



Aging, Care, and Place

Himalayan Elders in an Era of Migration

Sienna R. Craig

Professor of Anthropology

Dartmouth College

Collaborative & Comparative Research Design



Funding: US National Science Foundation 3-year Senior Research Grant (2024-2027)

Co-PIs: Geoff Childs & Sienna Craig

Locations: Baragaon & Lo (Mustang); Nubri & Tsum (Gorkha); Kathmandu; greater NYC area

Mustang, Kathmandu, & New York City Research Collaborators

- Kunzom Thakuri
- Yungdrung Tsewang Gurung
- Lhamo Tsering Gurung
- Nangsa Choeden Gurung
- Pamo Gurung
- Yangjin Bista
- Tsering Bista
- Tashi Wongdi Gurung
- Tsering Wangmo





Why is this Research Important?

- Aging and migration as a global issue
- Nepal as an exporter of “care” labor
- Rapid socioeconomic and demographic transition in Himalayan communities
- Debunking assumptions that all Himalayan regions are the same
- Methodological experimentation & innovation
- Making & supporting intergenerational connections
- Envisioning possible futures for Himalayan elders

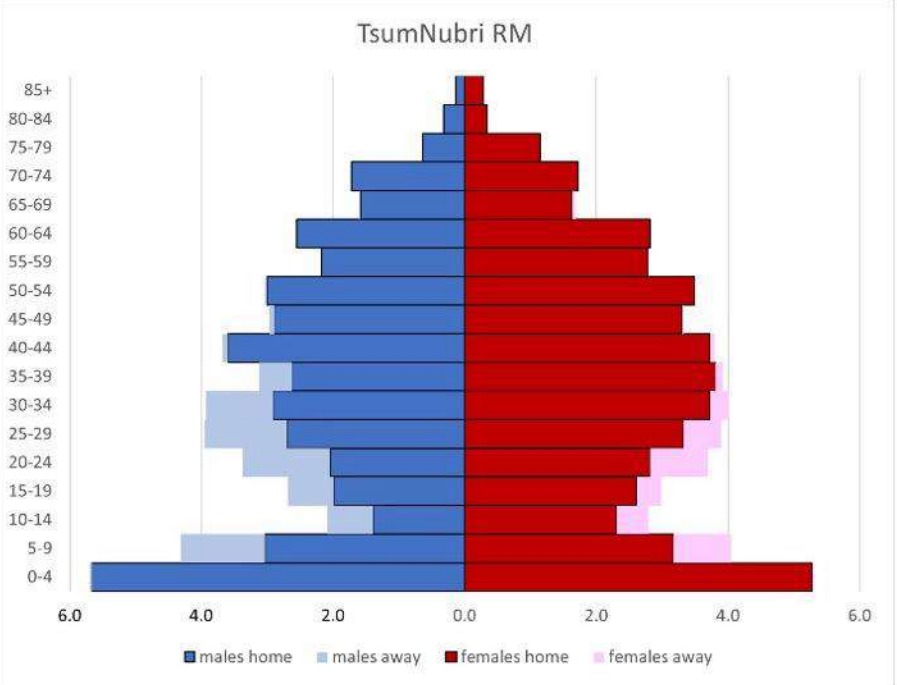
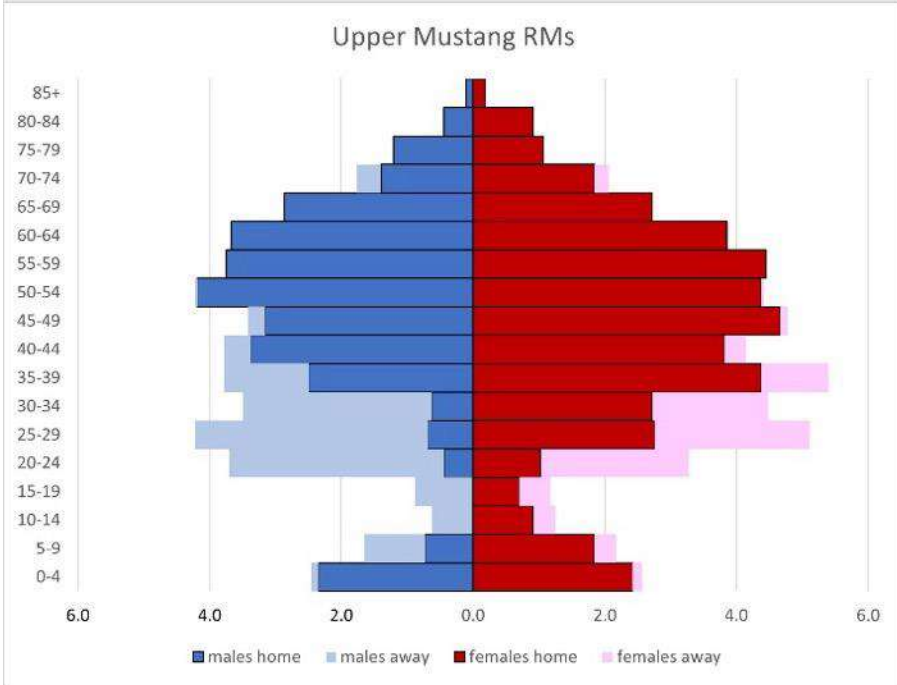
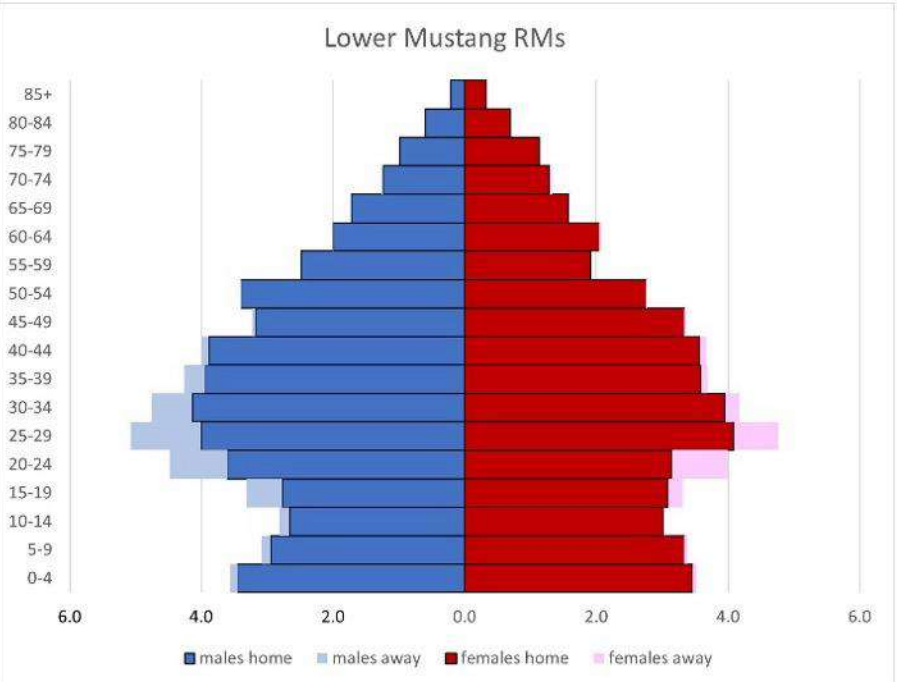
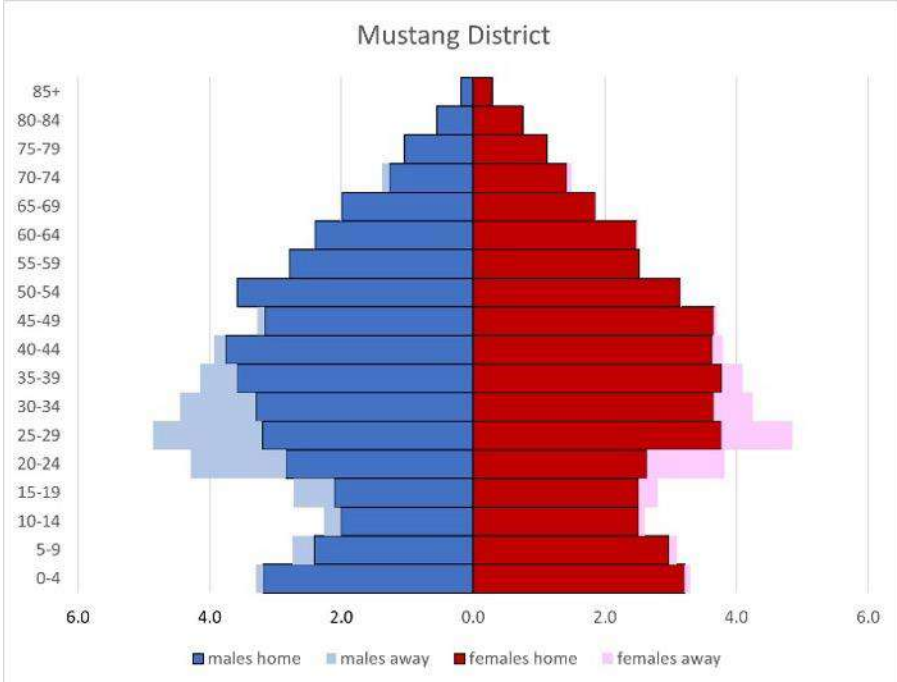
Research Questions

- What is “successful” aging for Himalayan elders?
- What does “aging in place” mean in an era of migration?
- What practices embody “care”?
- How do translocal families navigate support for their elders?



Demographic Transitions

(2021 Nepal Census Data)



Research Methods

- Household demographic surveys & longitudinal demographic data (2012-2024)
- Structured interviews with rural & urban elders as well as with community & religious leaders
- Participant observation
- Family-based case studies
- Focus groups & small group interviews
- *Pilgrimage as ethnographic method*

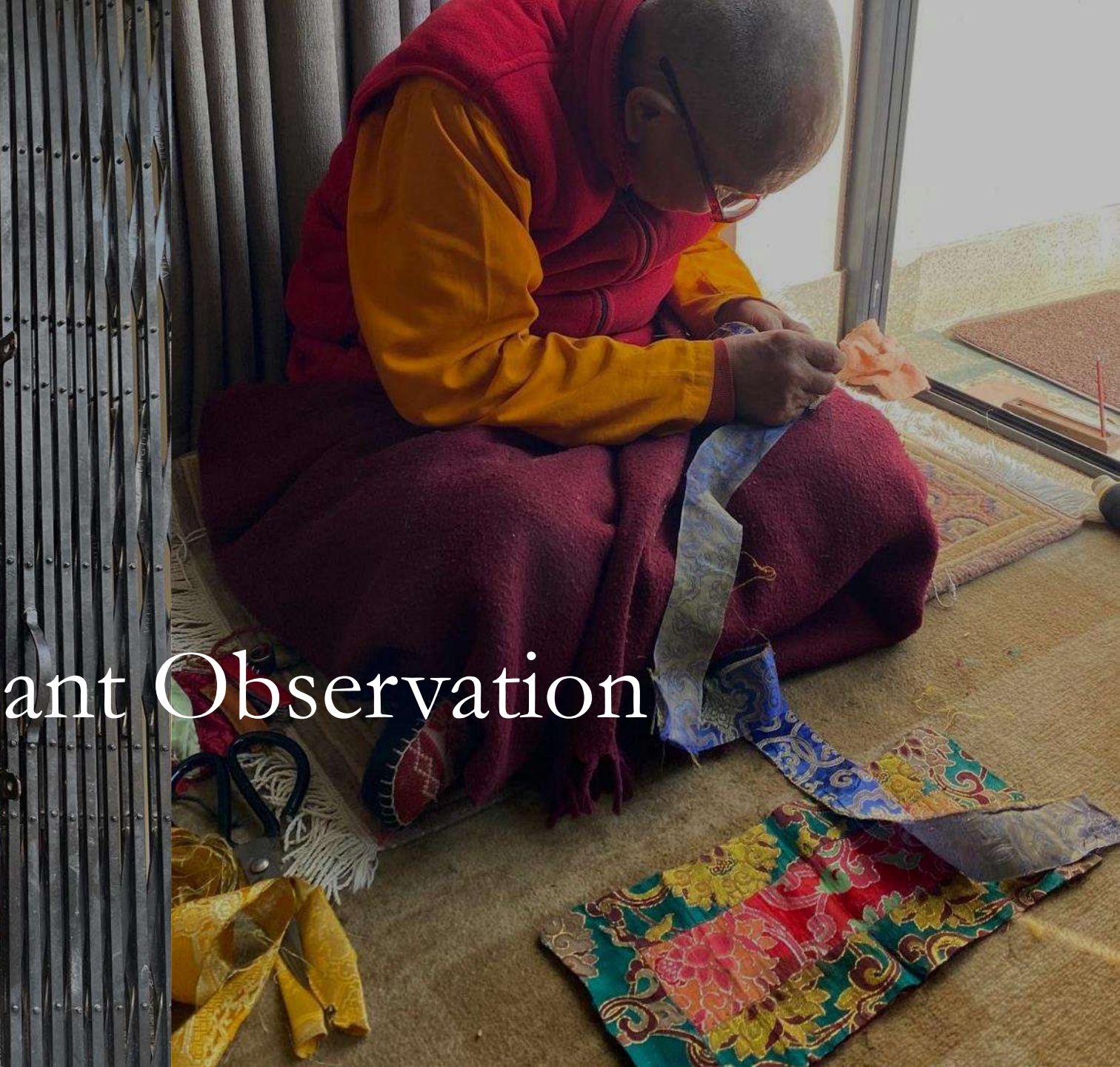


Structured Interviews

Questions about seasonal migrations and annual movements; financial and other forms of assistance from family and others; daily activities and mobility; physical and mental wellbeing; religious perspectives on aging; ritual practice and aging

- How do you know when you have become “old”?
- What are some of the things that elders need to be happy or satisfied in old age?
- Are there things that bother you in your body?
- Generally, what is the state of your heart-mind?
- What brings you comfort when you think about the challenges of this life?
- Where do elders from your area prefer to live? Why?
- What is your understanding of impermanence (མི་རྟག་པ་)?
- Why are pilgrimages important?





Participant Observation

Focus Group: Mustang Youth NYC

- Relationships with elders in their family
- Understanding of elders' life experiences
- Caring for elders
- Intergenerational conflict & communication
- Roles of community organizations in elder care
- Reflections on cultural shifts
- The future....



Small Group Interviews

- What are your impressions of Kathmandu?
- What differences do you see between your generation and your parents' generation for elders?
- Where is the best place to age and why?
- What is your biggest concern about growing old?
- If you are not in good health, what is the best place to be?
- What do you think about elders going to live abroad in their old age?





Pilgrimage as Ethnographic Method

Embodied care

Religious practice

Experiential education

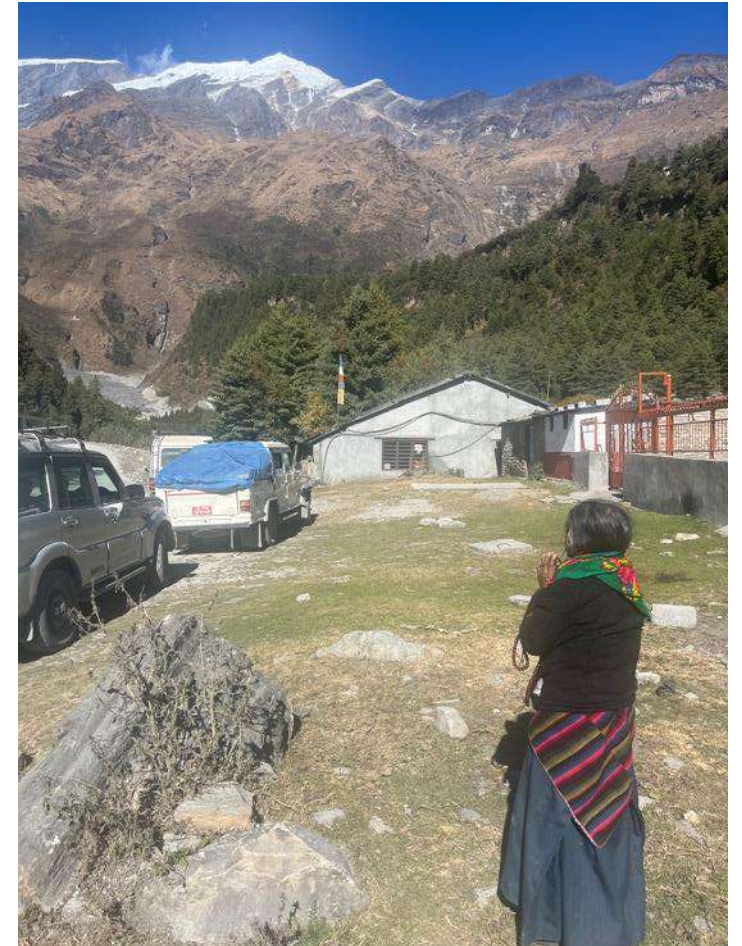
Rite of passage

Karmic connections

Voicing aspirations

Sharing joy & suffering

Departures & Concepts of Home



On the Road...Adventures & Obstacles





Serendipitous Reconnections & Cross-Cultural Encounters



Experiencing Kathmandu ... Some for
the First Time!

Darshan & Devotion



Making Offerings & Gathering Blessings



Moving through *Phayul's* Sacred Geographies



Experiential Education & Religious History





Benefit & Merit Departures & Returns



Preliminary Themes Pilot Study 2023 to the Present

Labor, Kinship & Care

Sending money is not the same as having people... You cannot swallow remittances... You can buy everything, but you can't buy your parents.





Benefits & Challenges of Increased Mobility
The road makes life easy...but it also makes me sick.



Against Social Isolation

Being together is important... The city is good if you have money, otherwise, the village is better... As more of us elders come to America, it will be less lonely, but still difficult because we cannot manage on our own there.



Navigating Ill-Health & Disability
The human body is a rented room for us.



Internal Migrations, Community Governance, State Support

Some think outsiders should not have village responsibilities. Others see we need them... I receive my old age pension... I am waiting for my old age pension.

Belonging, Connection & the Virtual Village

*Even if on outside we are in New
York, inside we are in Mustang.*



Creating &
Recreating a Sense
of Place

*I cannot do kora in
America, so I do kora in
my mind.*



Blessings, Burdens & the Meanings of “Retirement”

I had my tharchang years ago, but I am still tending fields and caring for animals.

I would rather be in Nepal, but it is easier for my children if I am in New York.





Impermanence & Uncertainty

I am worried about how I will die, whether in happiness or sorrow, whether at home or away... To die in the village is best, but will there be someone to carry my corpse? Will any of my children be with me?



Ramping up Religious Practice



Inner & Outer Architectures

Possible Futures for Himalayan Elders

- To *gensukhang* or not to *gensukhang*
- Elder daycares in the village and the “village” of New York
- The (im)possibilities of annual global *kora* & the enduring nature of seasonal migrations
- A future Mustang without Mustangis?





Thank you! Questions

