

**INDIA'S  
BOOMING  
ART MARKET**

# ASIAWEEK

## OPENING UP A LOST LAND

**Future Shock  
in a Himalayan  
Kingdom**

*The King  
Of Mustang*

AUSTRALIA.....	A\$5.00	CANADA.....	C\$5.50	INDIA.....	Rs42	MALAYSIA.....	M\$6.00	PHILIPPINES.....	P\$5.00	SWITZERLAND.....	Fr6
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BELGIUM.....	Fr135	DENMARK.....	Kr30	ITALY.....	Lira4520	NETHERLANDS.....	G7.50	SINGAPORE.....	S\$5.50	THAILAND.....	B80
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PHOTO: THOMAS LAIRD





Thomas Laird

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## THE LONG STORY

# In the Shadow of the Himalaya

## A Kingdom Unveiled

### Soothing Angry Gods

BY THOMAS LAIRD

I feel unjustly accused — but also a little guilty and embarrassed. It is late June and the monsoon is overdue. “The gods are angry because of you,” complains an old woman, wagging a weather-beaten finger at me. “All those bright lights disturb them. They like sweet smells and quiet darkness.” I try to explain my position. When I came to Nepal 20 years ago I swore I would always respect local feelings, no matter what. Yet here I am with my cameras, the first foreigner in 29 years to visit the remote Himalayan kingdom of Mustang, being blamed by a group of elderly women for the dry weather. I try to tell them how essential my work is, how the government of Nepal wants photographs of Mustang’s centuries-old art treasures to help preserve them. The King of Mustang himself sees the importance of it. But the scowling woman is adamant. “What do you care if the gods are angry and hold back the rain because you’ve come and taken so many pictures? You don’t live here. We’re the ones who’ll starve if the rains fail.”



One of the gods worshipped by the Loba — the people of Mustang, or Lo — is Dhungmara Himal. From the mountain-god’s glaciers drip the sources of the Kali Gandaki, the river that carves the deepest gorge on earth. The villages of Mustang are scattered across the vast mesas and canyons of the river’s headlands — hard up on the eaves of the Tibetan Plateau. Irrigation channels, glittering silver, snake across the desert plains from the mountain, bringing water to the isolated flat-roofed towns. Without it no one could grow a crop or live. In this place, hidden behind the Himalaya at an altitude of nearly four kilometres, all life flows from the sacred mountain. Only 6,000 people live in Mustang, a kingdom maybe half the size of

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Mustang’s King still drives his own threshing team



Bali. Harsh and beautiful, wild, windy and sacred — the land has shaped its inhabitants.

I rent a house for six months in the walled city of Lo Manthang, the capital of Mustang. The walls are 7 metres high, with battle towers at each corner. The city is roughly L-shaped — about 275 metres long and 160 metres across at its widest point. Though no one is certain when it was built, Lo Manthang first appears in historical writings in 1387. At sunset I climb the log ladder up to my roof and scramble on to the city walls to stare at the jumbled roofs, at the dark alleys that snake between the closely packed houses, and at the light and shadows that play over the surrounding mountains. In spite of the mean appearance of some of the houses, the city is full of traders, herders and farmers. Not all are rich, but all still live inside the walled city, surviving much as their ancestors did.

Lo Manthang is in the middle of a broad flat plain, surrounded on all sides by deep gorges. The walls shimmer in the noonday heat and glow golden in the light of dawn. The city stands alone on the plain, a single block of mud raised by man — for all the walls and all the flat-roofed temples and houses are made of sun-dried mud bricks. The plain is covered with the checkered pattern of the fields. In summer they are green, in fall golden with ripe grain. Later they stand dun-brown, empty and dead, as winter storms sweep over them.

About 1,000 people live in the city today, in nearly 200 extended families. They keep more than 2,000 sheep and goats, more than 250 horses and at least that many donkeys. Lo Manthang has just one gate. If you sit by it at sunset or dawn you can see everyone who lives in the city. The King of Mustang rides out, followed by a long train of mules. He is off to another town to mediate a water-rights dispute. The mules are headed down to the valley, loaded with Tibetan salt that will be bartered for rice. Has anything changed here in 600 years?

The old men sit by the gate all day, spinning raw wool into fine thread that the women will dye and weave into bright rainbow-coloured aprons. As they spin they ask me why I have travelled so far to sit with them. "I've come to take pictures and to learn what I can about your lives." They don't believe me. It is just too outlandish. "What good are all those pictures you take?" asks a 67-year-old named Sridi. He is dressed in a traditional maroon woollen robe. "You call it work. But when we work we plant seeds that grow, or cut wheat to eat, or build a house to live in or a bridge to take us across a river." Inevitably the younger generation has other ideas. "How much do your cameras cost?" asks 22-year-old Tsewang as he herds his goats and sheep through the gate. He wears jeans, a baseball cap that says "Captain"

and a T-shirt that reads "Hongkong." "More," I tell him, "than your house and your three horses and your 50 sheep."

**B**efore my trips to Mustang in 1991 and 1992, only a handful of people from outside Nepal and Tibet had ever visited Mustang. In the 40 years since Nepal opened its doors to tourism, as the Everest and Annapurna regions began to draw tens of thousands of tourists annually (along with economic development and environmental damage), Mustang stayed off limits and acquired an aura as "The Last Forbidden Kingdom."

Mustang remained closed because of an anti-Chinese secret war in the 1960s and 1970s during which Tibetan guerillas called Khampas used Mustang as a base to carry out raids into Tibet. Even after the Khampas were cleared out of Mustang by the Royal Nepalese Army following Sino-American rapprochement in the 1970s, Kathmandu and Beijing both considered

the area a sensitive border region and neither wanted outsiders there. For me to go to Mustang then was no simple matter. Indeed, it took a people's revolt.

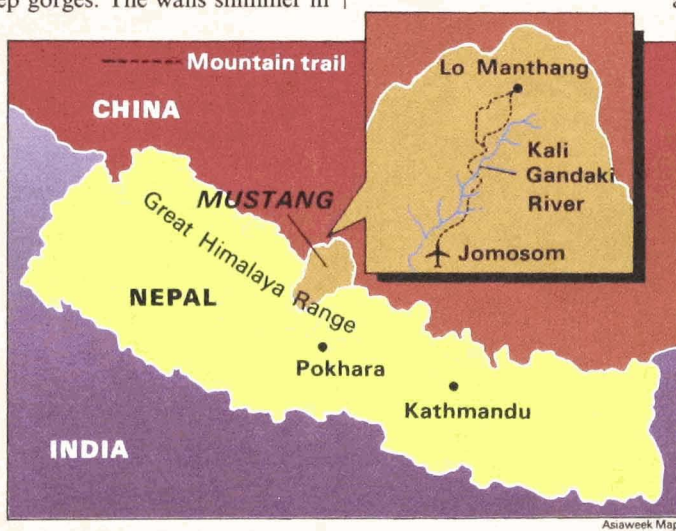
Though I had lived in Nepal off and on for eighteen years before 1990, I was as surprised as everyone else when the people rose up and cast off the shackles of "partyless *panchayat* democracy." Named for the *panchayats*, or councils, that effectively concentrated power in the monarch's hands, it

was a facade of democracy imposed in the 1960s by King Mahendra, father of Nepal's current King. After 30 years of corruption and mismanagement of Nepal's precious few resources, the patience of the people snapped and hundreds of thousands poured into the streets of Kathmandu and other towns.

Dozens of lives (interim prime minister Krishna Prasad Bhattarai said at least 500) were lost in the uprising. But the people got a new Constitution. It retained King Birendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev and his descendants as constitutional monarchs, put sovereignty into the hands of the Nepalese people and established the framework for parliamentary democracy. After a year of interim government, Nepal held its first free election in 30 years in May 1991.

Throughout the uprising and the election, I covered the political evolution of Nepal for *Asiaweek*. That, along with my spoken Nepali and my long residence in the country, brought me into close contact with Nepal's new leaders. I found them open to logical argument. So I asked for a permit to visit Mustang as a sort of journalistic scout before the first tourists arrived. I am grateful that sensitive officials listened to my request.

When the stunned officers at the Department of Immi-





gration handed me a one-year trekking permit for "All of the Restricted Area of Mustang," one of them laughed and said: "I've been in this office 20 years. I've never seen a one-year permit for anywhere and I've never seen any permit at all for Mustang." Observed another: "Now we know we've had a revolution in Nepal."

**T**he trip from Kathmandu to Lo Manthang is a journey between two worlds. First I fly to Pokhara. Below me the emerald tape-

stry of the rice terraces that shape the middle hills of Nepal unfolds in all its splendour. Tiny hamlets with sharply pitched thatch roofs dot the terraces that cover the corrugated hills. The next day I fly to Jomosom. As the plane climbs into the lower reaches of the Kali Gandaki river I notice that the high ridges are blanketed in pine, fir and rhododendron forests — except near the main Annapurna trekking route, where I see tourism-created deforestation. Our nineteen-seat Twin Otter heads north upriver until we come to the Annapurna massif. Then we turn west to go around the immense range that includes Annapurna I — at 8,091 metres one of the ten highest mountains on earth. We follow the river west, heading straight towards another Himalayan giant, Dhaulagiri, higher still than Annapurna I.

When we are nearly on top of the Dhaulagiri icefall, we turn sharply north and suddenly a way is visible between the peaks on either side. The airfield at Jomosom is near the bottom of the deepest part of the gorge that the Kali Gandaki has carved between Annapurna I and Dhaulagiri. Jomosom, at 2,700 metres, is 1,400 metres higher than Kathmandu. The gorge at this point, from the peaks above to the river below, is nearly 6 km deep.

As we turn the bend and head down to Jomosom, I notice that the ground cover begins a remarkable change. Suddenly the green rice terraces carved out of the steep mountainsides give way to

bright pink fields of buckwheat, laid out in a checkerboard pattern with corn fields and apple orchards. And all the fields are now on the flat valley bottom. The hillsides are too steep for terracing and there is little arable soil. The thick Himalayan forests of lower down have disappeared, replaced by scattered fir and juniper. Within a few minutes, as we fly into the rain-shadow belt behind the Himalaya, even these disappear. As we touch down at Jomosom we enter the jagged, eroded, treeless region of Mustang.

My companions are a government liaison officer, Guru Bishnu Kafle, my photo assistant, Meen Vajracharya, and



Lo Manthang is one of the last remaining intact walled cities

our cook, Karma Sherpa. Kafle is an assistant sub-inspector of police. Well educated, he speaks good English. He has the typical look of a member of the Brahman caste: a longish nose and heavy facial hair (unlike the Loba, who typically have the Tibeto-Burmans' wide cheeks, flatter noses and beardless faces, except where they have mixed with southerners). Married and the father of one, Kafle, 27, is open, curious and happy-go-lucky. Assigned to me by the Home Ministry, he becomes concerned over

time with protecting Mustang from environmental damage — so much so that later he goes out of his way to make sure other liaison officers accompanying tourists enforce conservation regulations.

Vajracharya, 25, is a single man from Kathmandu Valley. He is here on a small salary because he believes he can learn something about photography from me. His photos have appeared in several Nepalese and Indian magazines — and once in the French publication *Le Figaro*. We met in a tailor shop when Vajracharya asked me to teach him some photography. We became good friends during the 1990 revolt, dodging bullets together in the streets of Kathmandu.

Karma, a 32-year-old father of one, was the cook for the first all-Sherpa climb of Mt. Everest in 1990. For fifteen years he has worked for Mountain Travel Nepal, the country's oldest trekking agency. He sings as he walks and makes friends everywhere he goes. He can whip up a meal anywhere, any time, out of anything, and he makes a mean chocolate cake.

It is a five-day hike to Mustang for us and 20 mules loaded with a ton of equipment and supplies. There are no motorable roads within a week's walk of Lo Manthang. The

only vehicles in the vicinity are four-wheel drives used by Chinese border troops along the Tibetan frontier to the north. As we approach Mustang, the terrain becomes progressively drier and more

eroded, with less and less vegetation. We have entered another world.

The Kingdom of Mustang is located in the high valleys at the headwaters of the Kali Gandaki river, just north of the Himalaya. The name "Moostang" (pronounced as it was spelled in the 19th century) is a corruption of the name of the capital, Lo Manthang. This remote kingdom is part of Nepal today. But the modern Kingdom of Nepal has existed for only 200 years. Mustang had a high culture for at least 400 years before it became part of modern Nepal, and it has retained a nearly autonomous cultural independence to this

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**Mustang has been enriched by its contact  
with the two civilisations of India and Tibet  
for at least a thousand years.**

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day. The people are primarily ethnic Tibetans. Their faces, religion and culture all reflect this fact. They have, however, been citizens of Nepal for two centuries and genes from Nepalese to the south, as well as some cultural influences, have mixed in. Mustang rose to its cultural and economic peak in the 15th and 16th centuries by taxing trade that flowed up and down the Kali Gandaki's glacier-free trail. The river connects two worlds, India and Tibet. Mustang has been enriched by its contact with both worlds for at least a thousand years.

In 1952 Swiss geologist Toni Hagen described Mustang as "so remote as to be virtually independent." Later wide-ranging Italian scholar Giuseppe Tucci spent a week in the kingdom. And in 1962 French adventurer Michel Peissel spent three months here. From then until late 1991, Lo was closed to outsiders.

In the spring of 1992, six months after His Majesty's Government of Nepal let me in, it issued 200 permits to visit Lo. All the awe-struck visitors travelled to Mustang under regulations designed to protect the region's unique environment, art and culture. Nepal's new government is determined to learn from the mistakes and successes of opening other remote areas to tourism in the past two decades. Every year nearly 40,000 tourists trek around the Annapurna massif just south of Mustang. As the numbers of trekkers grew in the 1980s, the forests were attacked to fuel the lodges that sprang up along the trail. Litter was left by thoughtless visitors. Local people had a hard time meeting the needs of the visitors and maintaining their own values at the same time.

So the government established the Annapurna Conservation Area Project. ACAP helps villagers identify and address the problems tourism has brought, while increasing tourist appreciation of the area and boosting local profits from the visitors. In many ways it has been an ideal development project. In a country that has been plagued by centralised decision-making, ACAP is known for letting local people set goals — and helping realise them. ACAP is now extending its work into Mustang. In the meantime, for the trial period of tourism this year and next, rigid protection regulations have been set up. All visitors to Mustang must carry enough fuel for the needs of their parties. That is why I bring in a quarter of a ton of kerosene. All garbage must be packed out or burned. A government-appointed liaison officer accompanies each group of tourists to enforce the regulations and protect the treasures in the monasteries from be-

ing stolen or sold. The Loba are happy to have the regulations in place and in general seem to welcome the tourists because of the money they bring.

Still, despite all the regulations, some religious conservatives find something to blame the tourists for: the late arrival of the monsoon. The Loba's view of environmental protection is different from that of the rest of the world. People here depend on the weather and still believe that local earth spirits control it. Once, as I watch a herd of more than 100 blue sheep grazing on a hillside several kilometres away, they suddenly bolt. A Loba turns to me and says: "They smelled the human stink." I feel like an embodied "human stink" when the old women blame me for the lack of rain. It sounds

like a joke, but it becomes very serious to me. I feel dirty. After hearing this so often I begin to wonder: By coming here do I destroy this world? Is the talk of angry gods a subtle metaphor for complex events beyond our ken?

When a Japanese television crew lands just outside the walled city, children crowd up to the first helicopter they have ever seen, to stroke it gingerly like the wounded birds they catch in the high pastures. Encounters like these with the world view of the Loba help explain the historic importance of the opening of Mustang. An intact fragment of another world has miraculously survived into our own time. We can dismiss their perceptions or we can learn from them. Again and again I ask myself: Have we angered the gods?

I believe there is no place in a democratic society for anthropological preserves. The Loba want tourism because of the money it will bring. They work extremely hard to survive and I hope the tourist dollar can ease

that burden. At the same time I pray that their culture and artistic treasures can be preserved. But as agriculture becomes tougher, the Loba are spending longer and longer each year in India and southern Nepal, trying to earn extra money to survive. If they leave Mustang altogether, their art will vanish.

Most outsiders in the Himalaya would love to "discover" a lost Shangri-La, then keep everyone else out of paradise. This fantasy is at the root of Western fascination with the region. The opening of Mustang represents the final chapter in the colonial effort to force the gates of the Himalaya's "forbidden kingdoms."

In the Shangri-La of James Hilton's 1933 novel *Lost Horizon*, there were hot baths and a great selection of food. In six months in Mustang I get one hot bath, in a sacred geyser that spews horizontally from the wall of a cave. As for food, I go for four months this year with no fresh greens



Musical welcome for King Jigme at a monastery

Thomas Laird



aside from weeds and nettles. The Loba make do on wheat flour, butter, tea and mutton. The limited arable land is needed for the wheat crop. I live in a mud-brick house. The dried mud emits a fine grit that gets into everything, including my cameras, film and notebooks. Mustang's climate is similar to Tibet's. In spring the temperature at noon reaches well into the 30s Celsius. But because of the altitude, it can drop to freezing at night. In winter the temperature falls to minus-23 degrees Celsius and snowfall can be heavy. Spring storms whip up clouds of dust that turn the blue sky a khaki colour within an hour.

Unlike Shangri-La, Mustang has no secret elixir for immortality — other than Western medicines I bring in myself. I take antibiotics for diarrhea at least once a month and suffer from a number of other ailments. The Loba ask me for medicine but I send them to the local doctor instead. Tashi Chusang, 63, is not only Lo Manthang's *amji*, or herbal doctor. He is the *tsewah* (astrologer), the *lhati* (painter) and the *lhapun* (married priest). The king appointed him to all these positions for life. Known as one of Nepal's foremost herbal specialists, he is a storehouse of information on traditional Loba culture. A fatherly figure, he wears a yellow silk blouse most of the time and keeps his long hair in two braids. Coral and turquoise hang from his ears. A few silver strands make up his moustache.

Tashi Chusang's house is his clinic. Villagers walk in with their problems any time of the day or night. They pay him what they can — perhaps wheat or milk, sometimes even money. He turns no one away. His position is as much religious as medical. He is thought of as a "good, wise" man. I am sitting with him one day when a man comes in clutching his belly. "What's wrong," asks Tashi Chusang. "I was drinking some *chang* [a thick local beer]," he replies. "Suddenly my stomach began to ache, a lot. It doesn't go away." *Chang* can be made from any grain, although in Mustang it is mainly brewed from wheat. Children are given *chang* from the moment they ask for it — often before they can walk — in the same way that many European children grow up drinking wine. *Chang* can be served cold in summer and lukewarm in winter. The best is sweet and kind of nutty-flavoured — and kicks you in the head like a wild yak.

The doctor takes the patient's pulse while his son, whom Tashi Chusang is training, presses on the man's stomach. Tashi Chusang prescribes a herbal compound, then tells the sick man: "It's better if you don't drink much during the day. And bring the *chang* to a boil before drinking it." Tashi Chusang dispenses as much common

sense as he does herbs.

I make just one exception to my policy of not handing out medicine. A farmer comes to me one night, his hands still covered in dirt from a long day in the field. "My little girl has worms," he says. "Do you have anything for worms?" I reply: "I am not a doctor. What if I give you drugs and your daughter dies?" A few days later I hear the monks doing a ritual in the man's house. They chant and beat on drums. At sunset they blow on four-metre-long horns. When I see the farmer on the street I ask about his daughter. "She died, sir. Of worms." It is possible to die of complications from worms. I feel guilty. The next time I return from Kathmandu I bring hundreds of doses of worm medicine, which is well tolerated and has few side-effects. I hand it out whenever I'm asked. I have no choice. I cannot get that girl's face out of my mind.

Mustang's infant-mortality rate is high. I sit around a fire with a group of women, their work-gnarled hands delicately holding china tea bowls and smoothing their beautiful rainbow-coloured aprons. I ask how many children they have and how many have died. "I had six and three died," says one. "I had eight and four died," says another. And so on around the group.

Ongdi, my porter, translator (between Nepali and Loba) and defender, is a Loba from the peasant caste. The family he comes from is among the poorest in Lo Manthang. When I need



Tashi Chusang is a doctor, astrologer, painter and priest

someone to carry cameras, hold lights or kill a sheep, he is there, ready to work for a wage slightly above normal. He learns quickly and always does his best. His only fault is his drinking. He becomes a good friend, funny and never complaining about the hardships he has to endure in my service. When I give him a pair of Chinese-made shoes, Ongdi begins to cry and gets down on his hands and knees to bow at my feet. I pull him up, then get down on my own hands and knees to bow at his feet. Greatly embarrassed, he quickly yanks me back up. "See how it feels, Ongdi," I tell him. "It's embarrassing, isn't it? We're all the same inside." He has been taught servility from birth.

Inevitably, Mustang's opening will bring both joy and pain. I do not meet a single Loba who wants the region to remain closed. But there are misconceptions both ways. Dozens of Loba ask me to take them to the West. They query me constantly about my life and attitudes. I do everything I can to disabuse them of their fantasy of a Western Shangri-La where the streets are paved with gold. But nothing I can say will ever erase their image of me stepping out of a helicopter after a photo shoot. It means nothing to them that a magazine paid for the chopper. In their eyes all



foreigners are rich and fly around in helicopters.

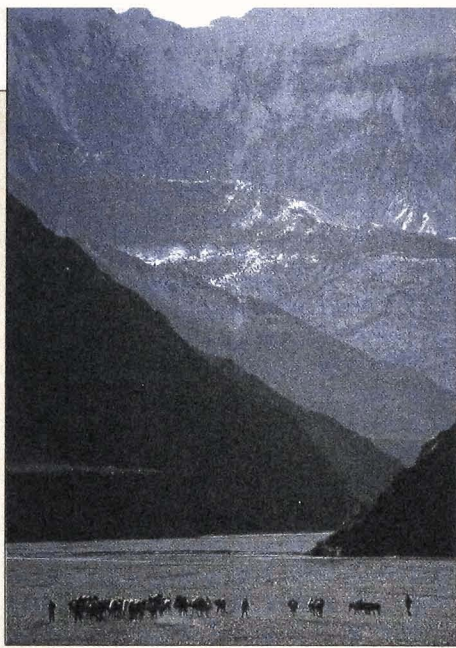
**B**ecause the Kingdom of Lo is mentioned in a 7th-century Tibetan historical work called *The Blue Annals*, we know Mustang has had a continuous cultural history for at least 1,300 years. The current ruler of Lo, King Jigme Palbar Bista, is said to be the 25th monarch in his lineage since it was founded by King Amepal in about 1400. King Jigme's life is not much changed from that of his predecessors. He is a very active 63. He spends several hours a day in meditation or studying Buddhist texts. He is a keen horseman and rides nearly every day, commuting among his palaces spread out across the kingdom. The King has fields and herds of animals in several locations and he uses his horses not only to travel among his holdings but to harvest his fields.

I watch him oversee the harvest and threshing of his wheat and pea crops. His horses carry the sheaves from the field and then are used to thresh them. The Loba thresh their wheat and peas on a floor of hard-packed earth. Most hammer an iron stake into the middle of the floor, then drive a team of two or three horses around it. Thrown under the horses, the wheat is knocked from its ears or the peas are knocked from their pods. Later the fierce autumn winds are harnessed to winnow the grain.

King Jigme, however, takes a slightly different course. He never drives a stake into the threshing floor. He holds the reins of his threshing team himself. And his team has five or six horses. I'm amazed to see the King so actively involved in the threshing of his own crops, to see a man of 63 driving six horses around for hours at a time. He has strong views about how to treat his horses and the land.

"First," he tells me, "when we hammer iron into the earth we weaken it. Second, many people who weaken the earth with an iron stake also drive their horses around and around rather roughly. They really beat the animals. They drive them so fast. But horses need rest. Horses, like the land, can be of use to us for many years if we don't drive them too hard. If we drive them too hard, they won't live very long. So we drive our horses by hand. We have to pull on the reins, just as the horses do. We work nearly as hard as they do. So we understand at once if a horse is hurting or tired or being driven too fast. If the horse is hurting it will make sure we're hurting too. You have to stay in touch with the earth in the same way."

When the King is not overseeing his holdings — 60 mules and horses, 200 sheep and goats, 100 yak and perhaps 20 hectares of fields — he is kept busy with the demands of his subjects. He spends on average half his waking hours



Thomas Laird

The Kali Gandaki cuts the ultimate gorge

from harvesting his field. "Hearing cases and making judgements is only half of it. He also goes to Tibet to negotiate fair trade prices and to Kathmandu to work with the government. So why shouldn't I give him a week's work a year for free? I don't mind."

As we speak, Wangyel plucks out the few whiskers on his broad face with brass tweezers he keeps hanging from a leather strap on his belt. He is a big man, with powerful shoulders. His callous hands are as hard and rough as the wooden handle of his hoe. In winter he wears sheepskin pants with the wool on the inside. Wangyel sports a piece of turquoise dangling from his ear, though he has cut his hair and no longer wears the traditional Loba braids. "At least we're free now," he says. "Not like before 1956."

In 1956 the Loba were emancipated by a decree of the Nepali Congress Party during the reign of the current King's father. Before that the king of Lo owned everything, and everyone, in Lo. "We had no freedom before 1956," a former serf tells me as we sit around his hearth. He is actually describing the life of the serfs all the way back to the establishment of Lo before

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**Some villages in Lo still provide the King with a certain amount of *corvee*, or forced labour, as serfs have done in every feudal society.**

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1400. "Back then every one of us had to do a certain amount of work for the king in a year," the old man says, slowly feeding goat dung to the fire that warms our change. "If we didn't do what we were supposed to do, the king would take our house and land and give it to someone who would do the king's work. We were not free then. We could not own land or houses. The king owned everything, the king and the noble families. And it wasn't just a little bit of work we did. A 'wood-carrying' family had to deliver 900 loads of fuel a year to the palace — and there were eighteen wood-carrying families in Lo Manthang. Every serf family was classified as 'wood carriers' or 'water carriers' or 'grain grinders' or by some other assigned work. You were born a 'wood carrier' and your children became the same."



Outsiders usually think of traditional ethnic Tibetan communities, whether in Nepal, Bhutan or pre-communist Tibet, as being free of a caste system and quite egalitarian. Perhaps it was true in Tibet. In Lo, from what I observe, it has never been the case. The Loba are still divided into three castes, which they call Rigkutih (noble), Rigpalwah (serf) and Rigrinin (outcaste). Before 1956 the nobles were the only Loba besides the King who could own land and houses. They were freemen. The Loba say all the nobles are descended from daughters of the kings of Lo. Even today the nobles generally only marry other Rigkutih or members of the royal family. The Crown Prince of Lo, however, does not marry a Loba. The royal family traditionally seeks its queens among the highest noble families of Tibet.

The Rigrinin, the outcastes, have always been court musicians and blacksmiths. Both tasks are carried out by untouchables in traditional Hindu society. Clearly these concepts penetrated up the Kali Gandaki to Lo. Though the outcastes are not untouchable, they cannot share a glass or cooked food with anyone from the other castes. No Rigrinin is allowed to live within the walls of Lo Manthang. Nor do the other castes intermarry with them.

The Loba believe the caste system allows society to function harmoniously. Tashi Chusang explains the traditional viewpoint to me. "The caste system has been with us since long ago," he says. "It's very good for us. It's just like

in a monastery where there's the head lama, the chief of rituals, the cymbal players, the drummers and the tea servers. Everyone has a place and the monastery can't function unless everyone does his job. In our culture everyone has a place and everyone stays in his place and our society is strong because of it. When people leave their place it's bad. Remember that the Buddha was born a king. He was born into that caste position because of his actions in his past lives. He could never have become the Buddha unless he first became king."

I am stunned to hear this hierarchical viewpoint extended into Buddhism, which I had always supposed to be free of Hindu caste ideas. But Lo's hierarchical society is reflected in every aspect of its culture. This pattern, based on patriarchal power, shows up in the traditional form of administration. Each village is administered for the King by a headman selected on a rotating basis from a noble household. The headman is responsible for collecting fines when village regulations are broken. In such a harsh environment, a strong dependence on one another creates a need for an array of village regulations and fines.

The Loba get only one crop a year from their fields. To get even that in the desert of Mustang they have to maintain an elaborate system of irrigation channels. "You see where this water comes from, way up on that glacier?" asks an elderly man as he sits beside his irrigation ditch, watching the trickle of water as if it were gold. "We have to guard it all the way here or we would starve." Working together without pay, the Loba irrigate around the clock, day and night, passing water from one farmer to the next in a precise pattern. Other Nepalese are surprised to see such cooperation. "Sherpas hardly ever work together on village projects," observes my cook, Karma. If a Loba messes up and sends water into the wrong part of the maze, one farmer's crop is flooded and another's goes dry. I witness a man being fined \$10 for doing just that. The money goes to help those hurt by his carelessness. Such regulations are not imposed by Kathmandu. They are created at village meetings at which everyone has a chance to speak.

The village headman is helped by two secretaries and six assistants. No outcaste can be a village official. The assistants are selected from the serf caste because they also act as town criers, which is considered physical work. The town criers summon the people to the village meetings. In Lo Manthang the meetings are chaired by the King or by the headman when the King is out of town. People speak freely at them



Thomas Laird

Lo is a time capsule from the past — but changes are coming

about their fears and concerns, often in quite heated terms — the caste system does not prevent frankness. There are many positive aspects to the system, and it certainly helps the Loba survive. Still, I can find no accurate description for it except "feudal monarchy."

The 1990 uprising led not only to parliamentary elections but to local polls throughout Nepal, including Mustang. For the first time in history, Lo has a democratically elected local administration. That leadership now faces the inevitable conflicts that will emerge between it and the King's traditional administration.

At the same time, Lo faces the arrival of tourism. "Don't take my picture," a farmer warns me. "I don't know where it will go. You might print it in a magazine and someone might throw it out on the street and then people would walk on me. It could take years of life away from me." Although the Loba are by no means totally isolated — many have been to Kathmandu and India — this ancient kingdom is clearly in for some rapid changes.

But for now, Mustang remains a time capsule from another age. Its origins are hazy. Before the founding of the current ruling lineage little is certain, though there are



tantalising glimpses. A skull and clay pots recently discovered in mysterious caves in the Kali Gandaki gorge are estimated to be 4,000 years old. The Buddha is quoted in scripture from about 2,600 years ago, giving instructions to a group of monks joining a caravan of wool traders leaving Varanasi for Kathmandu. Wool is still traded in Kathmandu. It comes today from Tibet and New Zealand. In the time of the Buddha all of it would have come from Tibet. Chinese silks appeared in Rome before the time of Christ, having come overland, or partly by sea from India. Ancient Chinese silks still hang in the monasteries of Lo. There is no doubt that trade has made its way through the Himalaya for at least 2,000 years — and perhaps much longer. The Buddhist kings of Lo in the 15th century grew wealthy taxing that trade. Today the landscape is dotted with impressive ruins of isolated fortresses from which the kings sallied forth to tax passing caravans.

**R**iding with King Jigme, I pull my hat down over my ears against the dusty September wind. "This is cold?" asks the King. "This wind is our breath. When we go down to Kathmandu, or to India, we get sick because the air is so thick and warm. Our yaks like this high, cold air. They're born to it, and so are we." An hour's ride out of Lo Manthang we suddenly come upon a centuries-old fort, Ketchar Dzong, towering above the river on a 100-metre cliff. "This fort was built by King Amepal's father, perhaps," he says. "It's hard to be accurate with these old buildings. But we know that Amepal lived in this fort, with his ministers and family and monks. Later he moved out and went down to build the walls of Lo Manthang. Then he built his palace inside and started construction of the big temples there." I ask him how they got water up to the fort. "The people carried it. Some carried water, others brought wheat. They worked for the King. But they didn't live inside the fort. Only the King and his court lived there. The others lived down at the foot of the hill here."

People still lug water to the forts. One evening I arrive at one of King Jigme's forts, in Tsarang, at dusk. Hawks wheel about in the glowing sky, gliding on the thermals. Making their loud whistling call, they soar up from the inky depths of the canyon below and past the roof of the fort five storeys above me. From inside the fort I hear monks chanting and blowing horns. As I approach the dark doorway a water bearer comes out, carrying an empty copper urn in a wooden frame on his back. He rests before heading to the town tap, about 100 metres away, to fetch more water for the monks. "A long way for water," I say. "But it's a work of merit for me, isn't it?" the old man says. His squinting eyes seem lost in the folds of age and the gloom of the

doorway, but his white teeth glimmer in the half-light. Then he hitches the urn higher on his shoulder and heads down the hill.

I feel my way up a pitch-black staircase. On the third floor I stumble down a dark hall, past empty bins once used to store the King's wheat, until I make out a red glow coming through an open door. Inside 40 monks sit in orderly rows. They are chanting from giant books of loose, handwritten pages. When not being used, each book is bound between two carved planks and stored in huge racks that rise to the ceiling on three sides of the dark chapel. Along the fourth wall are statues made of wood, clay and gold-plated copper or brass. A monk asks me to sit. His colleagues flip through the pages. The light from rows of butter lamps reflects off the gold lettering and flickers across the placid faces of the carved gods. Twenty minutes later no one says a word as I leave. On the way down I pass the old water carrier on the dark stairway. He is breathing hard and manages only a puffed "namastay" (goodbye).

There are more than a dozen such forts in Lo, not counting the three ancient palaces still inhabited by the royal family. It appears the forts were inhabited by petty kings who warred among themselves before Amepal founded the modern kingdom. Many of the sites are littered with pot shards and are outlined by the shapes of vanished walls. The ancient buildings, like Lo's modern ones, were built of adobe and wooden beams. Without constant attention they rapidly erode in the fierce environment. Scientific teams have yet to examine these

sites but are expected to begin work in the near future. Unless preserved, they are doomed.

The wealth and power of King Amepal is amply demonstrated in the impressive ruins of the Temple of the Coming Buddha in Lo Manthang. The Champa Lha Khang, as the Loba call it, is a three-storey Tibetan Buddhist temple and monastic complex. Only parts of this great undertaking remain. But they contain the world's largest surviving collection of 15th-century *mandala*, circular paintings of the realms of deities used for visualisation during meditation. Of the original 80 mandala in the Champa Lha Khang, 40 have survived the passage of nearly 600 years in fair to excellent shape. Until recently, when a bigger one was built in Kathmandu, the fifteen-metre-high image of the Coming Buddha in this complex was the largest statue in Nepal.

In Tibet the majority of the paintings of this age and fineness disappeared in the whirlwind of China's Cultural Revolution. It is no wonder that serious thought is being given to having the Champa Lha Khang declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO. It is unfortunate that under 30 years of panchayat administration nothing was done to stop the destruction of the Champa Lha Khang or to document



Winnowing wheat after the year's single harvest

Thomas Laird





Thomas Laird

Braving the elements at altitudes of up to 5 km, nomadic Loba live in yak-hair tents and raise goats and sheep

the treasures it preserves. Now that Nepal has a responsive, elected government, hopes have been raised that both tasks will be undertaken.

The Champa Lha Khang is but one of a half-dozen temples in Mustang from the 15th century or earlier. Several contain frescos, *thangkhas* (scroll paintings) or cast statues, all as finely executed as the remarkable mandala in the Champa Lha Khang. The Loba, fearing theft, do not allow me to photograph the statues or *thangkhas*. I determine that a previously unknown school of metal casters evolved in Lo. Until now scholars believed that Lo's statues had all been imported from Kathmandu or Lhasa. Though frustrated that I cannot document this discovery, I understand the Loba's fears. So much art has been stolen. The Loba do not agree with me that publication of photos of their religious art would be the only way to trace it if it were stolen. They feel it would encourage theft. They may be right.

In any event the thefts continue. In Gelling, south of Lo Manthang, I come upon a trove of fine 15th- and 16th-century *thangkhas* in the village temple. I spend hours one evening trying to convince the villagers to allow me to photograph them. "They'll be stolen if you take their pictures" is the repeated reply. Disappointed, I look over the collection of paintings, stacked in a dusty corner of the temple, and go on my way.

A few months later thieves break into the temple and steal fifteen *thangkhas*. I assume the paintings are worth at least several hundred thousand dollars on the international art market, where so many of Nepal's plundered treasures have been auctioned off in the past 20 years. The people of Gelling have no photographs of the stolen paintings with which to trace them. The Khampa guerillas who based themselves in Mustang during the 1970s also removed relics from monasteries — "for protection." Kathmandu would like to fully document all the remaining treasures in Lo, but the Loba have resisted.

Luckily Mustang's greatest art treasures cannot be stolen. They are painted directly on the walls of the isolated monasteries. With the assistance of His Majesty's Govern-

ment of Nepal and of King Jigme of Lo, I spend months shooting the first photographic inventory of these exquisite 14th- and 15th-century frescos.

One set, in the Luri cave monastery, is unique. Luri was once inhabited by dozens of monks. They performed their rituals in several finely painted chapels. Today a sole caretaker comes once a month to light lamps and chant from the Buddhist scriptures at the single shrine that has not been devastated by time and neglect. This small chapel is in a natural tower eroded from a tangle of ravines, cliffs, razor-sharp ridges and dry gullies. To reach it I climb through the eroded badlands, crossing the ravines on perilous log bridges. I enter the cliff wall through a man-made tunnel, then climb a log-ladder into hidden recesses carved into the cliff by monks at least 400 years ago. Today many of these chambers have had their front walls cut away by erosion.

But two rooms remain intact. One contains a normal altar, with *thangkhas* and statues. Behind it is a shrine room already famous in Himalayan-art circles. The second chapel is egg-shaped. It is filled with a Buddhist *chorten* (stupa) perhaps 6 metres high. The *chorten*, walls and ceiling are decorated with paintings. Only a small path is left between the *chorten* and the walls for pilgrims to walk around it, clockwise. The style of the murals is fluid and Indian influenced. According to a covey of Himalayan-art experts who gather to see my photographs of Luri, portraits of this size, style and age do not exist anywhere else in the world. Indeed, few painted *chortens* with frescos around them in man-made caves have survived from that period. Nearly all such examples in Tibet were destroyed during the 1950 Chinese occupation or the Cultural Revolution.

**B**esides Luri I map more than 25 cave sites in Mustang. All but a few are inaccessible without climbing gear. Some of the cave entrances are 50 to 100 metres up sheer cliff faces. The monks who carved these caves into the cliffs drove logs into the walls to create stairways. Or they carved pathways out of the cliff itself. Several centuries after they were abandoned, the pegged holes and the pathways



are long gone.

Although most of the cave shrines were probably made by monks in the 14th and 15th centuries, I am certain, thanks to my discovery of some fired clay tablets, that some of these caves were created as dwellings much earlier by monks of a pre-Buddhist sect called Bon Po. Others were possibly created by earlier inhabitants of which we know nothing. Several expeditions are in the offing to explore the caves. In the meantime the few tourists who visit the area are forbidden to enter them.

You may note that I refer to "my discovery" of the fired clay tablets. Well, no previous traveller mentions finding them. Still, I appreciate that the sublime thrill of stumbling upon a historic relic can slide into a ridiculous game of "I saw it first." I meet tourists in Lo who claim to be "the first Swiss to come to Mustang" and "the first Japanese woman in Lo."

Here's a case in point. I am the first outsider to see the source of the Kali Gandaki. On a fine autumn day Kafle, my government liaison officer, and I follow the river upstream on horseback. We come to the place the Frenchman Peissel claimed in 1962 was the river's source. But this brook is clearly just a tributary. We follow the main stream to a glacier on Dhungmara Himal. The trouble is there are two streams, about the same size, flowing from different glaciers on either side of the mountain. It is clear that the Kali Gandaki comes from the glaciers of Dhungmara Himal, protector deity of the King and all of Mustang, a mountain the people consider too sacred to climb. One of these streams is the true source, but not being a geologist I can't tell which one. So I look at both.

Six months later a German tourist calls a press conference in Kathmandu to announce his discovery of the sources of the Kali Gandaki. I suppose the mantle of "discoverer" will go to the person who climbs the glaciers with a global positioning device, bounces beams off satellites and charts the precise altitudinal, latitudinal and longitudinal coordinates. Of course the Loba are more than happy to point any "discoverer" towards the source, which they have known about since time out of mind.

I am constantly astounded by the diversity and natural beauty of the land here. The badlands of eerily eroded towers glow at sunset in a rainbow of blood red, pink, grey, yellow, green, mauve, black and brilliant white. None of this natural beauty is like anything else in Nepal.

Wildlife, hunted by the Khampa guerillas during the 1960s and 1970s, seems to be making a comeback. I see



One of the Champa Lha Khang's endangered treasures

large herds of *bharal*, or blue sheep, and big colonies of long-tailed marmots. A neighbour in Lo Manthang arrives one morning talking excitedly about snow leopards. He shows me the carcasses of two horses that were hamstringed and then killed by two of the big cats — only 100 metres from the walls of the city. Vultures, eagles and hawks circle in the deep blue sky. A variety of birds from the Tibetan plateau and the middle hills of Nepal spend part of the year in Lo. Mustang is also a stop for migrat-

ing Siberian cranes. Just after the autumn harvest I see a flock of six of these beautiful creatures, on their way from Siberia to Sri Lanka, feeding on stray heads of wheat left in the fields around Lo Manthang.

But for all its beauty, it is a harsh land and the people are hard pressed to survive here. Lo is a desert. The southern slopes of the Himalaya receive hundreds of inches of rain a year. But Lo, on the northern side of the great range, is in its rain shadow and only receives three to four inches a year. Hence the need for large, labour-intensive irrigation systems to water the patchwork of verdant fields that surrounds the villages. Even so, because the Loba can grow only one crop a year, they are forced to buy grain from their neighbours to the south. Villages even two days south of Lo can raise two crops a year thanks to a better water supply and warmer temperatures.

The Loba tell me the glacier-fed streams, upon which they depend for irrigation, have been getting smaller throughout living memory. This is caused, they say, by the shrinking of the glaciers, particularly in the past ten years. They say they are getting less snowfall and rainfall now. Every village in Lo is still surrounded by green irrigated fields six months of the year. But beyond the irrigated areas stretch equal areas of fields abandoned for lack of a water supply. No one in Lo has heard of global warming. They

blame the shrinking glaciers on vindictive local earth spirits — angered by some action of man. It is odd to think that these farmers, so far from 20th-century technology, may be victims of the

### Six Siberian cranes, on their way from Russia to Sri Lanka, stop to feed on stray heads of wheat left in the fields.

unforeseen consequences of hair spray.

In the 1950s a few Loba began migrating in winter to look for work. Their land no longer supported them. Now perhaps 50% of the population goes south in winter to Pokhara and Kathmandu, and even further afield to the cities of northern India, in search of employment to supplement the meagre, declining yields from their agriculture.

The trans-Himalayan trade that once supplemented the income of the Loba has been greatly curtailed since Chinese troops occupied Tibet and took up positions along the border in the 1950s. Maybe tourism is arriving just in time.



But in fact trade began declining 200 years ago, when wars between kingdoms scared traders away to other routes.

Perhaps another reason for the general decline in Lo — including a drop in population — is depletion of its few forests. The massive roofs on the temples of Mustang are supported by large wooden beams. Construction timber is cut from trees that are planted and harvested on private land. Yet there are two surviving tiny groves — one of ancient juniper, the other of birch and poplar — protected by a local religious taboo. Clearly there were once larger forests in the ravines. All have been cut down. And all the thorn bushes within a day's walk of Lo have been uprooted for fuel. From King to poorest peasant, the Loba today burn dung, not wood, in their cooking hearths. The limit on visitors is meant to protect the equally fragile economy and environment.

Luckily the desert climate has preserved some of the ancient frescos. Others have been less lucky. Temple roofs collapse if snow is not shovelled away and fresh mud is not applied. Once that happens the frescos are exposed to the elements and disappear within a few decades. One large 15th-century monastery, Samdruling, survived into the 1960s. It is now completely gone, along with all its unrecorded treasures.

The Nepalese government is trying to interest international agencies in conserving Mustang's priceless treasures. But it is such a remote region, and there is so much to be done, that the Loba face an uphill battle attracting skilled experts and motivating them to spend years of their lives here. Some experts reckon the Loba can be trained to carry out much of the restoration themselves — including the application of special bonding agents to reattach peeling murals to walls. That way the descendants of the artists who created these works would restore and maintain them.

Tourists are charged \$500 a week for permits to visit Lo. The government's aim is not only to limit tourists, but to raise money to help fund art preservation. Yet money is also required for immediate needs like irrigation, drinking water, medicine and education. Otherwise the day might come when the Loba are forced to leave their land — and abandon their irreplaceable temples and frescos.

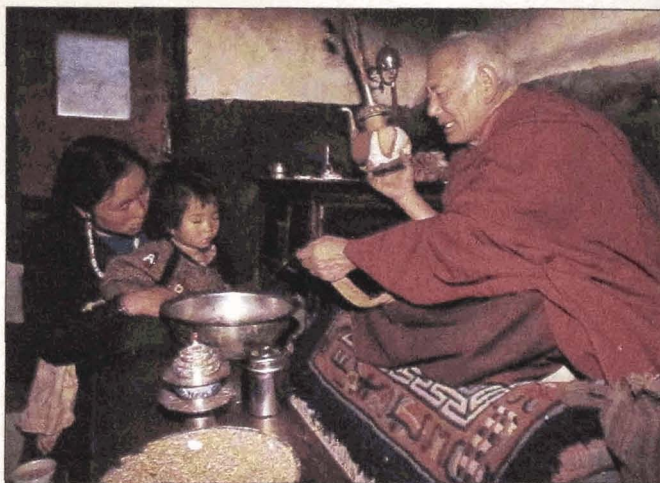
Kathmandu plans to allow another 200 tourists to visit Mustang before the end of 1992, and 200 more next spring. The government and ACAP are still assessing the impact of the first visitors this year. A tightening of regulations is in store. It seems probable that trekking groups will be encouraged to rent horses from the Loba to carry their loads rather than bring in outside porters. The Loba would

like to see more of the tourist dollar go directly into the local economy.

In mid-July a group of six pilgrims arrives in Lo Manthang. They have been walking for three weeks from a border area to the west called Dolpo, behind a range of 6,000-metre-high mountains. Three of the pilgrims, the leaders, are Buddhist yogis. Men in their 60s, they do not cut their hair. Their long dreadlocks are wrapped around their heads like turbans.

At sunset on the day they arrive, they dance outside the city walls, rattling double-headed drums and stopping now and then to blow on horns made from human thigh bones. Then they pitch minuscule tents, each just big enough for one man to sit up in. "How do you sleep in that tiny tent?" I ask one of the younger pilgrims. "We don't sleep," he replies. "We meditate in a sitting position all night." Before they retire they are well fed by the villagers, who send wives and daughters with offerings of food and tea.

The next day the dreadlocked masters lead their disciples around the temples of Lo Manthang to make offerings and prostrate themselves at the feet of giant statues. The young men have never been outside Dolpo and are amazed at the size of the temples in Lo Manthang — among the biggest Buddhist temples in Nepal. "Our lama is leading us on a three-month pilgrimage to Lo Manthang and on to Kathmandu so we can make offerings at all the temples of the Buddha,"



A sick child gets a ritual blessing from head monk Tashi Tenzing

explains a disciple in red robes and a three-pointed red hat. "We gain merit this way. As we go we practise the meditation the lama has given us. And we dance as part of our meditation in every village we come to."

That night and the next they camp in the courtyard in front of the Champa Lha Khang. On the third night the monsoon finally arrives, weeks late. Rain falls all night long. In the morning, as I slosh through the muddy alleys between the houses of Lo Manthang, I am stopped by one of the old women who blamed me for angering the gods. "See," she says, her wrinkled face beaming with joy, "the lamas came and brought the rain." I smile and go on my way. But through the day, half a dozen people tell me the same thing. The gods I angered in my ignorance have been placated by the wise offerings of the dancing pilgrims.

Upon leaving Mustang I run into Aungyel Bista, the assistant mayor of Lo Manthang, in Jomosom. His first question: "Has it rained?" I tell him about the coming of the monsoon. He literally jumps for joy, clapping his hands. If I am not going to get any of the credit, at least I can be the bearer of good news. ■