

Book Reviews

MICHAEL SPIES, *Northern Pakistan: High Mountain Farming and Socio-natures*. Lahore: Vanguard Books, 2019. 416 pages, 27 figures, 36 photos, 10 tables, \$12.88. ISBN 9789694026091

In Michael Spies's book, northern Pakistan is represented by Nagar, a rural district in the Karakoram range that has received far less attention than the better known and more thoroughly researched Hunza district to the north. Nagar was a semi-autonomous principality until 1972, before it was integrated into the political system of Pakistan. Another major change was the completion of the Karakoram Highway in 1978, which connects this formerly remote and isolated entity with downcountry Pakistan and with China. The author explores how these and other changes have shaped farming, especially crop farming, in Nagar over the past 30–40 years, and what actors and factors have been responsible for these changes and in what way.

The book is informed chiefly by Michael Spies's aversion to one-dimensional or reductionist explanations and by his emphasis on empirical research, which is epitomised in the statement that "this book is, above all, an empirical study of agricultural change in Nagar" (p. 9). The title of Chapter 1 "Climate change, among others: attempting an integrated analysis of agricultural change in Nagar" sets the scene. While conceding that climate change exists and that it does have an effect on local farming (Chapter 11 deals specifically with climate change and other environmental changes), he distances himself from the current fixation on climate change, which he describes as a new form of environmental reductionism, and argues for an approach that does better justice to the complexity of factors that have influenced crop farming in Nagar.

The author has chosen the assemblage approach for his research rather than other research approaches in the fields of human-environmental relations and agricultural change, which he presents in Chapter 2, because he considers it less prone to conceptual bias. The assemblage approach is explained in detail in Chapter 3 along with the concept of *socionature*, which figures in the book title and which views nature and culture not as two different spheres but as closely intertwined within the one sphere of "socionature". *Socionature* encompasses such concepts as, for instance, irrigation agriculture – considered as a complex and dynamic assemblage of human and non-human components that generate changes by interacting and overlapping with each other in often unpredictable ways. The assemblage approach refrains from explaining such changes through theories and allows an open and unbiased perspective for

empirical observations on the agency of the various components and on their interrelations with one another.

The book is based on the doctoral thesis of Michael Spies and on a total of four years of research, including eleven months of fieldwork between 2014 and 2016. During these months, he carried out interviews and informal discussions and collected observations during “innumerable walks around the villages and their environs” (p. 55). Intensive exposure to the field site, thorough and careful attention to detail, checking and cross-checking observations against each other and against other sources of information are characteristic features of Michael Spies’s style of empirical research and render the chapters on agricultural changes in Nagar into repositories of a stunning wealth of facts and insights. Moreover, due to the remarkable ability of Spies to guide the reader along the multiple and interconnecting threads of his narrative, the reader does not get mired in detail.

The changes that Michael Spies has detected and analysed can be summarised as follows. The most prominent is the shift from subsistence cropping to the production of cash crops, in particular potatoes, apricots, cherries and apples. At the same time agriculture has lost much of its appeal and importance as a livelihood as new income opportunities have emerged. The resulting shortage of agricultural labour has led or contributed to a decline in certain agricultural activities, such as animal husbandry involving transhumance. That the decline in livestock numbers is also due to an increase in commercial potato production, which has contributed to a shortage of winter fodder, is just one example of the co-occurrence of changes that influence each other in complex ways. Declining livestock numbers have reduced the availability of manure for crop production, which is compensated for by the introduction of chemical fertilisers, as just one of many technological innovations.

Key events in bringing about these changes were, as mentioned above, the incorporation of Nagar into Pakistan in 1972, and the opening in 1978 of the Karakoram Highway, which provided access to markets and facilitated interventions by development organisations such as FAO/UNDP and AKRSP (Aga Khan Rural Support Programme) as well as other actors, including the government. The impact of changes in the biophysical environment seems somewhat less significant. Changes in the climate have prolonged the growing season and made double cropping possible, but on the other hand have increased the vulnerability of villages in exposed locations to the effects of glacier melting or erosion.

The book is written in excellent English (not least because of the absence of jargon). From among the numerous illustrations, the maps of land use in Hopar, 1986 and 2014, and the repeat photographs of the same locations in the mid-1980s and 2014/15 stand out as very instructive examples of some changes in Nagar.

My concerns are few. As one example, Michael Spies employs novel terms such as “socioatures”, “actants”, or “symbioses”, but at the same time seems somewhat ill at ease using them. His comment in footnote 2 on page 38 – “to avoid unnecessary jargon, I will continue to use the terms ‘social’ and ‘society’, but they should be understood in the sense of ‘socioatural’ and ‘socioature’” – makes one wonder why he uses jargon, which he considers unnecessary, in the first place. I personally find the use of the term “symbioses” to denote turning points in the development of agricultural systems particularly confusing. “Symbiosis” as an established term in biology for alliances between organisms for mutual benefits should, in my view, be used only in this sense and not with any other meaning. Finally, the book title and subtitle suggest that Michael Spies considers Nagar as representative of northern Pakistan. It would have been good if he had added some explanation as to why he believes this to be the case.

Nevertheless, I read Michael Spies’s book with immense pleasure. He comes across as a solid and devoted empiricist with a genuine desire to do justice to the complexities of human-environment relations in particular settings and with little patience for approaches that are driven by the agenda of a particular discipline. This is one of the best books on human-environment relations that I have read thus far and a prime example of what geography can achieve when understood and practiced as a holistic science.

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SIEGFRIED O. WOLF, *The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor of the Belt and Road Initiative. Concept, Context and Assessment*. (Contemporary South Asian Studies). Cham: Springer, 2020. Xvii, 395 pages. €71.68, ISBN 978-3-030-16198-9 (eBook) / €88.39, ISBN 978-3-030-16197-2 (Hardcover)

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has become the best-known project of China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) or One Belt One Road (OBOR), popularly known as the New Silk Road, i.e. China’s programme to reconnect to Southwest Asia, the Eastern Mediterranean and beyond. The CPEC, as the author lays out, does far more than improve connectivity and ease transport from Western China across the Karakoram to the Arabian Sea, complemented by a host of projects in almost all sectors of the economy, especially energy. China has more in mind than safeguarding its energy supply lines and economically reviving its less developed and political restive western regions. Therefore the author asks, “is the CPEC part of Beijing’s alleged goal