THE ART OF NEIGHBOURING
PHOTO EXHIBITION
These boys are employed to apply a compound of molten lead and some sort of plastic to the exposed ends of wiring on this construction site, a 34-storey residential tower in Korla, Xinjiang. It is midwinter, but it is relatively mild, about -10°C.

They melt the compound with blowtorches; the thick toxic smoke that comes off this compound as it is being heated fills up the room from the top. By the time they have finished the two large apartments on that level, smoke fills the whole room; the only place to breathe relatively safely is right at floor level.

For this, they are paid 80 yuan (USD$12)/day – a lot more than the other jobs in their area of the market. Two months’ wages would not quite buy them one square metre of space in the apartments that they are helping to build.
A rented room in a soon-to-be-demolished part of the city. The boy from next door watches the fun as three guys from Yunnan get up mid-morning – the first thing that they do is strike up the fire and start warming up for a bit of karaoke.

These men are freelance interior decorators. They get paid a good deal more than the average construction worker, but on average each job lasts a much shorter time. In the winter construction work stops and they have free time.

Unlike many other construction workers, they choose not to go home (to Yunnan) for the Spring Festival: “there is nothing there for me... and it is a long journey,” explains the eldest, Mr Wang.

We sang “2002, the First Snow of the Year,” “Beneath the Northern Skies,” and other Xinjiang classics by Dao Lang.

Mr Wang told me that his son and daughter also live in Korla, but that they are not obedient. They don’t want to work on construction sites, so they work in low-paying jobs like hotels and shops. He is disappointed that they are not tough enough for the construction site.
This is the shop selling wild animal hides from the Tibetan highlands in Hezhou (Linxia, Gansu). When I asked the Hui salesman why he would sell such rare and beautiful animal skins to mostly Han from interior China, he said that his family had always done so and the Tibetans who brought them depended on him to bring them a good price since they did not speak good Mandarin and could not bargain well with the Han. He said he wanted to use his profits to help build a new Salafiyya mosque (a conservative branch of the Wahhabi’s) and also send both his daughters to school, since he had no sons. He was quite worried about who would carry on his family’s tanning and trading business, since the work was “not fit for women.”
In this photo taken from the Kashgar Sunday market (bazaar), the man with the long beard is a Uyghur from outside Kashgar, buying eggs from yet another Hui “ethno-religious mediator”, who had brought them from his home, a Hui village just north of the city. Parhat, the 72 year old Uyghur man, told me he bought 20 eggs for “bir koi” (one “kuai” RMB), and then offered to sell me his hat.

The photo was taken on a beautiful sunny warm day in March 1986, so Parhat was actually sweating under his fur lined hat, which I bought from him for “on koi” (ten RMB). I remember joking with him that the hat was worth 200 eggs. The Hui salesman, Mr. An, said the hat was too small to fit that many eggs, so I lost out in the deal. But I still have the hat!
From Ningxia to Lanzhou and Hezhou in Gansu, these are all Hui trading families whom I came to know over the course of several visits between 1983 and 1985. They show the long tradition of Hui Muslims serving as "ethno-religious mediators" bridging several cultures.

The two young girls on the far right (with their friend) are daughters of a tanner in Hezhou (Linxia), who sold his hides mostly to Han travelers along the ancient trade route along the Hexi corridor from the far west into interior China. The hides are mostly obtained from Tibetan traders and included some rare and now illegal items,
including snow leopard skins. Hezhou also is near the
great Tibetan monastery, Labrang, and Tibetans regularly
came through the town in the region that the late Joseph
Fletcher termed the nexus of four cultures (Han Chinese,
Muslim, Tibetan, and Turco-Mongolian).

The woman selling the flatbread which Hui call “da bing,”
and Uyghurs “naan,” is a third generation small business-
woman living in Lanzhou on a small alleyway frequented
mostly by men heading to the mosque for daily prayer.
She would put her table out before and after the hours
of prayer and retire to her home and make more bread
while she waited for the men to return. The sign above
the door reads “pure and true” (qing zhen) the earliest
Hui translation for “halal,” or even “Islam,” indicating that
the flatbread is made purely (without the use of lard), and
to the dictates of Islamic dietary restrictions.

The cobbler and his clients are sitting just inside his small
shop in Wuzhong, central Ningxia, where he is fitting
them with special cloth shoes (bu xie) that will fit inside
the larger boots, both of which are removed upon enter-
ing the nearby mosque for prayer.
On the “Friendship Highway” between Lhasa and Kathmandu, January 2008. After hours of driving across the flat Tibetan Plateau, snow-covered Himalayan peaks appear in the distance. Then, suddenly, the road winds down into the valleys that cut through the Himalayan range.

This road is the most important connection between Nepal and Tibet. It is open all year round, except for periods of heavy snowfall. Since 2008 the road has been sealed all the way to the border.
A little shop, a satellite telephone, a Chinese-made Dongfeng truck without number plates, oil barrels, wooden beams for export, a few tents, and a group of stray dogs – this is Tukling at the upper tip of the Limi Valley in Nepal’s far northwest, several days walk to the district headquarters in Simikot but only twenty kilometres from the PRC’s border.

A new road down from Tibet reached here a year ago. Two brothers, originally from a nearby village, came back from Kathmandu to establish this camp. It has quickly developed into a thriving business. In their shop they sell everything Chinese, from batteries to beer, from rice and flour to pans and pots.

The younger brother, who has a college degree and is fluent in English, stays up here during the summer, while his older brother continues his business ventures all over Asia. The shop’s signboard lists four of his phone numbers in India, China, and Nepal.
This is the assembly hall of Halji village in northwestern Nepal’s Limi valley. The young man in the white jacket is the recently elected village head.

We were invited for a dinner of dried yak meat, served together with rice, Lhasa beer, hard liquor, and soft drinks – all carried over from Purang, a couple of days walk across the border in Tibet. In the afternoon, the village had a meeting here. These were the topics discussed:

1) When to bring down the cattle from the summer pastures and when to start harvesting?
2) What to do with the two NGO staff that had come all the way from Kathmandu to offer training in micro-credit management? Nobody had an interest in micro-credits, and nobody had time for a two-day workshop. But sending them away would have been rude.

3) What to do against the glacier lake outburst floods that had afflicted the village for the fifth year in a row and destroyed fields and houses? New protection walls had to be built and funds raised. Despite all the talk about climate change, no NGO had been willing to help so far.

Bored by all this serious talk, the children started playing around.
January 2010, outside of Korla, south Xinjiang. The land is high in salinity, and requires regular flushing with irrigated water from the Peacock River in Korla, 60 km to the east.

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