The Travelling Carpet

Mobility, Trade and Identity along the Karakoram Highway

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I had already been in Pakistan for about two weeks, which I had spent mostly between Islamabad and Rawalpindi. I had already interviewed several Uyghur migrants and two former engineers, who had worked on the construction of the Karakoram Highway (KKH) in the 1970s and met some traders I knew from previous fieldwork in China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. On that day, a Monday in February 2013, I visited the Pakistan-China Institute, a think-tank aiming at promoting Sino-Pakistani ties and 'people to people' exchanges. There, I spoke with one of the assistant editors of *Youlin Magazine*, a monthly publication co-sponsored by the International Culture Exchange Association of Xinjiang. In the afternoon, I spent a few hours at Quaid-i-Azam University, where a colleague from the Department of Anthropology helped me locate a few Master's theses I was interested in. One caught my attention: it focused on carpets and carpet-making, featuring fascinating images of how designs were rendered on paper and written into what the author called 'carpet language' or 'design script' (see Figure 3). I was not sure whether this would be useful for my doctoral research – which centred on trade and migration along the Karakoram Highway between China and Pakistan – but I decided to make copies of it just in case. After a *chai* with a couple of instructors from the Department of Anthropology, and quite happy with a productive day of fieldwork, I headed back into town to have dinner with Martin Sökefeld.

I had never met Martin before, but we had been in touch throughout the previous year via email. I had contacted him regarding some of his work in Gilgit-Baltistan and asked if he knew any members of the Uyghur community in Gilgit. Martin put me in touch with colleagues at Quaid-i-Azam University as well as a few other scholars I would meet during my time in Pakistan. In previous months, I had also applied for a short-term fellowship to spend some months in Munich, with the intention of writing a chapter of my thesis under his supervision. Only two weeks before our first meeting in Islamabad, the application turned out to be successful and I was thus keen to thank Martin in person for his help. He had supported me without really knowing me – a PhD student from the University of Aberdeen.

Martin suggested that we meet at Kabul Restaurant, in Jinnah Super. "I am already longing for Kabuli kebab," he wrote in an email the previous January, as we planned our meet-up in Islamabad. I was rather happy with his choice, partly for my own appreciation of Afghan food, but also for the central location of the restaurant and its proximity to some of my favourite carpet shops. The food, to be sure, did not disappoint, and over dinner we spent a couple of hours talking about the Karakoram Highway, the state of construction work around the Attabad Lake and trade with China. Given my background and experience in Xinjiang, I knew a lot about the Chinese side of the border, but much of what Martin told me about Gilgiti traders was new. I left the restaurant convinced that I would have a productive time in Munich the following summer, and with a very positive impression of Martin.

Following dinner that day, I did not go straight to my guesthouse. Instead, I decided to stop by 'Saarouq Carpets', a small shop tucked away on the second floor of a rather shabby building in one of the least busy areas of Jinnah Super. During my time in Islamabad, I had already been to Saarouq Carpets twice: I liked what they offered and enjoyed talking with the owner, Arslan, even more. Originally from Afghanistan, Arslan had inherited the shop and a distinct passion for carpets from his father. Over the years, they had gathered an impressive collection, with some unique Turkmen pieces. My own appreciation of carpets, I had told Arslan the first time we met, grew out of the time I spent in Kashgar, in

Xinjiang, over previous years of travel and research. There, not only did I learn about local designs, but I also had a chance to see some beautiful Afghan, Kazakh and even Iranian carpets. Arslan, it turned out, was quite interested in learning more about Xinjiang carpets. He had seen a few 'pomegranate' pieces, he told me, but he would have liked to see more. I promised that I would come back with my laptop so that I could show him some pictures I took in Kashgar. That evening, I did just that – and we spent a couple of hours browsing through carpet pictures and talking about what makes a good example. I could never grow tired of those conversations, and, apparently, neither could he.

Over the following weeks, I returned to Arslan's shop several times and purchased a few carpets for friends in Europe who had asked me to keep an eye out for good specimens. With this goal in mind, I visited many carpet shops, including Arslan's, and took pictures of some of the best on display. I then shared those pictures and made inquiries about specific pieces, at times negotiating prices and placing orders. For me, this was not about making a profit – I never got anything out of those exchanges, and I bought fewer than ten carpets in total. Nevertheless, I not only enjoyed spending time in these shops, but this activity also allowed me to gain precious insights into the nature of commercial exchanges in both Xinjiang and Pakistan. More than that, though, I learned how carpets represented a unique commodity exchanged along the Karakoram Highway and how the history of their designs could shed additional light on the nature of transnational mobilities in the area. In other words, from being a small side-interest, a personal passion, carpets played a serendipitous role (Hazan and Hertzog 2011; Rivoal and Salazar 2013) in how I thought about the Karakoram Highway and the nature of cross-border exchanges between China and Pakistan.

In this chapter, I build on my experience with and among carpet dealers in Islamabad and Kashgar to recount the little-known story of Xinjiang carpets from Khotan and their unique designs, as these have travelled between China, northern Pakistan and Afghanistan since the opening of the Karakoram Highway in the 1980s. Through this story, I show how Khotanese carpets have become both a symbol of local identity and the transnational mobility of goods and capital, and how the Karako-

ram Highway features prominently in these narratives. I conclude by discussing how this example can contribute to ongoing ethnographic studies of roads and by commenting on the value of multi-sided ethnography. In doing so, and in line with the purpose of this volume, I show how a side-interest, a distraction, a personal passion, can become a surprising opportunity for seeing connections and dynamics that would otherwise remain out of sight.

I begin, however, with a brief history of the road that made these exchanges possible: the Karakoram Highway, or KKH.

The Karakoram Highway

The People's Republic of China and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan share just over 500km of (contested) border in the high Karakoram mountains. The boundary itself was agreed upon by the two countries in 1963 and has never been recognised by the Indian government, thus making it a very sensitive area of both connections and disjunctions (Lamb 1973, Fravel 2008). Following the 1963 agreement, China and Pakistan developed one of the world's closest bilateral relations. Leaders of both countries, in fact, rarely miss an opportunity to remark that their relationship is 'higher than the Himalayas and deeper than the Indian Ocean' and 'sweeter than honey'. Throughout the decades, this pompous vocabulary has taken some concrete form in various coordinated projects, with an explicit effort to improve the security and economic ties between the two countries (Small 2015). Surely the most outstanding result of this relationship is represented by the Karakoram Highway, which connects Kashgar to Islamabad (Figure 1). In addition to its obvious strategic value, the road, open to civilian traffic since 1982, was built to foster trade and enhance both countries' control over the border regions (Kreutzmann 1991; Stellrecht 1997; Haider 2005). For Pakistan the road provided improved access to the disputed territory of Kashmir and has become the main factor in the economic and political integration of Gilgit-Baltistan with the rest of the country (Sökefeld 2005).

Figure 1: The Karakoram Highway

Map designed by the author

Within this context, the KKH remains today the region's most important infrastructure, and while it would be wrong to argue that Gilgit-Baltistan was isolated before the construction of the KKH (Sökefeld 2014; Stellrecht 1998: 80–1), it nevertheless remains evident that the road has radically transformed the region (Karrar 2020). As Sherbaz Ali Bercha, librarian at the Gilgit Municipal Library and historian of the region, told me:

> Before the KKH was opened, people here in Gilgit-Baltistan were self-sufficient. The KKH connected us to Pakistan, which is a good and important thing, but there are also negative aspects. For instance, our dialect has been hurt. And, most importantly, now we are completely dependent on the road. If the road is blocked for some sectarian violence, or for some natural disaster, we suffer too much (Interview, June 2013).

The issue of Gilgit-Baltistan's dependency on the KKH is a topic of frequent discussion in the region, particularly when the road is obstructed for natural or political reasons and shops throughout the region run out of certain items. In fact, over 30 years after its official opening, the Karakoram Highway remains today a precarious infrastructure. The highway's accessibility is constantly threatened not only by natural factors such as landslides and precipitations, but also by its use during protests and demonstrations of various kinds, or the closure of some of its sections due to sectarian violence and other security reasons. Nonetheless, from its very conception, it seems to express powerful promises: connectivity, development, mobility and business opportunities. Although, here as in other contexts, roads often fail to fulfil most of their promises, the powerful sense of mobility that they embody remains generally untouched (Campbell 2012; Khan 2006; Jamali 2013). In the case of Pakistan, Haines has persuasively shown how the Karakoram Highway was part of a national integration, modernisation and development project. Through the trope of the 'Silk Road', moreover, the highway became a major connector between an imagined past and a likewise imagined future (Haines 2012). Promises of 'progress and prosperity' have more recently taken the shape of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and its integration as one key vector of China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (Oliveira et al. 2020; Rippa 2020a, 2020b).

To understand how infrastructural promises are negotiated on the local level, Penny Harvey and Hannah Knox (2012) apply the notion of 'enchantment'. They suggest that the experience of roads' dereliction and abandonment, for instance, "strengthens the desire for them and con-

stantly renews the sense that sometime soon they will appear and life will change for the better" (534). Rather than diminishing people's faith in the positive impact of road development, or in the government's ability to deliver it, moments of failure can thus strengthen the promises that infrastructure holds. This dynamic is confirmed by my observations along the Karakoram Highway, where regular encounters with the material disintegration of the road, or its closure for political reasons, seem to reinforce people's expectations and belief in the ability of the road to improve their futures. In the case of the highway, the framework is even more complex, given the transnationality of the road, a condition which – particularly in Gilgit-Baltistan – seems to intensify those expectations. In the region, there is a widespread belief in both China's capacity and commitment and in the proclaimed strategic relevance of the CPEC, which has often led locals to conclude that, this time, "Pakistan cannot forget us."[1]

The Karakoram Highway, in this sense, possesses a subversive power, too. Being the product of a joint effort by the governments of China and Pakistan, it has become the locus of thoughtful discussions and painful comparisons. In the Pakistani context, as mentioned, the road has been a major means for channelling state power and forging the nation-state (Haines 2012). This narrative, produced and sponsored by the Pakistani state, currently faces a major contradiction posed by the conditions of the road itself. At the time of my fieldwork, in 2012 and 2013, for instance, the highway was blocked due to a major landslide in Attabad, and a Chinese company – the China Road and Bridge Corporation (CRBC) – was constructing the necessary tunnels around the lake as well as undertaking important upgrading work on the Khunjerab-Raikot section of the road. In the eyes of most inhabitants of Gilgit-Baltistan, this represented a sign of Pakistan's incapacity – and/or unwillingness – to invest seriously in the region (Sökefeld 2012). This perception, certainly connected with the status of Gilgit-Baltistan within Pakistan, seems, then, to be

1 On the feeling of abandonment, and even betrayal, felt by many in Gilgit-Baltistan, due to the region's lack of political representation and right, see Ali (2019).

constantly reinforced by encounters with Chinese road workers, or by the experience of the road itself.

Cross-border traders have an even more defined idea of China's role in building and maintaining the Karakoram Highway. Throughout my fieldwork, I had countless discussions about the different conditions of the road on the two sides of the Khunjerab Pass – smooth on the Chinese side, bumpy and often interrupted on the Pakistani side. A direct experience of the highway itself thus produces narratives that often contradict the official version sponsored by the central states, and in this way it becomes a mirror for what are considered the lies, weaknesses and empty promises of the state. On the other hand, the Karakoram Highway also provides an emblematic example of Chinese state power, another topic of numerous discussions, particularly in Gilgit-Baltistan. In some of those discussions, the road becomes a means through which the Chinese state is attempting to infiltrate the region: it is not only an infrastructure for economic development, but also a tool for social, cultural and even political change. Many people in Gilgit-Baltistan shared with me their fear of losing their own culture and traditions, or even their limited political and economic independence. To borrow an expression from Harvey and Knox, this seems to be yet another case of *disjunctive doubling*, i.e., "where roads are dreamed of as solutions to a pervasive sense of abandonment and underdevelopment, and yet dreaded for their proven capacity to destroy fragile natural and social environments" (2015: 135).

Over the course of my fieldwork, and mainly driven by my personal interest in carpets, I also came to appreciate some of the more subtle ways in which the Karakoram Highway affects and engenders social lives in China and Pakistan. Below, I discuss the example of Khotani carpets and their circulation across the Karakoram. As several recent studies point out, objects are both bearers and makers of social change – and carpets represent a case in point (Dzüvichü and Baruah 2019; Tagliacozzo and Chang 2011). More generally, as I discuss towards the end, such an object-oriented approach can help us appreciate some of the least apparent consequences of road construction and can thus represent a welcome contribution to the growing field of infrastructure studies in anthropology.

Transnational carpets

Different kinds of carpets move along the Karakoram Highway in opposite directions. Shortly after the KKH was opened for civilian use in 1982, a few Pakistani dealers began to transport handmade carpets to Kashgar. Most were either made in Peshawar or Afghanistan; occasionally, however, Iranian, Turkmen and even Uzbek pieces were sent to Xinjiang as well. Most of these carpets were quite expensive and not meant for the local Uyghur market; rather, they were intended for Western – and increasingly Han Chinese – tourists visiting Kashgar. Indeed, a few carpet shops opened around the main touristic spots, namely the Chini Bagh Hotel, the main bazaar and the Idgah Mosque area. During my fieldwork, I repeatedly visited these places and became particularly close to one local carpet dealer: I shall call him 'Polat'.

Polat was born in a small village on the outskirts of Kashgar, and as a young man he used to visit the city weekly to sell leather and vegetables at the local bazaars. One day, he told me, he visited a small carpet market in Kashgar and thought about his home village, where a few families were still weaving these items in the traditional way. The next time he travelled to Kashgar, he brought a few of these carpets with him and immediately sold them, making a good profit. "This is how I became a carpet dealer", he told me. "It was 1987, and I didn't know much about carpets back then" (interview, May 2013). Shortly afterwards, he met some Pakistani dealers and learned that they were not only interested in selling Afghani carpets, but also in buying old local pieces. He thus travelled extensively around Xinjiang and collected an impressive number of old rugs, particularly 'Khotani', some of which are extremely valuable. 'Khotani' carpets were made around Khotan, in the south of Xinjiang, once famous for producing these items with very peculiar designs, including complex compositions of pomegranates and large medallions. Polat bartered many of those carpets with Pakistani dealers in exchange for new Afghani pieces. In 2001, he opened his own shop.

Polat was not the only Uyghur trader involved in this kind of business, and hundreds of old Khotani pieces in those years were moved across the Karakoram into Pakistan, from where they would be sold to

international dealers across the world (Mascelloni 2015). Today, Polat told me, it is difficult to find old Khotani pieces in good condition, and as a result he has stopped searching for them around Xinjiang. Although he still owns a few of them, his main business now lies in selling new Afghani pieces to Western and Han Chinese tourists. Among those pieces, however, some are weaved in a 'Khotani' design similar to the old ones he once sold to the Pakistani dealers. He explained this to me in the following way:

> Nowadays, people in Khotan don't make good-quality carpets anymore. But the design is very beautiful, so now they make them in Afghanistan. They copied the design from the old carpets I sold to the Pakistani, and now they bring me new ones. This [pointing at one of those carpets] is made in Afghanistan, but the design is from Khotan. It's a local design (interview, May 2013).

Figure 2: Old (above) and new (below) Khotanese carpets.

Photos by the author

Although a close examination of old and new Khotanese pieces would reveal significant differences in the complexity of their design, and the quality of the wool and that of the dyes, the resemblance is still significant (see Figure 2). More interestingly, for the argument of this chapter, this 're-localisation' of the production of Khotanese carpets happened entirely because of the Karakoram Highway. Not only are carpets woven today in Afghanistan imported into China via the highway, but many of the designs themselves have travelled in the opposite direction on the same road. Even more significantly, in the process of selling these carpets to tourists, this whole story was continuously re-enacted by Polat as if it were adding value to the carpet. As I observed – and helped – him on several occasions he was trying to sell a carpet, I noticed that he particularly insisted on the trans-local character of the piece, pointing out that although the design was from Xinjiang, it was made in Afghanistan and had been brought to Kashgar by Pakistani traders through the Karakoram Highway. The narrative concerning the carpet, its story, eventually seemed to become as relevant as the object itself. The carpet was valuable not only because of the originality of its design, or the quality of the knot work, but also because of its adventurous, transnational story. It was treated by Polat as both a local and a transregional product, a symbol of Uyghurs' long and rich cultural history and an indicator of Kashgar's historical role as a key trading hub and of the international flows of contemporary trade.

Within this story, the Karakoram Highway played a double role. It served as a prime artery for the exchange of goods (carpets) and knowledge (carpet design), but it also figured in the stories related to these carpets as a dangerous, exotic and inaccessible mountain road. These carpets, in my discussions with Polat, seemed to embody a local, Khotanese tradition as well as a trans-local element well-expressed by the Karakoram Highway, which functioned both as a form of narrative and fascination. The highway had thus become part of the carpet, defining its trajectory and contributing to its story.

Roads and carpets

After flipping through some of my carpet pictures from Kashgar, Arslan and I continued looking at some of the items he had in his Islamabad shop. At one point, he unrolled a carpet I had not seen before, in a particular design I did not recognise. I asked him if he knew what that design was called. His answer was rather straightforward:

> Look, I don't really know the name of this [carpet's] design. My father used to tell me that when he was young, they knew three or four designs. Now there are hundreds, so dealers who don't know them will make up some name just to sell more. I won't lie to you. And it's not important. Look at it [he points at the carpet]: what really matters is not the name of the design but the quality of the material. Look at the knots [he turns the carpet over and scratches a row of knots with his finger nail], look at the pile [he brushes the pile with his palm], this is a good carpet. This is a very good quality carpet; you can wash it a hundred times and it won't wear out. This is what's really important (interview, February 2013).

This conversation echoes what many carpet dealers in China and Pakistan regularly hinted at throughout my fieldwork, namely the important difference between the design of a carpet and its material characteristics, such as the quality of the wool and of the knot work. But how do the design and materiality of a carpet inform one another? What are the circumstances through which a piece comes to be made – and how? These are questions I kept asking myself during my fieldwork in China and Pakistan, prompted by encounters and conversations such as the one I just described. Over time, I recognised, I began thinking not only about carpets, but also about roads in similar terms. In the case of the KKH, this turned out to be an useful exercise in my attempt to reconcile the promised function of the road, with its (dire) material conditions. Once again, from being a small side interest, the stories of carpets and their design serendipitously informed my thinking about infrastructure, mo-

bility and identity along the Karakoram Highway. For this reason, I now turn to weaving, before heading back to roads and trade.

In anthropology, among the authors who have engaged with the process of weaving, Tim Ingold's discussion of 'making' is particularly interesting (2010). Ingold argues against what he calls the 'hylomorphic' model of creation, based on the Aristotelian principle that creation is a coming together of form (*morphe*) and matter (*hyle*). The hylomorphic model, accordingly, envisages that a pre-existing design is imposed by the creator upon passive matter. Against this view, he contends that making is rather a practice of weaving: "not the imposition of form on pliant substance but the slicing and binding of fibrous material" (2010: 92). The hylomorphic model is thus turned upside down, and primacy is given to "the processes of formation as against their final products, and to the flows and transformations of materials as against states of matter" (2010: 92). Furthermore, materials are constantly in a state of variation, and to separate the design from the making, or to disengage it from the material, means avoiding such consideration, thus treating the material for what it cannot be: a passive recipient of human agency.

Returning to the carpet trade along the Karakoram Highway, the examples of old Khotani pieces brought to Afghanistan and 'copied' seem to fit quite well within the 'hylomorphic' paradigm. Apparently, a specific design is taken and copied, probably sketched on a piece of paper and then hung beside the loom so that the weaver does not lose track of it (Figure 3). And yet, the carpets I used to see in Polat's shop reveal another story, particularly when compared with the old pieces he possessed. The reproduction of old designs holds a creative element. The general idea of the design did remain similar, and certain motifs – such as the typical pomegranate – look almost the same, but then each and every carpet has some interesting singularities. First, the dyes and the quality of the wool are radically different, which brings about different changes in the design itself, as different kinds of wool imply different degrees of 'precision' in the weaving process, while 'new' colours allow for different combinations. The new Khotani carpets, moreover, included in their designs a few geometric details and motifs that did not appear in the old ones. In some cases, a distinct Caucasian or Iranian influence was clearly dis-

cernible. Each carpet, thus, not only was inspired by a specific design, but also expressed the personality and the taste of the weaver – or, more likely, echoed some changes in the demand of the market.

Figure 3: Carpet language / "design script"

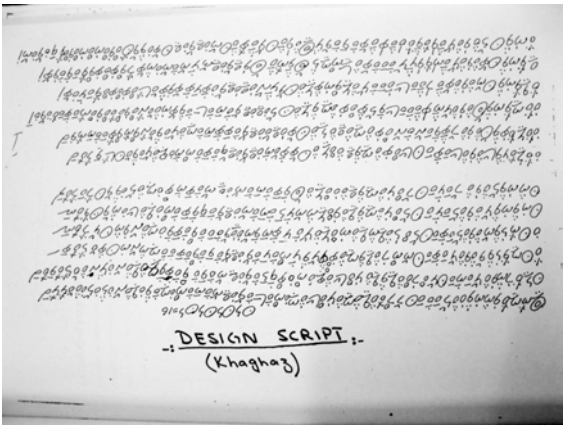

Photo from Mushtaq 2009

In fact, even when hung on the loom, a 'design script' always leaves room for some sort of improvisation and inventiveness. Mistakes are quite common, rather unsurprisingly, given the conditions where the weaving process takes place, as the work of small-scale weavers can be constantly interrupted by other activities that need to be carried out. Even professional weavers – as anybody who has ever visited a carpet factory must have realised – work in very confusing environments where people chat, eat and pray around the looms. The design of a carpet, therefore, rather than being simply the result of the imposition of form upon matter, not only exists exclusively through this 'matter', but also owes its characteristics to a complex entanglement of various elements: the ideal design, the quality of the wool, the taste of the weaver, work conditions and so on. In other words, design and materials do not

exist as a separate dichotomy but instead represent a coming together of ideal motifs and mundane instances, symbolic forms and practicalities. In this sense, carpets function as a particularly apt metaphor for roads: not in that they connect, but precisely because the connections they engender inevitably contribute to re-making social, cultural and political worlds. Furthermore, as the interruption (in trade and mobility) caused by the Attabad Lake shows, such connections are never given once and for all: they are instead continuously challenged, shaped and informed by the lives of other forms and materials.

This understanding of roads is not new in the growing anthropological literature on the subject, and so they been shown to allow the ethnographer to work through and across different categories and disciplinary boundaries and represent an ideal point of entry for anthropological analysis (Dalakoglou and Harvey 2012: 2; Dalakoglou 2010, 2012; Mostowlansky 2011; Argounova Low 2012; Rest and Rippa 2019). Echoing this literature, and moving from my experiences across many carpet shops, I address the Karakoram Highway not only as an object of analysis per se, but also as an inclusive space created by economic, social, cultural and material interactions. The road is thus understood as both a cross-contextual category of analysis and as the privileged locus of ethnographically bounded, localised dynamics.

The example of handmade carpets further highlights the connections between roads and the commodities that travel along them, hence showing the complexity of material encounters along the Karakoram Highway and the different directions in which the road seems to run. Polat's story shows the entanglement of local and transnational, personal and material, which characterises encounters along the road. Carpets are made in Afghanistan, based on a Khotanese design, and are sold in Kashgar as exotic products that have travelled through the high passes of South and Central Asia. In Kashgar's carpet shops, moreover, this transnational character is combined with the origin of the design, renewing a sense of belonging and proximity to the Khotanese tradition. When dealing with Western and Han Chinese tourists, as shown above, these two elements help (without apparent contradiction) add value to the carpets, as visitors often seem stunned by the mixture of tradition and trans-locality

they seem to reflect. To put it differently, as a road like the KKH cannot be studied without considering the expectations, promises and fears it continuously evokes, in Polat's shop, a carpet would lose meaning and value if detached from its story.

Conclusion

A road project might be completed, but as shown by the continuous making and unmaking of the KKH since its opening in the early 1980s, it is never quite finished. Carpets, too, might be woven; yet, throughout their lifetimes they might be repaired, their colours will fade and some of their corners will be eaten by bugs. Even more so, their stories will take thousands of different shapes and forms. Indeed, as Ingold puts it, nothing is ever finished, i.e., "everything may be something, but being something is always on the way to becoming something else" (2011: 3). Ingold makes a similar point while discussing what he sees as a 'radical distinction' between objects and things. Things, as opposed to the completeness and finitude of objects, are "a gathering of materials in movement" (2012: 436). Moreover, a thing does not stand before us "as a fait accompli, complete in itself" (2010: 96), but rather as potential "for further making, growth, and transformation" (2012: 435). The world of things, in other words, is a world of becoming, of transformation, namely a lifeworld. Things, as I have shown, particularly concerning carpets and roads, are necessarily intermingled with the meanings and narratives they continuously evoke. Meanings, however, are not simply 'attached' to objects by their human users or creators; rather, they emerge in contextualised encounters between things and actors, places and stories. The advantage of ethnography is precisely its ability to address these encounters in the details where lifeworlds are continuously generated and through often unexpected opportunities that emerge through fieldwork.

Therein lies a crucial element of much ethnographic research that needs to be explicitly addressed: the passion and care that drives it and the often seemingly futile interests of the ethnographer that shape it. The example of my work with carpets outlined in this chapter is an apt exam-

ple in this regard. Carpets ended up playing a significant role throughout the course of my fieldwork. At first, however, my interest was due simply to the fact that I found handmade carpets, rugs and kilims utterly beautiful and fascinating. Carpet shops were places where I enjoyed spending my time, and conversations with carpet dealers occupied a significant part of my days. I also had the opportunity to see weavers at work, an experience which produced important insights for my own research. Carpets thus became an object of my investigations, and as this chapter reflects, an important tool for thinking about roads and transnationalism in the context of the KKH.

To take a cue from the title of this volume, one could say that ethnographic research is always – and inevitably – multi-sided. Our passions, private lives and personal trajectories often drive not only *where* we work but how we conduct our research, who we spend time with and the issues we attempt to unravel. Were it not for my appreciation of carpets, for instance, I would probably never have met Polat and Arslan, nor would I have ever learned about how carpet design travelled between China, Pakistan and Afghanistan, affecting an entire segment of the market. Possibly, I would have ended up with a rather different understanding of what a road like the KKH is and what it means for those who travel and trade along it.

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