

Ariell Ahearn and Troy Sternberg (eds), with Allison Hahn.

Pastoralist Livelihoods in Asian Drylands: Environment, Governance and Risk.

Winwick, Cambridgeshire: The White Horse Press, 2017.

ISBN 9781874267980 (HB), 222 pp.

Published as a result of the workshop 'Localities and Livelihoods in Asian Drylands' held at the School for Geography and the Environment at Oxford University in 2015, this book joins five articles and four reports from the field into an edited volume of rich studies on pastoralism and its contemporary challenges. As a whole, the book comprises studies from Oman, Jordan, Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, China and Mongolia and, therefore, provides the reader with profound insights into various regions of Asian drylands.

In the introduction, the editors illustrate the course of the book by determining its major objectives. These include the overall aim to challenge studies that are informed by non-field-based knowledge, through discussing three major misconceptions of pastoralism: the ideas that pastoralists live beyond state control, lack formal governance structures and pursue a rather unsustainable lifestyle. In order to accommodate the continuance of pastoral lifestyles, the authors argue, these misconceptions need to be tackled by supporting pastoralist resilience 'through the articulation of agency, the definition and mitigation of risk and the conceptualisation and crossing of boundaries' (p. 11).

A unique feature of the book is its combination of authors, including scholars with a longstanding professional experience in pastoralism and with personal backgrounds in the respective regions addressed in this book. The reader, therefore, is provided with inside views that place pastoral communities at the centre of the political, social and ecological debates with which pastoralist livelihoods are entangled.

The featured articles and reports emphasise three major problems that pastoralists face and that affect their livelihoods on a daily basis. These include socio-political marginalisation, the neglect of indigenous knowledge and concepts, and the issue of 'conservation without a human face', according to Chatty (2002). These three issues are deeply interwoven with each other and, in some cases, appear all together in a single chapter.

How pastoral communities are increasingly marginalised becomes particularly clear in the chapter by Gongbuzeren, who discusses the multiple facets of micro-credit loans as

financial service for Tibetan herder communities in Ruoergai County in western Sichuan, China. The author agrees with Sneath (2012), indicating that 'herder's borrowing tends to reflect needs, not investment opportunities' (p. 93). Subsequently, it is made clear – through analysing the correlation between annual household incomes and the amount of annual loans – that herders have become highly dependent on loans. This dependency, however, does not contribute to poverty reduction or increased risk management but causes herders to be 'trapped in a vicious cycle of debt' (p. 98) which develops through a combination of high interest rates paired with decreasing access to pastures and low prices for animal products.

In 'From Reform to Revolt: Bashar al-Assad and the Arab Tribes in Syria', Haian Dukhan sheds light on how the interplay between the neoliberal, authoritarian policies of Bashar al-Assad, environmental hazards and unreliable conservation affected tribal communities in Syria. While tribal herders enjoyed more support through patronage networks under the authoritarian regime of Hafez al-Assad, pastoralists have become increasingly neglected under the reign of his son, where cities have been privileged over rural areas and pastoral lands assigned to oil and gas industries. Combined with the environmental disaster of a long drought, these shifts have led to the displacement of 65,000 rural families and pushed them into deeper social marginalisation.

Nisthasri Awasthi argues that '[l]ocal meanings ascribed to transhumance are intricately linked to their experience of livelihood, forest ecology, grazing, pastureland and policies' (p. 157). In her chapter, 'Transhumance and Change among the Rungs of Uttarakhand Himalaya', she discloses that changes in transhumance intertwine with local identity-related issues, including younger generations being less interested in following a pastoral way of life. The region is experiencing a major shift from a transhumant orientation towards the commercial exploitation of medicinal herbs and fungi, not least because of severe institutional discredit and educational disregard of pastoralism rooted in colonial times.

How western colonial policies affect pastoral livelihoods far into post-colonial times is further elaborated on in 'Afghan/Pakistan Border Politics: What Future for Kuchi Nomads', by Inam Ur Rahim. The creation of the Durand Line between Pakistan and Afghanistan has brought forth major changes for Kuchi pastoralists who now find themselves in a situation, in which '[l]ocal traditions and formal governance institutions related to grazing lands are either weak or dysfunctional. The traditional leadership

pattern of experience in collective bargaining for fodder resources has gradually been eroded and more individualistic competition is occurring' (p. 135f).

These chapters exemplify how marginalisation not only affects pastoralism as a livelihood but also spans various spheres of pastoral life, from governance and economics to education. Multifaceted forms of marginalisation are strongly related to both approaches to 'conservation without a human face' and the neglect of systems of indigenous knowledge which are dynamic and have developed over centuries within pastoral communities.

Salah al Mazrui discusses 'Indigenous Systems of Ecological Knowledge and Conservation Initiatives in Jabal Akhdar Mountain, Oman'. By paying special attention to the '*hema*' system, a dynamic concept embedded in Arab custom (*'urf*), the author critically addresses 'the question of defining ecology and the role of the expatriate in conservation' and tries 'to add sociocultural and historical dimensions to the idea of conservation' (p. 111). In this sense, Salah al Mazrui promotes diversity in conservation approaches:

Management of rangelands will hardly be successful if one is ignorant of how local communities perceive and give meanings to their tribal territories, where ancestors have been born and buried, wars have been fought, identities have been formed, to name just a few of the reasons why people become so emotionally attached to their *dār*¹, besides being a place that 'provides economic subsistence' (p. 118).

In 'Environment as Commodity and Shield: Reshaping Herders' Collective Identity in Mongolia', Byambabaatar Ichinkhorloo elaborates on the revitalisation of '*nutag*' as 'a traditional and dynamic concept' (p. 54) of collective identity that 'provides social identity and land access as well as livestock security' (p. 57). The nuanced integration of herders' narratives shows how '*nutag*' identity applies as a mechanism of informal resource management and environmental conversation that helps in navigating the increasing commodification of the environment in Mongolia.

Aman Singh, too, demonstrates how forms of traditional knowledge contribute to the maintenance of functioning ecosystems by arguing that 'co-management of the orans by villagers and pastoralists contributed to a greater species diversity in cultivated and

¹ According to al Mazrui, *dār* refers to a 'territory generally associated with a specific tribe' (p. 118).

wild plants as well as guaranteeing sustainable access to all members of the community' (p. 178).

Moreover, his study of the Bakhtpura oran makes it clear that the oran forests are central to pastoralist lives, providing manifold resources and protection: 'Orans are very important to the lives of different resource users, meeting economic, social, cultural and spiritual needs of the community' (p. 180).

Together, these chapters impressively underline that indigenous knowledge systems are highly flexible. Instead of depicting them as archaic heritages, the authors find substantial ways to show that local concepts of knowledge prove, rather, to be highly adaptable to changing circumstances according to their inherent dynamic character. Wassef al Sekhaneh further reinforces this position in his chapter 'Conservation of Tangible and Intangible Properties of the Tent in Jordanian Badia', where he discusses the material culture of Bedouin housing in Jordan. Although the material outfit of the household can take many forms, including 'the tent, traditional buildings made of natural building materials and modern housing made up largely of man-made materials' (p. 204), the domestic sphere maintains traditional ideas and transfers sociocultural patterns into any of the three housing forms mentioned above.

Despite being flexible and dynamic, knowledge is often contested and, especially in the Asian drylands represented in this book, it is often deployed in ways that bring forth negative effects for the communities it is applied to. In 'The Afterlife of Nomadism: Pastoralism, Environmentalism, Civilisation, and Identity in Mongolia and China', Bumochir Dulam provides an impressive example of how scholarly work can be exploited regardless its initial aim. In the case of Mongolian pastoralists in China, Hardin's 'tragedy of the commons' has been deployed by Chinese scholars and administration to justify the elimination of pastoralism as a lifestyle that is equated to poverty. However, the author infers, '[t]he debate has neither proven nor disproven whether degradation exists and what causes it; instead, the discussions have created more suspicion of pastoralism and have left many simply in doubt' (p. 27).

In contrast to China, mobile pastoralism has a far different status in Mongolia, where 'it implies pride in the successful achievements of modernity, democracy and a market economy from the basis of so-called "barbarian nomadic" pastoralism' (p. 29). On the contrary, international development practitioners consider herders to be mainly responsible for pasture degradation and therefore have introduced top-down pasture

management strategies after the model of Ostrom's 'community based natural resource management', leaving herder communities widely without participation. Concludingly, Bumochir critically questions the uprooting of scientific theory and how, subsequently, constructions of pastoralism evolve to be utilised in research, state policy discourses and development agendas.

Ultimately, the studies presented in this book show how pastoral herders experience severe disintegration and suffer socioeconomic neglect while sweeping marketisation is prioritised across Asian drylands. The book successfully connects a variety of issues with case studies that vary in region and scale while impressively achieving the goals formulated by the editors in the introduction. By way of concluding remark,

Gongbuzeren's article rightly asserts:

It appears that current market-based development systems promoted by the government narrowly focus on the development of markets and pay little attention to the response capacity of local herders, who are supposed to be the main beneficiaries; the ecological conditions affecting their livelihood; and the socio-cultural aspects of their livestock production system (p. 105).

Max Planck Institute for the Science of Human History

and

Central Asian Seminar

Institute for Asian and African Studies

Humboldt-University of Berlin

Email: bjoern.reichhardt@gmail.com