

Himalayan Studies Elsewhere

THE HIMALAYA PROGRAM AT THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA, CANADA

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Abstract

The Himalaya Program at the University of British Columbia located in Vancouver, Canada, draws upon faculty expertise, student engagement, and community partnerships to create a transdisciplinary hub for sharing knowledge about the Himalayan region, including Bhutan, China, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and the Tibetan cultural zones that traverse all of these countries. Since its founding in 2015, the UBC Himalaya Program has launched two principal initiatives: a regular event series hosting lectures by international interdisciplinary scholars focused on the Himalayan region, and annual summer community-engaged Nepali and Tibetan language courses. The Himalaya Program has become a leading North American center for Himalayan Studies, the only university in Canada to teach Nepali and one among a small number of Canadian universities offering colloquial Tibetan.

Introduction

Founded in 2015, the Himalaya Program at the University of British Columbia in the coastal city of Vancouver, Canada has quickly emerged as a leading transdisciplinary hub for knowledge sharing and community partnership for the academic understanding of the Himalayan region, including Bhutan, China, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and the Tibetan cultural zones that traverse all of these countries. The programme was founded by a group of faculty members at the University of British Columbia (UBC) who identified a need for better collaboration and knowledge mobilization on Himalayan topics in teaching, research and public outreach.

With each year, the Himalaya Program has become more widely recognised and institutionalized at the University of British Columbia, having received support from the UBC Faculty of Arts, the Teaching and Learning Enhancement Fund (TLEF), the Centre for Community Engaged Learning (CCEL), the School of Public Policy and Global Affairs (SPPGA), the Institute of Asian Research (IAR), and the Department of Asian Studies since its establishment. Since 2015, the programme has expanded to offer a regular event series with a range of diverse speakers, along with a variety of innovative language learning opportunities. Most notably, the Himalaya Program has designed, developed and delivered an annual summer intensive community-engaged language learning programme for both the Nepali and Tibetan languages. This is the only credit-bearing programme for learning Nepali anywhere in Canada, and one among a handful for colloquial Tibetan, making the UBC Himalaya Program a truly unique learning initiative.

What does the Himalaya Program do?

Our annual event series brings together leading scholars and community members participating in cutting-edge work in the Himalaya region, broadly defined. For example, in the winter of 2019, the Himalaya Program hosted Rabi Kamacharya, Co-founder and Executive Director of Open Learning Exchange, a major non-profit organization which works in fifty schools across Nepal to increase access to digital learning activities and teacher training. In the same term, Dan Smyer Yü—a Professor of Anthropology, the Chair for Trans-Himalayan Studies at Yunnan Minzu University, and a leading figure in the development of Himalayan Studies within Asian universities—also delivered a public lecture for our programme. In June 2017, The Himalaya Program hosted His Holiness the 17th Karmapa, one of the most important leaders in Tibetan Buddhism, at an event attended by more than 1,000 individuals. A joint event with Manjushree Thapa and Tsering Wangmo, two leading female creative writers of contemporary Himalayan literature, was hosted by our programme in November 2017.

Himalaya Program events are consistently well-attended, often attracting between 40-60 scholars, students, and alumni from a wide range of disciplines and backgrounds at UBC, as well as the general public given that all our events are free. These popular and well-advertised lectures and discussions also bring members of resident Himalayan communities from across the Greater Vancouver area to UBC. For example, our March 2019 event entitled “Carrying a Basket of Gold: A Historical Reflection on Buddhist Concepts and Ethics in Bhutan” brought members of the Bhutanese community all the way from the provincial capital city of Victoria in order to attend the lecture and participate in the subsequent discussions. The Himalaya Program event series features lectures that reflect the disciplinary and regional diversity of the entire Himalayan region, including literature and arts, policy, politics, geography, language, education, and religion.

Intensive, community-engaged summer Nepali and Tibetan language courses are also a major component of our vision and work. Since their humble beginnings as 1-credit, 1-week courses taught during the summer of 2015, they have since grown to become 3-credit, two-week courses that integrate in-class language learning with community engagement visits to the local Nepali and Tibetan communities. In summer 2019, Nepali language students learned to sing and dance to a traditional Nepali song; practiced their Nepali skills with monks at a nearby Tibetan Buddhist monastery; and shared a Nepali dinner with a large gathering of community members at the Hindu Buddhist Foundation of Canada. Tibetan language students had equally rich learning and community-based experiences, participating in conversations with two local Tibetan elders who were in Lhasa in March 1959 when the Dalai Lama fled; listening to a lecture about the value of diligent hard work offered by the local Buddhist monk Géshé Tenzin; and making and sharing Tibetan dumplings at Tsengdok Monastery.

The success of our courses was noted by the Khyentse Foundation, who made a generous gift to the Department of Asian Studies to establish year-long Tibetan language courses in collaboration with the Himalaya Program. In addition to the intensive summer courses, since

2018, UBC has offered two semesters of colloquial Tibetan and one semester of classical Tibetan from September to April each year. Our ambition is for the Tibetan and Nepali course offerings to continue to grow and help to establish UBC as the preeminent institution in Canada for the study of these important yet under-resourced languages, and for interdisciplinary Himalayan Studies in general.

Through the above programming, the Himalaya Program has created a vibrant and diverse community of scholars, students, and community members all dedicated to knowledge production concerning the Himalayan region. Deeply informed by language and area studies expertise, the programme also works closely with colleagues in policy and global affairs contexts, not least through our links with the locally-based international development and global health communities engaged in the Himalaya such as Jackets for Jasper and the Trans-Himalayan Aid Society (TRAS). We have also collaborated with the South Asia Center and Nepal Studies Initiative at the University of Washington in Seattle through a grant from UBC's Vice Provost Research and Innovation office, entitled "Connecting South Asian & Himalayan Research Communities Across Cascadia" which enabled 30 faculty to meet in November 2018 to develop models for greater research collaboration and student mobility.

Why the Himalaya Program at UBC?

The Himalaya Program is unique in its interdisciplinary nature, drawing on the expertise of diverse UBC faculty members with extensive knowledge of the Himalayan region. It was founded out of necessity, because while UBC had a strong concentration of regional expertise in both its faculty and student bodies across a range of departments (including Anthropology, Art History, Asian Studies, Economics, the Institute of Asian Research, and the School of Public Policy & Global Affairs) there was a lack of formal programming and resources devoted to the Himalaya, a region often neglected due to historical emphases on South Asia and East Asia. The prominence of established Nepali and Tibetan communities in the Greater Vancouver area has been fundamental to the success of both the community-engaged language learning programmes and the collaborative

nature of the initiative as a whole. The scholarly and community networks of the Himalaya Program Steering Committee members have further supported the programme to flourish and expand since its founding.

What is “Himalayan” about UBC’s Himalaya Program?

As an essential component of our mission, the Himalaya Program accords high value to collaborative research and community partnership. It is no exaggeration to say without the generous and enthusiastic support of the local Nepali and Tibetan communities, it would be impossible for us to deliver our community-engaged language learning programmes. The emphasis on and commitment to collaborative research and community partnerships is further reflected in the work of the Himalaya Program faculty members.

This rich, collaborative and respectful engagement with the Himalayan region is also reflected in courses taught at UBC that draw on or prominently feature aspects of the Himalaya. In concert with calls throughout Canada to “de-colonize” the academy, Himalaya Program faculty members emphasize the importance of engaging with scholarship from the region and privileging the voices of Himalayan authors, writers and public intellectuals. Our syllabi reflect these calls for inclusion and respectful engagement, drawing on readings from scholars from the Himalayan region and encouraging students to explore ethical ways to engage with members of the Himalayan community in the Great Vancouver area.

Who works at UBC’s Himalaya Program?

The Himalaya Program was founded by a group of faculty members at UBC who saw a need for increased knowledge sharing and coordination of activities about the Himalayan region. The Program is currently led and advised by a Steering Committee comprised of six multidisciplinary faculty members with domain expertise in Anthropology, Art History, Asian Studies, Economics, Linguistics, Public Policy & Global Affairs, and Tibetan Buddhist Studies. Their individual scholarship and collaborative research partnerships are situated in Bhutan, China, India,

Nepal, and the Tibetan cultural zones that span all of these countries. Within the Himalaya Program, each Steering Committee member assumes specific responsibilities to strategise the programme's future, develop the speaker series and language programme, develop pedagogical programming and enrich curriculum, liaise with academic, research, Nepali, Tibetan, and Buddhist institutions and communities and engage in public outreach.

The Himalaya Program Steering Committee:

Sara Shneiderman (PhD Anthropology, Cornell) is an Associate Professor in Anthropology and the School of Public Policy and Global Affairs / Institute of Asian Research and co-founder of the Digital Himalaya Project. Shneiderman's first book, *Rituals of Ethnicity: Thangmi Identities Between Nepal and India*, explores the relationship between political discourse, ritual action, and cross-border mobility in producing ethnic identities and shaping social transformation amongst the Thangmi ethnic community. Shneiderman also participates in a research project concerning trans-Himalayan citizenship across borders of India, China, and Nepal, and another project on infrastructure and development in Nepal's agrarian districts. Shneiderman is the principal investigator of an international, transdisciplinary partnership focused on Nepal's post-earthquake reconstruction entitled "Expertise, Labour, and Mobility in Nepal's Post-Conflict, Post-Disaster Reconstruction", supported by a Partnership Development Grant from Canada's Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.

Steering Committee Members Katherine Hacker and Ratna Shrestha are also collaborators on Shneiderman's post-earthquake reconstruction project. Hacker (PhD Art History, Pennsylvania) is Professor Emerita in the department of Art History. After completing a project entitled "Architectural Restoration and Reconstruction in Post-earthquake Nepal" centered on the historic town of Sankhu, Hacker continues to explore urban and rural reconstruction and debates around cultural heritage and the roles of architects, traditional builders and craftspeople, and UNESCO and NGOs in rebuilding processes. Ratna

Shrestha (PhD Economics, Hawaii Manoa) is a Lecturer at the Vancouver School of Economics and Sauder School of Business. Shrestha is currently working on mathematical models that can explain the interaction between political stability and economic growth, and has published on reforming healthcare insurance policy in Nepal.

Tsering Shakya (PhD Tibetan Studies, SOAS) is an Associate Professor in the Department of Asian Studies and the School of Public Policy and Global Affairs / Institute of Asian Research. He also serves as Canada Research Chair in Religion and Contemporary Society in Asia and has served as the President of the International Association of Tibetan Studies from 2013 until July 2019. Shakya is a scholar of Tibetan literature and modern history, having written several books including *The Dragon in the Land of the Snows: A History of Modern Tibet Since 1947*. His research explores the confluence of politics, ethno-national identity and religious practice in cultural production and social transformation across both historical and contemporary Tibet and the Himalayas.

Dagmar Schwerk (PhD Tibetan Studies, Hamburg) is the current Khyentse Foundation Postdoctoral Fellow in Tibetan Buddhist Studies at UBC's Department of Asian Studies. Schwerk's dissertation research focused upon a scholarly controversy surrounding the paramount philosophical doctrine and meditative system, Mahāmudrā, of the Kagyü school of Tibetan Buddhism in Bhutan. She has also worked and published about the relationship between religion and politics, and modernity and secularity in Bhutan. With a background in social sciences and Sanskrit studies, she is particularly interested in Buddhist conceptions of state, governance, and social structure, as well as applied Buddhist ethics in secular contexts such as economics and education in Asia and the West. Schwerk is currently working on the publication of her first monograph and embarking on a new research project on identity and nation-building processes in 18th century Bhutan.

Mark Turin (PhD Linguistics, Leiden) is an Associate Professor in the Department of Anthropology and the Institute for Critical Indigenous Studies. His doctoral work with the Thangmi community of Nepal and India led to the publication of *A Grammar of the Thangmi*

Language and subsequent studies on the language. Turin is a co-founder of the Digital Himalaya Project, an integrated, open scholarly portal for disseminating scholarship about the Himalayan region, and has worked on a collaborative research project to document the endangered oral traditions of Bhutan. Turin is also a co-investigator on a NASA-funded project that investigates how social change and natural disasters affect patterns of mobility and urbanisation in Bhutan, India and Nepal, on which steering committee member Sara Shneiderman also collaborates. Turin is the author or co-author of four books, the editor of nine volumes, and edits a series on oral literature with Open Book Publishers.

In addition, the Himalaya Program is fortunate to draw on the professional skills of two language teachers for the annual summer intensive community-engaged Nepali and Tibetan courses, and for the Tibetan courses that run throughout the academic year. Mr. Binod Shrestha teaches the summer Nepali courses. Born and raised in Nepal, Shrestha has been involved with Nepali language instruction since 1990 as an instructor, interpreter and translator of various Nepali language initiatives in Nepal and Canada. He has taught English in several schools and colleges in Nepal, and is a British Columbia-certified Secondary Teacher and holds a Master's degree in English Literature and a Bachelor's degree in Education from Tribhuvan University. After realizing the need to impart Nepali language pedagogically, Mr. Shrestha wrote the textbook *Communicative Nepali* to help support students as well as instructors in their learning and teaching of Nepali. He uses this textbook for his Nepali teaching. His other works include a translation of the short novel "Jonathan Livingston Seagull" by Richard Bach into Nepali.

All colloquial Tibetan courses are taught by Mr. Sonam Rinchen Chusang. Born in Amdo, northeastern Tibet, as a child, he attended the Tibetan Children's Village School in Dharamsala, the capital of the Tibetan exile community in India. Thanks to his unique upbringing, Sonam Chusang is fluent in both Amdo Tibetan and Central—or Standard—Tibetan varieties. After moving to Canada in 2001, Sonam began teaching Tibetan and gradually built the Tibetan language resource website Learn Tibetan Language (www.learntibetanlanguage.com). Sonam

Chusang was a lecturer at the University of Virginia's intensive Summer Language Program in 2007, and has also taught Tibetan in many Buddhist communities in the United States to both students and researchers. He will continue teaching at the University of British Columbia this upcoming academic year where he is scheduled to instruct the courses *Introduction to Tibetan 1* and *Introduction to Tibetan 2*.

Patrick Dowd, a second-year doctoral student in the Department of Anthropology, serves as the Graduate Student Coordinator for the Himalaya Program. In this position, he serves as a central liaison with the local Tibetan and Buddhist communities, and has assisted in the design of the syllabus for a forthcoming undergraduate Anthropology course entitled "Himalayan Diversities," and the administration of summer language courses. His doctoral research concerns the contemporary life of Tibetan language, spoken throughout the Himalayas and the Tibetan plateau. In particular, his work focuses on the relationship between orality and textuality and the role of language in transmitting culture.

The Himalaya Program Undergraduate Student Coordinator helps to ensure that the administrative tasks associated with running a university programme are accomplished. Both the Graduate and Undergraduate Coordinators assist with maintaining community relationships, university communications and event-related tasks and logistics. Beyond the Steering Committee, the Himalaya Program is supported by a large number of graduate and undergraduate students and alumni with an interest in the Himalaya Region.

How to be a part of the UBC Himalaya Program?

Students, faculty, staff and community members become involved with the Himalaya Program through various avenues. First, anyone is welcome to attend our regular event series, for which information can be found on the Himalaya Program website, social media, posters or newsletters sent to our subscribed mailing list. Further, our language courses are open to all registered UBC students. Thus far, a small number of community members and exchange students from various Canadian universities have participated in the summer language programmes. We are currently

exploring ways to ease the process of enrolling community members and external students in our popular language courses.

Many faculty members on the Himalaya Program Steering Committee oversee the research of various graduate students on Himalayan topics. Students may also enroll in Himalaya-related courses in multiple disciplines across the University Campus including “Ethnography of South Asia,” “Tibetan Buddhism” and “Tibetan and Himalayan Culture and Society;” many of which are taught by Himalaya Program Steering Committee members. An updated list of courses with considerable Himalayan interest is posted on the website each year.

The Himalaya Program does not currently offer a degree programme or student funding in Himalayan Studies. Interested students must apply to and be accepted by one of UBC’s regular departments at the appropriate level; once admitted they may participate in the Himalaya Program’s activities.

Himalaya Studies as a career beyond research

With our emphasis on community engagement and collaborative research, the Himalaya Program encourages students to consider how the Himalaya is a globally-significant region in terms of environment, language, culture, and geopolitics. We encourage robust academic work while simultaneously demonstrating the other career pathways open to those who engage substantively with the complexity and richness of the region. These include engagements in international development, global health, sustainable enterprise, and experiential education.

Conclusion and Closing Remarks

Since its founding, the Himalaya programme has received sustained positive feedback from UBC faculty, staff, students, international scholars and visitors and local community members. Our summer intensive language courses are extremely popular with both students and community partners, prompting our Steering Committee to explore ways of expanding the courses to be longer and more in-depth. Given our success in achieving language learning objectives through creative and innovative forms of

community-engagement, we imagine that some of the programme's approaches to pedagogy may serve as a template for other University initiatives that seek similar impact.

Overall, the UBC Himalaya Program has created a vibrant, diverse and unique hub for scholars, students and communities to collaborate and share their love of research, language learning and wider knowledge and interest in the Himalayan Region. The scholars and students involved in the Himalaya Program at the University of British Columbia are committed to strengthening, deepening and growing this initiative in a way that is both sustainable and responsible.

For more information and to get involved, please visit <himalaya.arts.ubc.ca> to sign up for our mailing list to receive the latest information. Please send any queries directly to himalaya.arts@ubc.ca, and send physical correspondence to Room 229, C.K. Choi Building, Vancouver, BC, Canada V6T 1Z2.

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Biographical Note

James Binks is an Anthropology Honours student at UBC. He recently completed his undergraduate thesis based on fieldwork along the *Char Dham Yatra* in Uttarakhand, in which he sought to understand how the process of travel impacts the suite of religious, environmental, and social

experiences along the pilgrimage and tourism circuit. He has also served as a Research Assistant on an international, transdisciplinary partnership focused on Nepal's post-earthquake reconstruction. Finally, Binks has been involved at the UBC Himalaya Program in various capacities since taking the Nepali summer language course in 2017 and 2018 and will continue as a Program Assistant until the summer of 2020.

Patrick Dowd is a second-year doctoral student at the University of British Columbia, where he is also a Killam Doctoral Scholar, Public Scholar, and Liu Scholar. His doctoral research concerns the contemporary life of Tibetan language, spoken throughout the Himalayas and the Tibetan plateau, a region where he has studied, researched and collaboratively worked for more than five years.

Taylor Sacré is a recent Honours graduate of the University of British Columbia where she completed a Bachelor of Science in Global Resource Systems, focussed on Global Health and International Development in East Africa. Throughout her studies, she immersed herself in multiple global education opportunities including fieldwork in Tanzania's coffee industry, and public health studies at the University of Copenhagen. Her passion for experiential education, global learning and programme development drew her to the Himalaya Program where she worked as the undergraduate Program Assistant from April until August 2019.