, they claim, »were active at courts of diverse religious and confessional affiliation throughout the Mediterranean region«. ¹⁷ Many contemporary historians will, I suspect, resonate with their emphasis on the »agents, places, and ways of exchange«, and may be looking to the broker concept as a way into these three interrelated domains of research.

Von der Höh, Jaspert, and Oesterle identify three broad usages of the term that are helpful for considering how wide a scope one might want to allow, or how much focus one might require, when using the term for one's own purposes.

11 Press, *Ambiguity and innovation*, 215.

12 Van Fleet, *Teachers as cultural brokers*.

13 Baron, *Cultural brokerage revisited*.

14 Connell Szasz, *Introduction*; Harvey and Rivett, *Colonial-indigenous language*, 453, n. 21.

15 Reimitz, *Cultural brokers of a common past, and especially *idem*, Historian as cultural broker*, which offers a genealogy of the term at pp. 43-44.

16 von der Höh *et al.*, *Courts, brokers and brokerage*, 9.

17 von der Höh *et al.*, *Courts, brokers and brokerage*, 9.

The first is, as they say, »rather broad, because it comprises all individuals who live in a cultural environment that is in some aspect different from their own. By communicating with these culturally alien surroundings, such individuals necessarily and often involuntarily perform cross-cultural brokerage«. ¹⁸ Secondly, a »narrower definition reduces cultural brokers to those who actively or deliberately transfer cultural messages or contents to a different environment«. ¹⁹ Thirdly, the »most exclusive understanding of the term is reserved for those go-betweens who mediate between two (or more) cultural spheres without being fully accepted members of either (or any) of them«. ²⁰ Examples of the first category may include »slaves, merchants or generally speaking experts who moved to a different cultural sphere«. ²¹ Examples of the second include »missionaries, in some cases diplomats, authors of travel accounts, and participants in religious dialogues«. ²² And the third category may include Jewish brokers active at Christian or Muslim courts. Von der Höh, Jasper, and Oesterle recognize the varied levels of precision underlying the concept's usage as potentially problematic. Nevertheless, they hope that a strength of their volume is a demonstration of »struggling with the adequacy of the term and by searching for modes of operationalizing it«. ²³ I suspect that many historians considering employing a concept such as this find themselves in similar aspirational circumstances.

None of the authors in von der Höh *et al.*'s volume reference the anglophone anthropological discussion of the cultural broker, though echoes of that scholarly trajectory can be seen in the three broad usage categories which the editors sketch out. While the capaciousness and flexibility of their three-fold notion of the broker concept, as well as the historical questions they pose are useful and productive, I think it also useful to fashion a more detailed operative definition of »cultural broker« based on the anthropological literature, one which I can, for instance, bring with me as I consider potential use cases in the history of Buddhism and as I consider how to move forward from the concept of »Indo-Tibetan« in a way that actively questions the nature and scope of this interface and its changes. To do this I will review the five points I have gathered from the key anthropological essays and then move to an example to ask: Does this operative definition assist us to better identify, examine and understand the process of cultural change within the long history of Buddhism's move through South Asia, Tibet and Central Asia?

To summarize, a robust operative definition of »cultural broker« that we might glean from the writings of anthropologists Wolf, Geertz, and Press includes five features. First, cultural brokers are social mediators even when brokering »culture«. Second, they mediate between small, often local social groups and large, often translocal social groups. Third, brokers must attend to the needs and desires of both the smaller and the larger groups. Fourth, this mediating role confers authority upon both the mediator and upon members of the local group who work with the broker to gain the cultural resources they offer. Finally, the cultural broker has the capacity, and perhaps even the mandate, to innovate.

18 von der Höh *et al.*, Courts, brokers and brokerage, 9.

19 von der Höh *et al.*, Courts, brokers and brokerage, 9.

20 von der Höh *et al.*, Courts, brokers and brokerage, 9-10.

21 von der Höh *et al.*, Courts, brokers and brokerage, 9.

22 von der Höh *et al.*, Courts, brokers and brokerage, 9.

23 von der Höh *et al.*, Courts, brokers and brokerage, 10.

Using the Cultural Broker Concept to Interpret a Pivotal Moment in Tibetan Buddhist History

To put the above definition most succinctly, the concept of »cultural broker« 1) consists of social mediation; 2) between local and translocal; 3) attending to needs of both contexts; 4) authority for both the mediator and members of the local context; and 5) the capacity and mandate for cultural innovation. There are certainly other features that we might add or swap; this is in fact a conversation that would benefit from taking place on multiple occasions across multiple and distinct times and places of historical inquiry. Nevertheless, with this operative definition in hand, I turn now to an example from the history of Tibetan cultural change and exchange. After this I will attempt to address the question of how well or poorly this definition »fits«, and then I will make some concluding remarks on the potential utility of the broker concept as well as some directions that it might lead scholars as they engage in the more generalized task of assessing models for better understanding cultural change.

For ease of reference, as I looked for easy examples, I reviewed the book *Sources of Tibetan Tradition*, an anthology of about two-hundred selections of Tibetan literature in English translation that I produced in collaboration with my colleagues Matthew Kapstein and Gray Tuttle. There are dozens of Tibetan sources that might benefit from inquiry using the lens of the broker concept in this volume, and practically countless more in the vast canonical and indigenous Tibetan-language literary corpus. In this contribution, one will have to be enough. The example I would like us to consider is an excerpt from a unique narrative depicting the debate over whether the funeral of the Tibetan emperor Tri Songdetsen should be carried out by Bönpo priests or Buddhist monks. This is the *Zas gtad gyi lo rgyus*, the »Account of Providing Food [for the Dead]«, itself included within important early narrative work on the Tibetan emperors and the introduction of Buddhism to Tibet, the *Dbā' bzhed*, or the *Testament of Wa*. This has been extensively analyzed in recent scholarship.²⁴ It is one of the few narratives that has received significant theoretical discussion within Tibetological research, and though the broker idea does not, to my knowledge, appear explicitly in this area of research, it is one of the primary venues of Tibetan historical scholarship where models of change have been discussed and debated.²⁵

I identify the iconic early Tibetan Buddhist monk, translator, and traveler Vairocana as the »cultural broker« here and have selected passages from this lengthy narrative to highlight his activities. When the story begins, Vairocana is in exile in eastern Tibet, far from the center of Tibetan imperial power. A highly redacted version of Pasang Wangdu and Hildegard Diemberger's translation of the passage reads as follows:

In the horse year (802) in the first spring month, the Tsenpo Tri Songdetsen passed away. As he was very young, [his] son Muné Tsenpo had little interest in the practice of the doctrine.

²⁴ See Doney, *Bringing Buddhism to Tibet*; Doney, Master Vairocana's journeys, and the references therein.

²⁵ See especially Dotson, *The dead and their stories*, and, although not about the narrative in question here, Doney, *Redescribing two Old Tibetan prayers*, which utilizes an historiographic model drawn from J. Z. Smith to great effect.

When it was to be decided to perform the funeral for [his] father, the Son of God, the black ministers ... in order to annihilate the Buddhist doctrine and in order to let the Bön be honored, they set up a big enclosure at Drakmar Tsomogur. Meanwhile... one hundred and twenty-seven Bönpo ... arrived from Phenyül in order to celebrate the funeral [of Tri Songdetsen].

At that time the son [of the king] Muné Tsenpo communicated to the assembly of the great uncle-minister: »In my dream of last night the Lord [Buddha] Sri Vairocana, [bodhisattva] Vajrapani, [and bodhisattva] Prince Mañjusri, together with father Tri Songdetsen were residing in the palace called Adakavati situated in Akanistha. Here they preached [authoritative] sources of the sutra and numerous narratives concerning the doctrinal tradition. Thinking about this omen, the funeral of my father, the Son of God, cannot be performed according to the Bönpo. It must be performed according to the white doctrine [of Buddhism]. The chief representative of Buddhism, the translators and the uncle-ministers participating in the great and the restricted assembly must discuss the issue in detail and find an agreement.«

Then [two messengers] ran day and night to... invite Pagor Vairocana ... [Afterward] the Buddhist monks... were to take part in the discussion, [but] the right row of seats was occupied by the Bönpo, the left by the ministers; in the center was the prince [the king's son, Muné Tsenpo], and as no row of seats was assigned to the monks, they felt humiliated. ... [M]aster Vairocana, wearing a big bamboo hat, holding a long stick, and wearing a golden cloak, paid deep homage to the prince [Muné Tsenpo]. [Then] leaning upon his stick, he stood behind [one minister], who was seated at the first place of the right row, under [the throne of] the ruler [Muné Tsenpo]. Feeling uneasy, the minister cast a glance behind and saw [mustard seeds used for exorcism] in the beard of Vairocana and got up with a start. He was immediately replaced by Vairocana and lost the whole right row.

[The displaced minister makes a long speech arguing for the efficacy of the Bönpo ritual in social, political, and magical perspectives, ending with the claim that the imperial tombs, presided over by Bönpo priests, are the source of Tibet's auspicious good fortune. In response, the monk Vairocana speaks directly to Tri Songdetsen's son, Muné Tsenpo:]

»... [B]ecause of this age of bad karma I learnt the language of Lhobel (the ›southern barbarians') and I wandered in all countries in the four directions under the sun. I was sent thereby to louse-ridden holes and pits of evil snakes. Thus [my] flesh dried up and [my] senses became dulled. Basing myself upon an extensive learning, I shall say just a few words in general.... [I]t is false to say that auspiciousness is due ... to the tombs of the deceased [...]. More auspicious than those is ... the [›glorious temple of Nalanda'] in India. There, thanks to the blessing of great faith in the holy doctrine and devotion toward the white side [of virtuous belief in Buddhism] ... the king of India and King Indrabhuti of Urgyen (Oddiyana)... did not die for fourteen generations and the descendants did not interrupt their lineage.« »...As far as the holy doctrine is concerned, it is preserved by logical precepts and scriptural authority. By performing virtuous deeds, one achieves higher rebirth, and by taking life one falls to a bad rebirth.

Like our lord, Tri Songdetsen, though he obtained for a moment a human body as a material appearance, [his] mind is in the state of buddhahood... I therefore request that the funeral for the Son of God be performed according to the Buddhist custom.« [The unseated minister said]: »Monks! The origin of your arguments came from the empty sky... The decisional power belongs to the king. If our advice is not followed, may [the king] decide what is better! May the monks hold the assembly of the palace! May the monks serve the lord! May the monks protect the land as border-guards!« And he shook himself in passion.

Nobody dared to answer. Vairocana replied again: »We monks can do it!« So, the Son of God was extremely delighted. Then, the monks celebrated the funeral in the white religious system ... Then the Lord Muné Tsenpo, Vairocana, and [another...] translated the precepts and the instructions of the true word [of Buddha] from the language of India to Tibetan. The son Muné Tsenpo transmitted the profound precepts and instructions of the true word [of Buddha] to those who were eager to learn.²⁶

If we, for the moment, think of the work of the cultural broker as 1) social mediation 2) within and between local and translocal groups while 3) attending to the needs of both contexts in 4) such a way that confers prestige on both parties and 5) involves innovation, we can ask how this helps us to see the work of Vairocana in this narrative.

1) First, we might notice that Vairocana mediates simultaneously at the levels of culture, politics, and social life: Culture because he brings new ritual, literature, and thought; political because he upsets the political status quo at the Tibetan imperial court, and social because he transforms the scope and authority of the young monastic body relative to both court life and public ritual life. If we privilege social interaction over cultural production, as it seems that Wolf did in his initial formation of the term, we might argue that Vairocana used culture instrumentally to mediate between competing claims about social relations at court. If we follow Geertz, we might afford a bit more causal efficacy to culture. Either way, Vairocana's moves as a mediator between multiple factions and using multiple resources are wonderfully complex.

2) Vairocana works between the local and the translocal when he argues for the efficacy and authority of Buddhist funeral ceremony in India and elsewhere, and when he claims his own authority on the basis of his wide travels to the South Asian heartland of Buddhism. He successfully reduces the importance of a local deity – and therefore of the social institutions composed of local specialists in charge of that deity's cult – at the emperor's court and places the resources of the Buddhist cosmopolis at the emperor's disposal.

3) We might call Vairocana's work »mediation« in the further sense that he must adjudicate between multiple groups, and all, including him, must make significant accommodations during mediation.

26 Wangu and Diemberger, *An emperor's funeral debated*, 150-155.

Note, for instance, that even though Buddhist ritual will now be used for the emperor's funeral, the emperor will not be cremated like the Buddha or other major Indian Buddhist figures, but rather entombed like the preceding emperors (The cremation of major political leaders would have to wait, it appears, until later centuries, when additionally, the stupa became the dominant container rather than the tomb. Even the embalmed remains of Dalai Lamas were interred in stupas and treated as cremated remains in terms of the rituals, myths, and funerary technologies that gave them social significance. In other words, Vairocana's use of Buddhist funerary ritual was highly selective in the case of the emperor).

4) In terms of advantages, we might note that Vairocana himself is freed from his exile and works now at the grace of the new emperor. The young emperor, for his part, gains the support of the new, translocally focused Buddhist monastic body, even if he loses a measure of support from local religious institution. Here it is useful to note that Vairocana is said to have subsequently worked in places as far away as Khotan in the maintenance of Buddhist temples and communities. The emperor, therefore, has gained an asset in his endeavors to expand imperial networks throughout central Asia, something that would have likely been far more difficult to achieve through the efforts of a relatively local tradition. Additionally, the emperor has gained a new theological mode of authority through Vairocana's work, for he is now considered to be an enlightened being, like the Buddhas, within a new, cosmically oriented imperium.

5) Finally, Vairocana is an innovator; he draws his new cultural modes of thought and practice from »the empty sky«, as his opponent puts it. In basic terms this is because he introduces new culture, largely derived from South Asian traditions, into the Tibetan cultural sphere. Emperor Tri Songdetsen is the first Tibetan king, on this narrative's account, to be commemorated in his funeral proceedings with Buddhist ritual tradition. More strongly, I would argue that in introducing this single new feature of translocal Buddhist culture into the local scene of Tibetan culture, Vairocana upends the entire social, cultural, political, and even economic order of the Tibetan court and sets the stage for the radical transformation of these domains in the centuries to come. His successful negotiation of the revised funeral ritual is a pivotal moment in Tibetan history, one which the broker concept helps us, I suggest, see in both a clearer and a more far-reaching light.

A rereading of this important narrative is aided, I suggest, by the application of a version of the broker concept drawn from anthropological literature (rather than strictly mediated through the subsequent historiographic literature mentioned above). Eric Wolf, Clifford Geertz, and others were concerned primarily with explaining social change in reference to cultural resources in specific historical contexts.

There are certainly other starting points for this throughout the social sciences: The entire episode might be better assessed through a social capital approach. Macrosociologist Michael Mann, for instance, identifies four sources of what he calls »social power«: economic, ideological, military, and political power.²⁷ In Mann's account, trade and negotiation between these four domains is a key engine of social and cultural change. Or I could analyze the relationships portrayed between Vairocana and all the other actors in the narrative using the microsociological approach of Randall Collins known as »interaction ritual«, which focuses on the intersection of levels of mutual focus in relation to shared emotional build-up among small groups.²⁸

Beginning either with a macro-focus on types of capital or with a micro-focus on interactions between individuals could lead us in a very different direction than beginning with the lone figure charged with moving those types of capital – the broker – and yet still lead to enlightening results. At worst, the concept of cultural broker does neither well, for it risks failing to help us explain the influence of either large-scale factors such as trade, tradition, or environment, or the psychology of intimate encounters between individuals and small groups as they exchange and change cultural ideas and practices. At best, the concept inhabits a productive middle-ground between macro- and micro- viewpoints. It allows us to analyze moments of contest, negotiation, change, and continuity such as the Tibetan funerary transformation initiated, in the above account, by »the cultural broker« Vairocana. It also allows us, perhaps encourages us, to treat these moments and the figures within these moments as working in both local and translocal contexts. The cultural broker concept thus offers affordances at either the macro or the micro levels or, ideally, both at once. Additionally, if we retain a rich operative definition of the cultural broker, one that pays special attention to the broker's innovative capacity, when we move between micro and macro views, we may be usefully encouraged to treat neither context – neither the local nor the distant – as immutable entities, but rather as social domains where the transformative work of the broker is operative more often than not. It is, as it were, brokerage all the way down. Helmut Reimitz summarizes this particular advantage of the concept well:

...[B]rokers should not be understood as mediation between clearly distinguishable and fixed cultural systems. Rather [brokerage] should be seen as a creative performance in social contexts characterized by a complicated interplay of local and extra-local influences. These brokers not only develop new perspectives for the integration of their societies, but they also maintain the tensions and differences between different (real or imagined) social groups and identities which provide the dynamic of their action, and the basis of their social prestige. Thus they do not simply abrogate social difference, but rather provide new frameworks for integration in a larger whole that could be shared by all of the different social groups and identities involved.²⁹

27 Mann, *Sources of Social Power*.

28 Collins, *Interaction Ritual Chains*.

29 Reimitz, *Historian as cultural broker*, 44.

Here is an opportunity to insert some measure of analytical insight into the term I began with: »Indo-Tibetan«. It is the relationship between the two poles of this compound that we seek to better understand. They are not one thing, but neither are they two distinct things. The power of the term, following Reimitz and others, might be seen in the hyphen, the »-«. This is where the cultural broker lives, and this is where the concept of cultural broker centers our attention.

Conclusions: Using the Concept to Understand Change and Continuity

As I conclude, I should admit that I have treated my source text as being rhetorically flat or neutral for the purposes of demonstrating a possible application of the broker concept to an historical event. Where the anthropologist, presumably, is observing and recording real-time events, the historian uses sources which are themselves always interested, arguing for a particular vision of the past. Given that the *Testament of Wa* is told from a broadly pro-Buddhist perspective, it is natural that one of Tibetan civilization's first Buddhist monks, Vairocana, would be portrayed in a positive light, as successful in his endeavors, and as triumphant in any social and cultural conflict. An important question that I have not engaged with here, then, is how the broker concept might help us to better understand the rhetoric used to portray broker figures and to triangulate between historical events, literary representations of those events, and our analysis of human interaction in the past. I commented above that Vairocana's work as a broker is »wonderfully complex« because he works simultaneously at the levels of politics, social life, and culture. What I should say is that the *Testament of Wa's* portrayal of his work is wonderfully complex. And this assertion raises a new set of questions about the writer or redactor's aims, the goals of manuscript and print producers – the »publishers« – and the range of possible readers' receptions.³⁰ To address these questions would necessarily involve attending to both the contexts and actors in the time and place described in a given account and those of the composition of that account.³¹ This is particularly challenging when using narrative literature such as the example used here. Those working with documentary evidence rather than narrative may face different challenges.

In either case, however, the cultural broker concept can lend useful focus in the work of explaining historical change and continuity. Regardless of the conceptual or documentary starting points, beginning with a clearly proscribed set of concepts, such as the apparatus of mediation and innovation that the broker concept helps us to assemble, does much to move beyond the experience of historiographic standstill that terms like »Indo-Tibetan« promote. I said at the beginning that a problem with this notion, which was and perhaps still is to some extent a de facto historiographic concept, is that it implies a cohesive cultural object that is different than either the source or the target contexts, but that can be only a reified abstraction of a given cultural production. Yet the deeper problem is that this synthesized object treats the transformation of what we deem to be »Indian Buddhism« into what we deem to be »Tibetan Buddhism« as a *fait accompli*. It treats »Indo-Tibetan« Buddhism as an *object*, when it would be better to treat it as a *process*. And in so doing, it encourages us to focus on the object (however well or poorly conceived) rather than the nature of the process – on, in other words, the problem of change.

30 See Willis and Gonaktsang, *An archeology of the Dba' bzhed* manuscript.

31 Dotson, *The dead and their stories*, undertakes this work.

For historians, change is perhaps the central object of inquiry. How does one phenomenon transform into another over time? This is the question that is always on our lips. And yet the question is so easy to state, data for analysis so abundant, and sufficiently explicit ways of devising an answer so ready at hand that it is perhaps too often easy to forget the complexity, the depths, the horizons, the *mystery* that both cultural change and continuity represent. Not all historians can or should be philosophers of history, but we all act, when we make claims about the causes and effects of cultural change, as philosophers, as psychologists, and as social theorists, for each claim we make rests upon so many implicit notions of what makes humans do what they do. As a colleague in neuroscience once said to me, »The biggest problem in neuroscience is that *I* am not *you*. I do not know, really, what it is like to be you«. ³² In other words, because human individuality is an irreducible limitation, any theory about human action necessarily rests upon arguments based on analogy from self to other.

And if the cognitive scientist finds individual identity to be an almost intractable challenge for making claims about the nature of human action – culture included – then the historian is faced with this problem multiple times over. Like the cognitive scientist, the historian seeks to analyze and understand the behaviors of human actors and the reasons for that behavior. Unlike the cognitive scientist, who works with human subjects in a lab environment, the historian holds no access to direct testimony, no control populations, no chance to move from brain to mind and back again, from biology to culture, no chance for direct observation. What we do have as historians are concepts that structure and guide our investigations, and the best concepts are those that promote and aid inquiry into change as explicitly as possible. In the simple »experiment« carried out in this paper – sketching out an operational definition of one such term and reading through a narrative of great historical importance for the history of Tibet and the polities it came into contact with – I find that the concept of cultural broker is valuable for its potential to offer fresh insight into well-known historical moments. Were we to expand the number and varieties of examples from the fields of Indian and Tibetan Buddhist studies alone, it would be best to try other conceptual starting points on the same narrative, as well as the same concept of cultural broker on many different examples from the history of, yes, »Indo-Tibetan« Buddhism. For now, I leave the reader with a question: Has the broker concept figured in your research, and what other analogous conceptual starting points have you found to be valuable for your own work? Attempting to answer these questions may yield a new tool in the conceptual toolbox, and it will always result in a productive assessment of the tools already in use in one's scholarly workshop.

32 James A. Coan, The University of Virginia, personal communication.

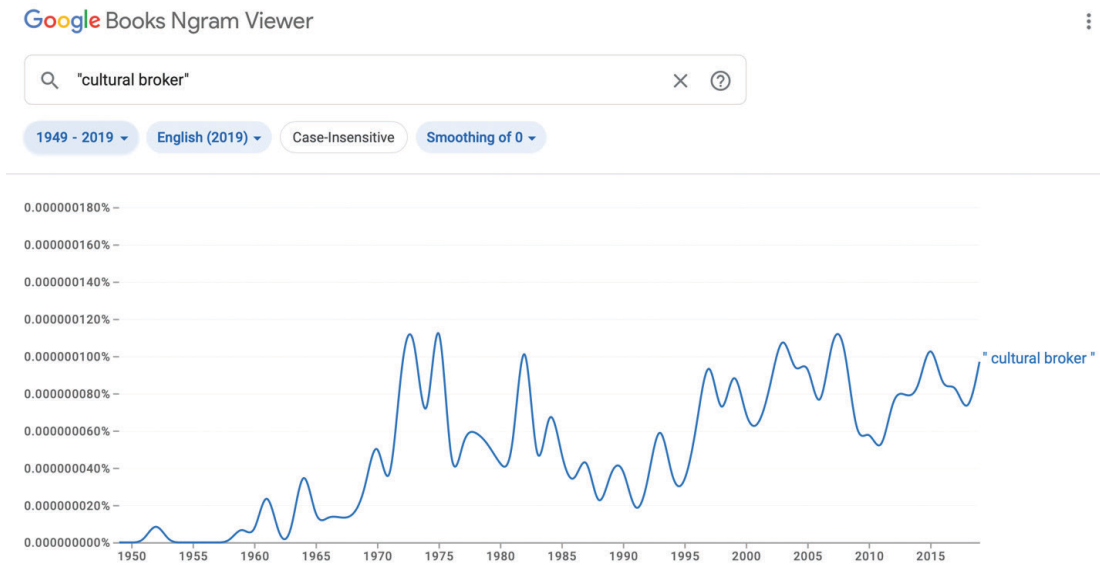


Figure 1: Google Books Ngram Viewer: »Cultural broker« in books between 1949 and 2019

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