CINEFORUM
ISSN: 0009-7039
Vol. 66. No. 6, 2026 (Special Issue 6)

Asymmetric Foodscapes: State-Led Globalization, Social Stratification, and Culinary Sovereignty Under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor

Komal Niazi[1], Abdul Qadar[2]*

[1]Affiliation: LIAVH (Laboratory for Integrated Archaeological Visualization and Heritage), Pratt Institute, New York, USA
Email: niazi.komal_leo@yahoo.com
[2]Department of Humanities and Sciences, National University of Medical Sciences (NUMS), Pakistan
Email: abdul.qadar@numspak.edu.pk
***corresponding Author**
Abdul Qadar
Affiliation: Department of Humanities and Sciences, National University of Medical Sciences (NUMS), Pakistan
Email: abdul.qadar@numspak.edu.pk

ABSTRACT
This ethnographic study examines how the Pakistan-China Economic Corridor (CPEC) shapes foodscapes and the extent of asymmetries in state-led globalization. This study, which gathered data over two years across multiple sites in Pakistan, demonstrates how food serves as a tool of gastro-diplomacy and a site of struggles over sovereignty. State narratives portray culinary connectivity and Pak-China friendship, while local farmers, vendors, and informal food workers are marginalized, face economic precarity, and remain vulnerable to threats to their culinary heritage. This study thinks with Appadurai's notion of global cultural flows and introduces the term "asymmetric foodscapes" to make sense of the unequal power dynamics that emerge in state-mediated globalization along class lines. The results show three key tensions: a) gastro-diplomatic harmony and grassroots struggles for sovereignty; b) the celebration of digital media and the invisible labour hierarchies; c) and modernization of agriculture against resilience of the informal food economy. Thus, the study shows how mega-infrastructure projects affect not only the physical environment but also cultural foodways, social stratification, and everyday life rhythms.
Keywords: foodscapes, CPEC, globalization, gastro-diplomacy, social stratification, culinary sovereignty,
Introduction

INTRODUCTION

A rice seller is setting up his stock of basmati rice behind the stalls in the busy Anarkali bazaar in Lahore, which are packaged "Pak-China Friendship". A Chinese restaurant nearby offers Sichuan-Punjabi dishes. As a case in point, engineers from China coming to different construction sites buy traditional Pakistani food i.e. sweets, bakery items and snacks etc. The process of these intermingling cultural foodways reflects the complex reconfiguration of Pakistan's foodscapes in the wake of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. The project remains one of the largest ones in Pakistan's history with total layout $62 billion spanning over diverse mega-infrastructural, agricultural and techno-scientific ventures to make Pakistan an important hub in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (McCartney, 2022). These food exchanges appear to offer an opportunity to realize the food sovereignty of South-South cooperation, defined as two countries cooperating to achieve mutual prosperity. But behind this facade of peace and prosperity lie many stories of land dispossession, labour exploitation, and the gradual disappearance of local food traditions (Niazi et al., 2024)

More than a network of roads, railways, and ports, the CPEC, signed in 2015, is a series of projects. CPEC provides a blueprint for state-driven development, which scholars increasingly see as a comprehensive model that affects not only physical development but also the social, cultural, and economic integration of the regions involved. Examples of Belt and Road (BRI) projects in their research show that the BRI changes not only work, diet, and languages used, but also people's understanding of their local lifeworlds and how states influence the same (Niazi et al., 2026). Under the BRI, China's agricultural cooperation, which scholars call the "Food Silk Road," actively reshapes global food supply chains through investments in infrastructure, technology transfer, and policy coordination. Pakistan, with its important agricultural base and strategic location, plays a pivotal role in this reconfiguration (Zhang, 2021; Tortajada, C., & Zhang, H., 2021). However, most analyses of CPEC barely mention food or treat it as a significant factor in Pakistani society. Most development studies, political economy scholarship, and regional geopolitics literature focus on energy, infrastructure, and trade, treating food as an afterthought rather than a central feature in how development projects reshape social worlds (Power, M., 2019; Veltmeyer, H., & Bowles, P. (Eds.), 2021). We argue that food is never just about subsistence and commerce. It

OPEN ACCESS © CINEFORUM

is reflective of power relations, carries cultural identities, conveys social stratification, and organizes everyday life. Food systems show us how wealth and poverty are organized; they show us who has a voice and who does not, who has a place in knowledge and who doesn't. In the context of mega-infrastructure projects such as CPEC, food emerges as a particularly instructive lens for understanding "state-led globalization," which Jim Glassman (2025) describes as "the active orchestration of global flows by state actors aiming to further specific geopolitical and economic interests".

This study presents how stories of food cooperation found in the state are paralleled by radically different experiences on the ground. For example, Valtar (2020) reminds that farmers in Punjab's basmati-producing areas deplore their growing reliance on high-cost hybrid seeds they can no longer save. Similarly, women who used to rely on the dairy sector for their livelihoods now find themselves in situations of displacement in villages such as Qadirabad, near Sahiwal, where they are compulsorily moved to work in industrial jobs with low wages or do not have any land at all. Celebrated on social media platforms for their "innovative fusion" creations, street food vendors are constantly targeted by the municipal beautification campaigns that aim to showcase modernity to Chinese investors. Such divergent experiences like promoted connectivity and grassroots dispossession, indicate a highly asymmetrical foodscape under CPEC when their benefits and burdens are unevenly shared by class, gender, locality and nationality. Considering the available literature on CPEC, we are of the view that literature dealing with the everyday lives of the people needs grounded engagement with the people and critical revision of convenient understanding of the topic. First, much research on the CPEC and the BRI has focused on energy cooperation, port development, and transportation networks (Javed et al., 2021; Khalid, 2024). Scholars such as Kugelman (2020) and Sidaway and Woon (2017) have analyzed CPEC's geopolitical context and its impact on the region's geopolitical dynamics. But these studies exclude culture, food, and everyday life, focusing on infrastructure as technical, material, and economic. Second, a growing body of literature on 'gastro—diplomacy'—the art of the state of using food as soft power—records how states such as China and Thailand market their food internationally. Afoakwa-Acheampong and colleagues' (2026) research on identity negotiation in relation to food disputes offers insight into how culinary nationalism functions, but current academic work on gastro-diplomacy has not examined the internal dynamics of such state projects or their implications for domestic food producers and employees. Furthermore, scholarship on food sovereignty and agrarian political economy, as represented in the Journal of Peasant Studies and Agriculture and Human Values, shows how global food systems reproduce inequality and dispossession (Bernstein, 2026). However, this literature does not systematically examine how infrastructure megaprojects such as CPEC transform local food systems, or how the struggle for food sovereignty and infrastructure development are interlinked.

This research aims to fill these gaps by taking food at the center of the study of state-led globalization under CPEC. We consider following question for our argumentative structure of the study:

How does the Pakistani state's engagement with CPEC reshape foodscapes, and what does this show about the state of globalization and its asymmetries?

This question links macro-level state narratives with micro-level experiences. It emphasizes the need to see CPEC not just as a movement of investment and infrastructure, but as a reshaping of food, kitchen, market, and sites of projects as spaces in the making because human connections to food, land, and labor keep on shaping the networks. Therefore, paper joins three important dialogues by adding to the ensuing debates. First, it contributes to anthropological and sociological theory of globalization by extending Appadurai's (1996) influential work on global "ethno-scapes" to suggest that food flows are not independent of other cultural phenomena but are deliberately manipulated through state power. Second, it contributes to food sovereignty scholarship by showing how mega-infrastructure projects not only endanger agricultural autonomy but also endanger communities' autonomy to retain local food identities, taste practices, and intergenerational food knowledge, which we call culinary sovereignty. Third, it situates gastro-diplomacy within domestic labour exploitation and class inequality, showing how state-supported cultural diplomacy around food can conceal labour hierarchies while accentuating the precarity of food producers and processors from working classes. Therefore, this research has implications for studying the BRI as a social and cultural endeavor, not just an economic undertaking. As countries around the world try to follow China's path to development and BRI initiatives spread globally, it is important to understand how these initiatives are changing food systems, labor relations, and cultural life to anticipate and address social impacts. Asymmetric foodscapes offer scholars, policymakers, and development practitioners a lens to think through the promise of globalization's connectivity and mutual benefit alongside the realities of inequality and struggle.

Theoretical Framework

The idea of "glocalization" builds on Appadurai's (1996) research on global cultural flows, where he describes the "scapes" through which globalization functions. Appadurai identifies five types of 'scapes': ethnoscapes (migration of populations), mediascapes (circulation of images and stories), technoscapes (technological configurations), financescapes (capital flows), and ideoscapes (political ideologies). Globalization is disjunctive,

OPEN ACCESS © CINEFORUM

as Appadurai's model indicates, but in most respects, it has ignored the state's role as an active participant in shaping these flows (Friedmann & McMichael, 1989; McMichael, 2009). We expand this framework by introducing the analytical category "foodscapes," which engages with and overlays Appadurai's original "scape." Foodscapes comprise material and symbolic flows, food practices, agricultural technologies, and gastronomic imaginaries (as defined in this article) (Johnston & Baumann, 2015; Goodman et al., 2012). By contrast, CPEC foodscapes are far from independent; state power strongly shapes them, creating "asymmetric foodscapes" that produce unequal consumption experiences and enjoyment across social classes in culinary globalization.

Recent scholarship understands state-led development as an active process that shapes globalization, not just reacts to it (Glassman, 2010; Sidaway & Woon, 2017). McMichael's 2013 food regime theory highlights the role states play in facilitating interaction between global and local food systems, and how this process tends to favour industrial farming over smallholder farming. This framework helps explain CPEC, where the Pakistani government is restructuring agricultural systems to attract Chinese investment while also using food as a diplomatic asset. (Kugelman, 2020; Khan & Liu, 2019). Moreover, social stratification theory helps explain how foodscapes inequitably affect different social groups (Bourdieu, 1984; Wright, 2015). Building on Friedmann's (2005) research on corporate food regimes and Dixon's (2009) analysis of culinary capital, the study explores how the CPEC establishes new hierarchies of food access, production, and cultural legitimacy. When considering how the state affects the food system, we draw attention to "culinary sovereignty"—local control of foodways, including cultural control—eclipses food sovereignty (Wittman et al., 2010; Patel, 2009).

Food's role in international relations has been a topic of academic discussion under the rubric of 'gastro-diplomacy' or 'culinary diplomacy' (Rockower, 2012; Chapple-Sokol, 2013). Other works, however, have rarely studied gastro-diplomacy's effects on local food producers and informal economies except Ichijo & Ranta, (2016) and DeSoucey (2010). To fill this gap, this work examines how Pakistani state symbolically or practically mobilizes food at the diplomatic level and how local communities materially transform food systems. The conflict between gastro-diplomatic discourses and grassroots experiences expose the contradiction of state-led globalization projects. The use of food in international relations, also known as 'gastro-diplomacy' (Gastrodiplomacy) or 'culinary diplomacy' (Chapple-Sokol), is a topic of growing research by scholars. These examples of state use of food to cultivate international ties are illustrated in the research of Zhang (2015) on China's culinary diplomacy and Reynolds (2012) on Thailand's 'Global Thai' program.

Research Design and Methodological Reflections

This ethnographic study was conducted in several locations in Pakistan from January 2022–June 2024) following a multi-sited approach (Marcus, 1995). The research design was deliberately created to reflect the full range of CPEC's impact on the food landscape, including both spaces of state-promoted modernization/space of everyday food practice. Traditional markets included Anarkali Bazar in Lahore, Empress Market, and Raja Bazar in Rawalpindi. The Study also included the Allama Iqbal Special Economic Zone (Faisalabad) and the China-Pakistani Agricultural Demonstration Zone (Gwadar), as well as 15 restaurants in Islamabad, Lahore, and Karachi that offer fusion of Chinese Pakistani cuisine. The study design remains a loose mixed methodology inclusive of material and symbolic aspects of the foodscape. We have beeb able to spend 450+ hours observing food practices, social interactions, and spatial arrangement in markets, restaurants, and a range of agricultural settings where detailed field notes were recorded to capture the sensory experiences, price negotiation and cultural exchanges around the food. Beside the participant observation, we conducted 20–45-minutes in-depth interviews with a variety of stakeholders in Urdu, Punjabi, and English. Subsequently, we have systematically analyzed 200+ articles in Pakistani and Chinese state media, 500+ social media posts on #CPECFood and #PakChinaFriendship, and promotional material from agricultural expos. There have been certain pictures of food products, restaurant areas, etc., which proved helpful in starting debates about cultural shifts and economic consequences. Overall, the methodological approach helped us map the production-to-consumption pathways of specific food products and their utilization as part of CPEC to understand the negotiation of food (a)symmetries. Following table gives tabular representation of the field design and participation of different groups of people in the process:

Research Participants

Participant Category	Number	Class Position	Gender (M/F/Other)	Age Range	Education Level
Small-scale farmers	28	Working class	24/4/0	28-65	Primary-Secondary
Agricultural laborers	15	Working poor	10/5/0	22-55	No Formal Education
Market vendors	22	Upper middle class	18/4/0	25-60	Primary-Higher Secondary

OPEN ACCESS © CINEFORUM

Restaurant owners	12	Middle class	10/2/0	30-58	Higher Secondary-Graduate
Food industry workers	18	Working class	14/4/0	20-45	Primary-Higher Secondary
Government officials	8	Upper middle class	7/1/0	35-55	Graduate-Postgraduate
Chinese business owners	6	Upper middle class	5/1/0	32-50	Graduate-Postgraduate
Street food vendors	14	Working poor	12/2/0	18-52	No formal-Secondary
Consumers/Diners	4	Mixed	2/2/0	25-45	Secondary-Postgraduate
Total	127	-	102/25/0	18-65	-

Source: Field Data

This representational scheme from Qadirabad village near Sahiwal is about those who live and practise their culture in a specific geographic locality, as opposed to Chinese workers, who travel and stay around CPEC spaces. One of the important words derived from participants' self-identification was ‘locals’ for themselves pointing to their attachment to land, and vendors speaking of hereditary land ownership, while informal workers noting that they were not made part of CPEC's formal economy. The use of ‘local’ is not just about location but it is also a political claim. One of our informants in the field recalled:

“This is our land, we are locals, they come, and they go, they are Chinese companies, but we are attached to this land, whether we eat or we don't,” said Ahmed, a 45-year-old rice farmer from Sahiwal.

Considering Pakistani state’s extra sensitive approach to CPEC and how local lifeworlds crisscross these tensions and promises as shown in above given passage we are using pseudonyms for persons and location of the field.

Gastro-Diplomacy Versus Culinary Sovereignty

The Pakistani state's use of food as diplomatic capital contrasts sharply with local experiences of losing control over food systems. Tensions play out at different levels: international trade fairs, villages, and farm work. The Pak-China Friendship Food Festival was held in Islamabad 2026, with government officials showcasing elaborate food exchanges. Cultural fusion was evident at the opening ceremony, when a Pakistani chef prepared biryani and Chinese chefs made dumplings. Senior Minister of Commerce Dr Rashid Khan reminded people that ‘food is a bridge between our hearts; when we share food, we share the future’. Pakistani state media has free rein to run similar stories. After analyzing 200+ articles, common messages emerged: food as friendship (42%), food as innovation in partnership (31%) and food as agricultural modernization and prosperity (27%). The state TV network (PTV) broadcast a cooking show with recipes of Chinese-Pakistani fusion cuisine and an ideology of harmonious integration.

But fieldwork in the basmati-growing areas of Punjab revealed very different realities. The table below summarizes farmers' main concerns about CPEC's impact on their food sovereignty.

Concern Category	**Frequency (n=28)**	**Representative Quote**
Loss of seed sovereignty	24 (85.7%)	"Chinese hybrid seeds are expensive, and we cannot save them for next season."
Reduced bargaining power	22 (78.6%)	"The new procurement system favors large operations. Small farmers like us have no voice."
Cultural dilution of heritage varieties	20 (71.4%)	"Our grandfather's basmati had an aroma that filled the whole village. Now it is just yield, yield, yield."
Dependency on external inputs	19 (67.9%)	"Earlier, we were self-sufficient. Now everything—seeds, fertilizers, machines—comes from outside."
Market displacement	18 (64.3%)	"Chinese rice is flooding urban markets. Who will buy our premium basmati?"

Source: Field Data

Mohammad Ashraf, a 52-year-old farmer from Sahiwal, exemplifies these tensions. His family has grown basmati rice for four generations and knows the area's soil and weather conditions well. As agriculture modernizes through

OPEN ACCESS © CINEFORUM

CPEC, he is under pressure to use Chinese hybrid seeds that offer higher yields but are too costly to buy and not suitable for replantation. Ashraf pointed to a promotional poster of an agricultural expo where they called it 'Pak-China Friendship Rice' at the exhibition. Ashraf asks, 'Friendship is equality', they say, 'here we do the land and labour, and they do the technology. Who benefits more?'.

In response to farmers' fears of losing culinary sovereignty, the Basmati Heritage Movement (BHM) was established in Gujranwala in 2022. A grassroots group of 150+ small farmers aiming to preserve local rice varieties and strengthen rice culture. They established a seed bank of 12 heritage basmati varieties and developed direct marketing routes to urban consumers, prioritizing culture over yield. Their philosophy was explained by BHM's leader, Nasreen Bibi, who is one of the few female farmers of the area: "*Food sovereignty is not only about production; it is about maintaining our identity. When we lose control over what we produce and how we produce it, we lose ourselves"*. The movement faces major obstacles. Chinese-supported processing plants use standardized grain sizes that traditional varieties lack, and government subsidies favor modern varieties. Yet BHM members continue to fight against cultural homogenization, seeing their actions as resistance to the dominant culture

Moreover, social media provides a more cosmopolitan frame for CPEC food exchanges and hides the labour inequalities that sustain them. The Chinese state media also spins positive stories. In 2023, Xinhua's Urdu service published 47 food-related CPEC stories, focusing on mutual learning (38%), prosperity through cooperation (34%), and cultural harmony (28%). These digital narratives generate an "imagined community" of food fellowship between Pakistan and China, as Anderson (1983) put it. Some of these celebratory images are deceptive, concealing a hierarchical labour market often evident in ethnographic fieldwork in agribusiness regions. The following table provides details on the labour hierarchy in the food industries related to CPEC.

Position Level	**Typical Roles**	**Nationality**	**Monthly Salary (PKR)**	**Working Conditions**
Management	Facility directors, technical managers	Chinese (90%), Pakistani (10%)	200,000-500,000	Air-conditioned offices, flexible hours
Skilled Technical	Quality control, Machine operators	Chinese (60%), Pakistani (40%)	80,000-150,000	Some climate control, regular hours
Semi-skilled	Packaging supervisors, Logistics coordinators	Pakistani (100%)	40,000-70,000	Limited amenities, overtime common
Unskilled	Sorting, Loading, Cleaning	Pakistani (95%), Afghan refugees (5%)	20,000-35,000	No climate control, 12+ hour shifts

Source: Field Data

In an ethnographic study at a Chinese-owned food processing unit in Faisalabad, huge differences emerged. The Chinese managers worked in modern offices with imported furniture, while the Pakistani workers worked in poorly ventilated warehouses. Chinese employees ate lunch in another canteen with imported food, while Pakistani employees could only eat outside. Shahid, a worker at a packaging factory, regrets:

"I see beautiful pictures of Pak-China friendship through food on social media, but in reality, we are working 14-hour shifts, packing products that we are not able to afford ourselves. There is no friendship in exploitation.

Technoscapes, Narratives of Modernization and Women Workers in Qadirabad, Sahiwal

The tall chimneys of the coal power plant at Qadirabad, on the edge of Sahiwal, stand in stark contrast with the local way of life. Same are often touted in government announcements as symbols of modernization and 'green energy cooperation ', but it brought an end to many of the local women's traditional professions, tied to agriculture and dairy farming. Parveen, a 50-year-old widow from another village, explained the change: "We lived off our animals. Even when men went to work elsewhere, we could get milk and butter from our animals. Now when we look at them we see that we are no longer free to live our lives off our animals as they have taken over our land and the water used for irrigation runs black." Before construction, the village bordered other villages where women herded small buffalo and cow herds on communal grazing grounds next to the irrigation canals. Selling

OPEN ACCESS © CINEFORUM

milk began to provide a small, regular household income, and life organized around caring for the animals: milking in the early morning, making fodder in the afternoon, and selling milk to local vendors. Parveen, 50, a widow, recalled that they fed off their animals. Men worked other jobs and we the women used to have milk and butter for our children, but now the land is fenced, and the water used to irrigate our agricultural land is black.

The power plant bought land, and entire families had to move. When women received compensation, it was not the norm, and it often went to women who were not recognized for the informal labor they did in dairies. Many could no longer farm their land or graze their cattle but were required to work outside the plant as cleaners, sorters, or packagers (for little pay compared to what they had earned selling their dairy products). Zainab who is in her late thirties and mother of four recalled:

Before the plant, I used to have two buffaloes and provide milk for sale every morning; it was a difficult job, but it was my job," Now I have to stand in a cold room for several hours cleaning fish to be exported to China, and I cannot sit down and relax even for a few minutes; my hands burn from the water.

Her story shows how women's labour shifted from self-chosen agriculture to subordination and control within several corporations. The change was not only about losing household autonomy, but also about how care and work were gendered. These new jobs, as described in the government's report, are "employment opportunities," but they have left women's lives more precarious. Meanwhile, the plant's official website portrays happy female workers and gleaming machines, hiding the social displacement and the material and emotional toll on Qadirabad. The stories from women of Qadirabad are vital to understanding the gendered effects of CPEC's infrastructure developments, as outlined above, and the many attendant forms of precarities the project generates. Such gendered narratives defy perceptions of modernization, revealing the complex intersections of global capital, state agendas, and local survival in women's everyday lives as they negotiate an uneven landscape.

Moreover, in Qadirabad, Sahiwal, the rhetoric of modernization and "scientific agriculture" frames such projects as nodes of technological progress which will offer jobs, economic growth and modern livelihoods. At the same time, they try to transform local agrarian practices through the logic of efficiency, productivity, and export-oriented development. Therefore, small-scale dairy farming and subsistence farming that were the sources of livelihood for women in Qadirabad are now under threat of dispossession and discipline of labour. Land acquisition for the coal plant restricted access to water, fodder, and communal grazing areas, effectively ending traditional farming practices that once had a significant impact on day-to-day life.

The vision of 'bringing Pakistan from traditional to modern agriculture' can be read ethnographically as part of a wider discourse arguing for replacing autonomous, locally embedded labour with restricted, surveilled labour. The promised modernization in Qadirabad does not empower women farmers; it means working in technologically alien rooms under strict supervision. Meanwhile, their primarily agricultural knowledge (milking, making fodder, and miniature farming) becomes financially invisible. State statistics and corporate websites emphasize yield gains, water conservation, and efficiencies in "model demonstration zones," while women in Qadirabad endure dispossession, precarious jobs, and the loss of traditional agricultural knowledge. This juxtaposition reveals a conflict between the technoscapes of modernization promoted in official discourse and rural women's lived reality. New agricultural techniques and industrial facilities, supposed to signal progress and development, can also reorganize labour and displace people; in this way, development can be redefined in ways that disproportionately burden women in rural areas such as Qadirabad.

Social Stratification and Class Dynamics in the Foodscapes of Qadirabad, Sahiwal

This reconfiguration of foodscapes around the Sahiwal Coal Power Plant is one example of new modes of social stratification brought about by infrastructural development under the CPEC, while reinforcing pre-existing class hierarchies. Today, the food economy is no longer characterized by agrarian rhythms, self-sufficiency, and local exchange, but rather by industrial labour, wage dependency and changing dynamics of access to land and resources in Qadirabad. Ethnographic observations show four classes of experience of this transformation. Some local business owners and investors have somehow become part of the new food system emerging from the plant. With their capital, political connections and proximity to the CPEC project, they invest in hospitality businesses, cater to the CPEC plant workers, and establish small CPEC value chains for Chinese and Pakistani staff. In Sahiwal city, high-end restaurants are now offering fusion menus, and Chinese-style ingredients are imported, marking a new cosmopolitan dream. One of the restaurant owners in Sahiwal remembered:

"It was a form of soft diplomacy – business through culture. The plant attracted new customers and new tastes from Chinese people, and Pakistanis were also curious to try the food of Chinese people."

These new elites see themselves as cultural brokers, embrace the language of partnership and modernization, and consolidate economic privilege.

CPEC has become a double-edged sword in Sahiwal's agricultural markets for old merchant families. Those with more capital and transport resources have adapted by partnering with Chinese trading companies or rebranding locally produced goods for export. One such trader explained how he made the deal when they sell rice and wheat to companies associated with the plant, which Chinese buyers appreciate the quality, and they pay as agreed—

OPEN ACCESS © CINEFORUM

this is business for them, but it makes all the difference. Smaller traders can't keep up. In contrast, small-scale merchants, who used to sell mainly to the local market, now struggle with rising costs, inadequate storage facilities, and dwindling profits. The concentration of food trade in industrial supply chains has sharpened class divisions within the merchant class. Thus, foodscapes in Qadirabad are being transformed, particularly among the working class, where work precarity at the coal plant is entwined with foodscapes. Many households used to produce their own milk, grow wheat, and farm vegetables, but now they have to buy food with income from unsustainable industrial work. Workers in the plant's packing and cleaning departments describe the paradox of making food for export while they can't afford nutritious meals. As one worker recalled:

"Before, we used to prepare our own ghee and sell milk; now I have to buy everything in the market—even milk powder for my kids! The plant provides us with jobs, but it has also robbed us of our local lifeworld.

However, workers are proud of their traditional food practices despite the difficulties. Women share recipes in evening chats and at family gatherings, and they share how to create some of these home-grown flavors at home using store-bought ingredients, a common way to maintain a sense of continuity even in the face of rupture. Moreover, when it comes to negotiate local ways of continuity with change, land, agricultural cultivation and subsequent claims as land owners play an important role. But, larger landholders who were compensated have opted for mechanized farming or urban businesses, which aligns with CPEC's language of modernization. In contrast, smaller farmers have lost their land and their livelihoods. The rhetoric of technological progress, as universally guised, manifests as unequal development in Qadirabad where farmers lose autonomy as they rely on wage labour, and traditional knowledge systems of seed saving, irrigation, and dairying are rapidly disappearing. These class positions reflect uneven modernization in Qadirabad's foodscape as a natural outcome of such processes. The result is a stratified modernity, one that hides deep inequities behind development rhetoric. What promise of progress brings for some, it takes for granted for others and undermines the foundation for how people live their daily lives.

This study offers several answers to the questions of anthropological theories and methods when we think about questions of class, inclusion and visibilities in large scale agenda of development. Methodologically, it demonstrates the usefulness of multi-sited ethnography in order to understand the multi-scaled impact of state-led globalization. By comparing diplomatic events with street markets, processing plants, and family farms, it uncovers links that do not stand out in individual site studies. Ideally, this research contributes to anthropological knowledge of the cultural dimensions of infrastructure. In response to Larkin's (2013) thesis that CPEC's physical infrastructure (roads, ports, processing factories) influences cultural infrastructure (food practices, taste preferences, knowledge systems), this analysis offers insights into that impact. Food as infrastructure: Social reproduction and power dynamics. Asymmetric foodscapes is a conceptual strategy that can serve as an anthropological lens for understanding the process of graduated sovereignty (Ong, 2006) in national space because of global development projects. Class position, geographic location, and cultural capital shape differential inclusion in CPEC's promised prosperity.

CONCLUSION

This ethnographic examination of Pakistan's foodscapes under CPEC finds significant asymmetries beneath the indiscreet narrative of mutual gains. For some in the Pakistani state, food is a symbol of friendship with China; for others, food is a cause of marginalization, cultural displacement, and it brings battles over culinary sovereignty. Asymmetric foodscapes embody these paradoxes, showing a place where diplomats perform harmony, while inequalities play out on the ground as people experience food. So, we propose that this study has implications beyond CPEC. To prepare for and respond to the social implications of food system transformations, it is important to understand the challenges and opportunities countries face as they address food system changes within foreign development programs like the Belt and Road Initiative. Asymmetric foodscapes offer a lens through which scholars and policymakers can examine, through people's experiences, the successes and failures of globalization's visions of connectivity and prosperity. We have presented Pakistani farmers, vendors, and workers, reminding us that development is more than infrastructure and economics—it is about food as a way of seeing at human dignity, cultural continuity, and social justice. As CPEC expands and similar projects rise, Pakistan's foodscapes become increasingly relevant. Scholars, policy makers, and development practitioners must move beyond connectivity narratives and confront the inequities mega-infrastructure projects create. As a case in point, food remains an important but underutilized lens for viewing today's food globalization. Asymmetry in the foodscapes generated by projects like CPEC highlight the many facets of inequality that governments produce in the name of prosperity and development. Our engagement with local communities, whether farmers, vendors, or workers, shows that globalization's effects are not one-size-fits-all; instead, they vary sharply across social classes. Asymmetry of foodscapes can help explore these inequities and visualize potentially more equitable alternatives. With the BRI and other such interconnections, understanding and tackling these inequalities is not only an academic issue, but an ethical one, and it is essential to produce fair and sustainable food futures...

OPEN ACCESS © CINEFORUM

REFERENCES

1. Abid, M., & Ashfaq, A. (2015). CPEC: Challenges and opportunities for Pakistan. Journal of Pakistan Vision, 16(2), 142–169.
2. Anderson, B. (1983). Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism. Verso.
3. Appadurai, A. (1996). Modernity at large: Cultural dimensions of globalization. University of Minnesota Press.
4. Bourdieu, P. (1984). Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste. Harvard University Press.
5. Bernstein, H. (2016). Agrarian political economy and modern world capitalism: the contributions of food regime analysis. The Journal of Peasant Studies, 43(3), 611-647.
6. Chapple-Sokol, S. (2013). Culinary diplomacy: Breaking bread to win hearts and minds. The Hague Journal of Diplomacy, 8(2), 161–183. https://doi.org/10.1163/1871191X-12341244
7. Charmaz, K. (2014). Constructing grounded theory (2nd ed.). Sage Publications.
8. DeSoucey, M. (2010). Gastronationalism: Food traditions and authenticity politics in the European Union. American Sociological Review, 75(3), 432-455. https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122410372226
9. Dixon, J. (2009). From the imperial to the empty calorie: How nutrition relations underpin food regime transitions. Agriculture and Human Values, 26(4), 321–333. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10460-009-9217-6
10. Friedmann, H. (2005). From colonialism to green capitalism: Social movements and the emergence of food regimes. Research in Rural Sociology and Development, 11, 227–264. https://doi.org/10.1016/S1057-1922(05)11009-9
11. Friedmann, H., & McMichael, P. (1989). Agriculture and the state system: The rise and decline of national agricultures, 1870 to the present. Sociologia Ruralis, 29(2), 93–117. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9523.1989.tb00360.x
12. Glassman, J. (2010). Bounding the Mekong: The Asian Development Bank, China, and Thailand. University of Hawaii Press.
13. Glassman, R. M. (2025). The Great Global Transformation. Springer Nature.
14. Goodman, D., DuPuis, E. M., & Goodman, M. K. (2012). Alternative food networks: Knowledge, practice, and politics. Routledge.
15. Hussain, M. (2019). The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and the new regional geopolitics. Asia Policy, 14(2), 89–112.
16. Ichijo, A., & Ranta, R. (2016). Food, national identity and nationalism: From everyday to global politics. Palgrave Macmillan.
17. Javed, H. M., & Ismail, M. (2021). CPEC and Pakistan: Its economic benefits, energy security and regional trade and economic integration. Chinese Political Science Review, 6(2), 207-227.
18. Johnston, J., & Baumann, S. (2015). Foodies: Democracy and distinction in the gourmet foodscape (2nd ed.). Routledge.
19. Khalid, M. (2024). Energy Cooperation in the Construction of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor under the Belt and Road Initiative. Pakistan Perspectives, 29(2), 79.
20. Khan, A., & Liu, Y. (2019). Agricultural transformation under CPEC: Opportunities and challenges for Pakistan. Journal of Global Network, 15(3), 234–251.
21. Kugelman, M. (2020). The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor: What it is, how it is perceived, and implications for energy geopolitics. Asia Policy, 15(2), 27–45.
22. Larkin, B. (2013). The politics and poetics of infrastructure. Annual Review of Anthropology, 42, 327–343. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-092412-155522
23. Marcus, G. E. (1995). Ethnography in the world system: The emergence of multi-sited ethnography. Annual Review of Anthropology, 24, 95–117. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.an.24.100195.000523
24. McMichael, P. (2009). A food regime genealogy. The Journal of Peasant Studies, 36(1), 139–169. https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150902820354
25. McMichael, P. (2013). Food regimes and agrarian questions. Fernwood Publishing.
26. McCartney, M. (2022). The China-Pakistan economic corridor (CPEC): infrastructure, social savings, spillovers, and economic growth in Pakistan. Eurasian Geography and Economics, 63(2), 180-211.
27. Mintz, S. W., & Du Bois, C. M. (2002). The anthropology of food and eating. Annual Review of Anthropology, 31, 99–119.
28. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.32.032702.131011
29. Niazi, K., Shoaib, M., & Qadar, A. (2024). Choosing between energy and ecologies of health: Understanding developmentalism, state formation and local life worlds. Journal of International Development, 36(1), 192-204.
30. Niazi, K., Qadar, A., & Waheed, A. (2026). Securitized development, popular politics and the authoritarian state in Pakistan. Area Development and Policy, 1-20.

OPEN ACCESS © CINEFORUM

31. Ong, A. (2006). Neoliberalism as exception: Mutations in citizenship and sovereignty. Duke University Press.
32. Patel, R. (2009). Food sovereignty. The Journal of Peasant Studies, 36(3), 663–706. https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150903143077
33. Pottier, J. (2012). Anthropology of food: The social dynamics of food security. John Wiley & Sons
34. Power, M. (2019). Geopolitics and development. Routledge.
35. Reynolds, C. (2012). The soft power of food: A diplomacy of hamburgers and sushi? Food Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal, 1(2), 47–60.
36. Rockower, P. S. (2012). Recipes for gastrodiplomacy. Place Branding and Public Diplomacy, 8(3), 235-246. https://doi.org/10.1057/pb.2012.17
37. Sidaway, J. D., & Woon, C. Y. (2017). Chinese narratives on "One Belt, One Road" in geopolitical and imperial contexts. The Professional Geographer, 69(4), 591–603. https://doi.org/10.1080/00330124.2017.1288576
38. Tortajada, C., & Zhang, H. (2021). When food meets BRI: China's emerging Food Silk Road. Global Food Security, 29, 100518.
39. Valter, S. (2020). The economic and social conditions of Pakistani Basmati Rice Farmers.
40. Veltmeyer, H., & Bowles, P. (Eds.). (2021). The essential guide to critical development studies. Routledge.
41. Watson, J. L., & Caldwell, M. L. (Eds.). (2005). The cultural politics of food and eating: A reader. Blackwell Publishing.
42. Wittman, H., Desmarais, A., & Wiebe, N. (Eds.). (2010). Food sovereignty: Reconnecting food, nature and community. Fernwood Publishing.
43. Wright, E. O. (2015). Understanding class. Verso.
44. Zhang, J. (2015). The food of the world: Mapping and comparing contemporary gastrodiplomacy campaigns. International Journal of Communication, 9, 568–59.
45. Zhang, H. (2021). China's global quest for food and the Belt and Road Initiative. Research handbook on the belt and road Initiative, 65-75.
46. Acknowledgments
47. The authors thank farmers, vendors, workers, and other participants who generously shared their time and insights. The authors express special gratitude to the Basmati Heritage Movement for facilitating access to agricultural communities. All errors remain solely of the authors

OPEN ACCESS © CINEFORUM