

The Imagined Geography of Mount Everest

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Introduction

Mount Everest, also known by the Tibetan name Qomolangma and Nepali name Sagarmatha, is located within the Himalayan mountain range on the border of China and Nepal. The peak is the highest point on Earth, at 8,848.86 meters above sea level. On May 29, 1953, Sir Edmund Percival Hillary of New Zealand and Sherpa mountaineer Tenzing Norgay became the first confirmed climbers to summit Mt. Everest, initiating a worldwide interest in Everest expeditions and a cultural obsession with the accomplishment of climbing to the top of the world. Mt. Everest, as a landscape and symbol, illustrates the physical manifestations of shifting power and imagined geography through both the visible landscape of the mountain, and the physical pursuit of its summit. An analysis of Mt. Everest as both a place and culture reveals hidden labor within the landscape and friction of power exertion between indigenous Himalayan people, companies capitalizing on the landscape, consumers of culture, and nature itself.

Background

Many people live within the Himalayan valley, including individuals of Chinese, Tibetan, Tamang, Bhutia, and Indian descent, with the most famous and prevalent being the Sherpa ethnic group. Historically, Sherpas believed the Himalayas were sacred homes of gods and demons and avoided

climbing Mt. Everest for these reasons (Venables, 2023). Over the 20th century, however, the respect and pay earned in mountaineering garnered significant interest within local communities. Sherpa people are the most highly sought-after Everest mountain guides due to their generational expertise and capacity to process oxygen more efficiently than the general population, stemming from genetic adaptations from centuries of high altitude living. Mt. Everest is considered a challenging climb because of the limited ascent windows, unpredictable summit wind patterns, crippling effects of high altitude existence on human bodies, and technical skills required to ascend and descend safely. The average Everest expedition lasts for about two months and costs upwards of \$50,000 for the average consumer (Arnette 2023), involving gathering supplies, trekking to base camp, and weeks of acclimatization at various camps on the Everest slope. After the initial summit in 1953, only about 200 people managed to summit and survive before the late 1980s, when the number of expeditions increased from a few every decade to ten per season on both sides of the mountain. Guiding companies continued to grow and expand throughout the 2000s, leading to an all-time high in Mt. Everest permit sales in December 2019, with 668 million USD generated in tourism revenue for the Nepali government (“Nepal Tourism Revenue,” 2023). Over the past century, hundreds of ambitious

climbers have perished on Everest, specifically within the 'Death Zone,' the area surpassing 8,000 meters in elevation, and many bodies still remain on the slopes. Today, Mt. Everest faces concerns of overcrowding, environmental degradation, water contamination, and other negative consequences as companies attempt to garner majority shares of the Everest mountaineering market.

How does a landscape foster inequality?

Through critical analysis of the landscape of Mt. Everest and how the mountain is shaped by the struggle of the native guides integral to expedition success, the experience of consumers is exposed as a construct, hiding and re-presenting labor as innate aspects of physical place. Mitchell (1996) defines the re-presentation of the products of labor as "an attempt to naturalize and harmonize the appropriation of that labor and to impose a system of domination, consent, control, and order within the view" (p. 162). Through naturalizing the presence of laborers within a landscape, dominant groups can retain power over others, viewing appropriated groups as exclusively existing within a certain setting. The appropriation of the Sherpa people is evident through the synonymous use of the word 'sherpa' in reference to all Everest guides or porters, as if an entire culture and ethnicity can be minimized to an occupation. While members of the Sherpa ethnic group undoubtedly contribute the most work in shaping Mt. Everest to be accessible to consumers, they, as a community, also neither own the land nor benefit fully from its abundance.

Most climbers opt to climb Everest by way of the South Col, on the Nepal side, through a dangerous ice formation known as the Khumbu Icefall, widely considered the most treacherous part of the entire journey. Mark Synnott (2021) notes "Every season the route through the icefall is constructed by a team of sherpas called the 'icefall doctors' with fixed ropes and aluminum

ladders that bridge crevasses and surmount seracs. Sometimes multiple ladders are lashed together to achieve the needed span or height" (p. 279). The behind-the-scenes, life-threatening work shaping the face of Everest is purposefully hidden within the landscape. Expeditions to Everest have developed into a competitive business, as companies seek to offer low-cost premium experiences, and "restlessly searching out new opportunities for the production of surplus value, seek[ing] differentials not just in land rent or locational advantage, but also in the ... needs and tendencies of labor" (Mitchell, 1996, p. 164). Sherpa guides and porters have historically been exploited, viewed as expendable, and put in positions to interact negatively with the mountain, as external entities seek to gain experience or capital from the landscape. During his Everest ascent, Synnott (2021) shares instances of indigenous guides carrying packs described as "a beast, bulging at the seams ... I shuddered at the thought of even lifting it off the ground, let alone carrying it that night to 27,000 feet" (p. 482). Synnott identifies a repeating pattern of Sherpa mortality at high elevations, as they often fall back in lines toiling under heavy loads and become the most vulnerable victims to exhaustion, oxygen deprivation, and avalanche risk. Truly, those who sit down after a day of climbing to a cup of coffee, a new tank of oxygen, and a stove connected to a series of power generators, observe Everest's landscape from "the broad, perspectival, aesthetic view from atop the hill," where experience of landscape is a privilege. In contrast, "the ugly, violent, dirty landscape of workers' everyday lives" (Mitchell, 1996, p. 161) is hidden through the mountaineering company practice of outsourcing risks to Sherpa workers, who are paid a small percentage of the wages of their European counterparts, in the name of capitalizing on the desire for a successful Everest expedition and a photograph on top of the world.

How does globalization affect places?

Tsing (2005) defined “friction” as awkward, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference in the context of globalization, a phenomenon present across multiple spheres of power influence between entities engaging with Mt. Everest and one another. In the early 1990s, some western Everest guides began training Sherpa people to be actual guides, not just porters, leading to a pay increase that was used to send their children to private English schools in Kathmandu, Nepal. Many within this next generation developed business skills, received an international education, and returned to the Himalayas to start Sherpa-owned and employed outfitters, offering expeditions at significantly lower price points. This increase in accessibility, paired with the rise of the internet and rapid globalization, made Everest more attainable for a wider range of individuals, and significantly increased tourism revenue (Synnott, 2021, pp. 332-335). Tsing (2005) emphasized friction as a medium that “inflects historical trajectories, enabling, excluding, and particularizing” (p. 6), highlighting the unpredictable and multidirectional nature of power influence and globalization. While the popularity of Everest garnered by Western expedition companies enabled native Sherpa people to profit from natural resources within their home, increased access has led to unintended consequences, or friction.

The number of people climbing above Base Camp has almost doubled in the past 20 years and since 2011, the Everest expedition death ratio has increased from an average of 4 to 6.5 deaths per 100 climbers annually (“Nepal Tourism Revenue,” 2023). This trend is attributed to congestion during limited summit windows and inadequate experience of consumers drawn to lower price points. Through this lens, the friction caused by British explorers that once exploited and excluded Sherpa people from their own cultural geography

has shifted trajectory: enabling Nepali people to “take back their mountain” (Synnott, 2021, p. 332) and initiating a myriad of capricious effects. Perhaps the most intriguing effect, and application of friction from a perspective of power influence, comes through analysis of people’s relationship to Mt. Everest as a force of nature. Mt. Everest’s jet stream, snowfall, and temperature patterns remain the primary determining factors for summit potential, exerting power over all human entities. Yet, humans similarly exert power over the Everest landscape, affecting the ecosystem by polluting waterways and harming thousands in the Himalayan valley through a wasteland of discarded oxygen canisters, food containers, and human waste. Each climber generates around 18 pounds of trash (Britton, 2020) during a single summit attempt. Tsing (2005) critiques friction surrounding Indonesian deforestation within their work, stating “Indonesian forests were not destroyed for local needs; their products were taken for the world” (p. 2). Similarly, the environment of Mt. Everest has not been destroyed by local use and engagement, but by power exertion, power dynamic changes, and cultural obsession from consumers, Sherpa mountaineers, western expedition companies, the Nepali government, and nature itself.

How does our creation of meaning for things shape power relations?

Through constructing Mt. Everest as a place of greatness and lauding the accomplishment of a successful summit with national pride and financial accolades, an imaginative geography is created as a veneer over the vulgar realities of mountain climbing, causing individual and collective actions to be shaped in unseen ways. Within India, successful Everest climbers are celebrated as champion athletes, and rewarded with fame, career opportunities, and financial security. Synnott (2021) explains the example set by Mamta Sodha,

who upon return to India was promoted to lifetime deputy superintendent of police, solely due to climbing Everest as she lacked any other relevant experience or connections. Similarly, “for a lot of Indian families, stretching their finances to the limit is worth the risk because if the favored son or daughter can somehow succeed in clawing their way to the top of the world, the entire family may reap the rewards- possibly for generations to come if they manage their windfall well” (Synnott, 2021, p. 279). Driver (2014) describes imaginative geographies as “representations of place, space and landscape that structure people’s understandings of the world, and in turn help to shape their actions,” with “significant implications for the way in which people behave” (p. 246). The representations of Everest expeditions consumed by the world are characterized by greatness, sacrifice, humanity, and alignment with nature, as seen through best-selling books, movies, and media.

Whereas geography objectively studies landscape and place, imagined geography refers to people’s perception of place created by imagery, discourse, and popular culture. In reality, camps are smothered with garbage, looking “more like a third world landfill than the staging point below the most glorious summit in the world” (Synnott, 2021, p. 513) and clients pay thousands of dollars without consideration if local guides are receiving fair compensation or adequate insurance. Most abhorrently, stepping over multiple dead or dying bodies within the “Death Zone” is a well-known phenomenon, as individuals rationalize the summit experience and accomplishment as more important than human lives and safety. The imagined geography surrounding Mt. Everest has caused summit expeditions to become the crown pursuit of mountaineers worldwide, while a closer inspection reveals a landscape “overrun with inexperienced climbers who stacked the odds in their favor by outsourcing the most significant risks

to the climbing sherpas, who carried the weight of everyone’s egos on their shoulders- and frequently paid with their lives” (Synnott, 2021, p. 30). Driver (2014) emphasizes how representations of place are created to serve certain purposes. While the actions of individual Everest climbers are morally questionable, it is also important to consider the capitalist motivations of those profiting off Everest expeditions, and how the creation of an imaginative geography can benefit certain groups while ignoring others.

Conclusion

In conclusion, a critical analysis of the Mt. Everest landscape, history, and cultural geography related to globalization, reveals purposefully hidden labor within the landscape. Shifts in power exertion between indigenous Himalayan people, expedition companies, and government entities, consequently contribute to and perpetuate an imagined geography of Mt. Everest, impacting the actions of those consuming the landscape. Glaciers provide one-fifth of the global population with drinking water; and according to a recent assessment of nearly 80 glaciers around Mt. Everest, there is evidence of consistent glacial mass loss and glacial thinning even at altitudes above 6,000 meters (Brown 2022). Ethnic Sherpa guides offer remarkable mountaineering capacities, yet have been exploited as labor and constructed as one with the landscape by expedition companies, inherently hiding their perspectives from the consumer experience. Tsing’s (2005) concept of friction explains how these dynamics are now shifting, as the balance of power in Everest expeditions changes. Due to the growth of Sherpa-run outfitters that cater to more customers at lower price points, climbers now have greater access to the mountain, creating heightened overcrowding problems, serious safety issues, and environmental concerns. The desire to climb is sourced from this imagined geography of the landscape and the

social recognition of surviving a successful summit. Yet this narrow perception fails to recognize the unsavory aspects of the Mt. Everest obsession and the tangible, unavoidable, and often morally compromising elements of the climb.

The recent developments within the Mt. Everest mountaineering industry reveal the unintended consequences of inclusivity and mass commercialization. Tragedy raises questions such as: Should efforts to increase access to Mt. Everest continue to meet the demand, even at the expense of human lives? If not, who should determine which individuals are allowed the privilege to stand at the top of the world? What are the real-world implications of this imagined geography and lauded accomplishment? Mt. Everest, as a landscape and symbol, has captivated humans for millennia and will continue to reflect a dissonance between perception and reality into the foreseeable future. As the proportion of deaths occurring on Everest expeditions continue to rise, these questions will only become more relevant and pressing for the global community.

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