

## **Socio-Economic Organisation in a Border Area of Tibetan Culture: Tabo, Spiti Valley, Himachal Pradesh, India**

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## **Socio-economic Organisation in a Border Area of Tibetan Culture: Tabo, Spiti Valley, Himachal Pradesh, India**

By Christian Jahoda. Vienna,  
Austria: Verlag der Österreichischen  
Akademie der Wissenschaften,  
2015. 367 pp. € 89.00. ISBN 978-3-  
7001-7816-3.

Across the Himalayas are a number of remote and interesting places, including Spiti Valley in the arid western Himalayas. Although little known to the outside world, this valley is famous among scholars of Tibetan Buddhism and Buddhist art and architecture as the location of Tabo Gumpa, the world's oldest continuously run Buddhist monastery (Klimburg-Salter 1997). Tabo was one of the first Buddhist monasteries in the western Himalayas to be studied by Western scholars, and continues to draw researchers from around the world. As such, there is a relatively rich body of literature on its art, texts, and architecture (Tucci 1988; Petech and Luczanits 1999; Auer 2017). Yet although the Buddhist heritage of Tabo and, by extension, the Spiti Valley continue to draw attention, research on Spiti's social and economic institutions has been very limited. This is where Christian Jahoda's book makes a major contribution.

The known history of Spiti spans over a thousand years, beginning at a time when the region played an active role in the so-called Tibetan Renaissance, or second diffusion of Buddhism into Tibet from India, that occurred from the late 10th through 11th centuries. One of the leading figures of the period, Rinchen Zangpo, lived in Spiti and established Tabo and several other monasteries and stupas in the region. These institutions played an important role in the broader religious and political

project to translate Sanskrit Buddhist texts into Tibetan and to (re)establish Buddhism in Tibet.

While this part of Spiti's early history is well known and much celebrated, little else has been recorded about Spiti's historical past. Existing knowledge about Spiti's history is extremely limited, and what primary materials do exist are scattered in sources that are not easily accessible. Spiti's history is further complicated by the fact that it has been under many different political regimes or administrative units (Guge, Ladakh, Tibet, Dogra, Bashahr, British India, India) over the last millennium. Given these challenges, Christian Jahoda has done a remarkable job of sieving through disparate sources to examine how the socioeconomic organization of Tabo village likely developed, starting from its earliest known history to the present.

A central feature of Spiti's traditional socioeconomic system, which is similar to that of Tibetan societies more generally, is that primary farming households, known as *khang chen* or *khral pa*, are hereditarily tied to their land in a tenant-landlord relationship. These households have historically owed labor, rent, and other dues and taxes to the ruling authority that has claimed ownership or control over the land. Most villages in Spiti have traditionally been ruled by the Nono, which was originally appointed by Ladakhi rulers and adopted by subsequent regimes. Tabo village presents an interesting exception, however, in that land has historically been owned and controlled by the local monastery rather than the Nono. Jahoda's book is thus a useful case study for understanding the development of Tibetan peasant societies in which monastic institutions have exercised dominion over land and resources.

The book begins with an introduction of its topic, objectives, and thematic concepts, as well as a detailed discussion of theoretical

considerations and relevant literature relating to the anthropology of Tibetan societies. The main body of the text starts with a detailed, chronological discussion of Spiti's history, which is followed by an analysis of different historical phases of peasant development in the region. The study then zooms in on the specific case study of Tabo village, providing a detailed description of relevant local socioeconomic structures, institutions, and customs, including a description of recent socioeconomic changes instigated by the Indian government. The book concludes with a brief summary of the study and a thoughtful discussion on future research perspectives and needs. The last hundred or so pages are devoted to documenting Jahoda's primary sources and bibliography, which make clear the extensive research contribution of his study.

The book's peasant studies framework should make it of broader theoretical interest, and it will unquestionably prove useful for researchers interested specifically in the history of Spiti Valley. In addition to its chronological investigation of Spiti's history, Jahoda's study is layered with useful discussions on critical topics concerning Spiti's history and socioeconomic system that have been largely overlooked by past researchers. These topics include the *'Bro*, one of the earliest known clans of western Tibet; the role of the wool trade in west Tibet; the economies of Buddhist monastic communities in the region; the taxation concept of *pun* and its role; relationships with neighboring regions of Bashahr and Tibet; the implications of Sikh Dogra rule; and other points of interest.

Jahoda's study makes use of a uniquely local, contextual approach to better understand Spiti's history and socioeconomic conditions. Past studies that have looked at Spiti in relation to its neighboring regions have mainly focused on Lahaul, Ladakh, and Tibet. This study analyzes Spiti's history in relation to

its closest neighbor: upper Kinnaur. While Lahaul, Ladakh, and Tibet are larger and important neighbors of Spiti, a focus on upper Kinnaur is appropriate because of its greater geographical proximity to, and closer cultural relationship with, Tabo and Spiti Valley. As such, this aspect of Jahoda's study is a welcome and empirically oriented contribution to the literature on Spiti Valley.

Overall, Christian Jahoda has written an admirably comprehensive and thorough case study of a unique type of peasant society in a border area of Tibetan culture, and has shed new light in the process on Tibetan peasant societies such as those that have been studied by Melvyn

Goldstein, Graham Clarke, and others. This book is perhaps one of the most substantive research contributions on the topic of Spiti's historical development. Jahoda's findings on many aspects of Spiti's history, which have been unsolved and difficult puzzles in the past, greatly clarify and expand on our existing knowledge of the region's fascinating history—and I have no doubt that they will inspire new questions and projects.

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