

TRADING CATERPILLAR FUNGUS IN TIBET: WHEN ECONOMIC BOOM HITS RURAL AREA

*Emilia Roza Sulek, 2019. Amsterdam:
Amsterdam University Press, 328 p.*

In *Trading Caterpillar Fungus in Tibet*, Emilia Roza Sulek provides a nuanced account of pastoralists' everyday life in Golok, a region on the Eastern Tibetan plateau which today forms part of Qinghai province in the People's Republic of China. The pastoralists that Sulek did research with over eleven months between 2007 and 2010 are involved in the harvest and trade of caterpillar fungus, a very peculiar commodity. Caterpillar fungus (*Ophiocordyceps sinensis*) – or *yartsa gumbu*, “summer grass winter worm”, as it is called in Tibetan – is parasitic on the larvae of species of ghost moth that are only found in high-altitude regions of the Tibetan plateau and the Himalayas. While *yartsa gumbu* has long been used in traditional medicine, in recent decades it has emerged as a luxury product in China, being ascribed the function of a natural Viagra among other things. Consequently, its demand underwent an unprecedented boom which – so goes the book's central argument – has profoundly transformed the livelihoods of Tibetan pastoralists involved in digging and trading caterpillar fungus and in leasing out their land to others for digging.

This monograph is the first in-depth, book-length analysis of how the commodity of caterpillar fungus leads to changes in pastoralists' socio-cultural lives and the region of Golok more broadly, also paying close attention to the historical and legal dimensions of a commodity largely produced for an external market, not the pastoralists' own consumption. As stated in its introduction, the book sets out to understand “the inner mechanisms and consequences” (p. 16) of a

phenomenon that every year draws together a multitude of actors in two main places: the pastureland where caterpillar fungus is harvested and the market where it is traded, heading off to consumers all over China and abroad. Sulek demonstrates that pastoralists use their newly generated income actively to participate in developing their region – claimed in official discourse as being an area exclusively attributable to the Chinese state – instead of merely wasting the money on consumer goods and short-lived pleasures.

The introduction is followed by nine chapters, a conclusion and an afterword. The first three chapters introduce the region of Golok and its population, along with the digging process, which the author participated in for many weeks, and the usage of caterpillar fungus as medicine and commodity. The next three chapters, on the market and trading as well as laws and state regulations, delve deeper into the processes and practices surrounding the caterpillar fungus economy. Throughout these chapters Sulek shows that in addition to the pastureland and the market, townships and roads are also crucial to the booming economy. A whole bundle of income-generating practices and diverse networks of actors are associated with caterpillar fungus: pastoralists, diggers, traders, migrant workers, seasonal businesses in town, and the (non-)regulatory state all play their part in a complex translocal economy. The final three chapters address money and, more specifically, the individual and structural consequences of a novel income stream. The central question of what pastoralists decide to do with their newly acquired wealth is considered throughout these chapters too. All chapters and the afterword are designed as independent units; they can be read in any order, enabling readers to learn about the themes

they feel most curious about first. Significantly though, the overall structure reflects the author's commitment to staying close to the pastoralists' everyday lives: The focus is on telling their stories through caterpillar fungus, not vice versa.

Sulek's skilful ethnographic descriptions bring Golok, the pastoralists' lives, and the caterpillar fungus economy into sharp focus. In a captivatingly written opening vignette, for instance, we not only learn about but can almost feel the atmosphere during the harvesting season, which starts in May and lasts for around 40–45 days: it is busy, exciting, joyous but also filled with conspiracy and rumours that manifest in whispers about illegal digging and state regulations. Chapter five includes lively snapshots of dialogue that outline the occasionally heated bargaining process between pastoralists and traders. An accompanying sketch illustrates the various hand signs used during bartering – these are often invisible to observers since they are hidden by the involved parties inside long sleeves for secret negotiation.

The transformation of pastoralists' livelihoods is discussed in greater detail in the later chapters of the book. Sulek's analysis of Golok pastoralists as active agents of social change in their individual lives and on a more systematic level in their wider region makes an important ethnographic contribution to scholarly debates on rural development processes in China's Western region. Chapter eight addresses pastoral production and the changes it has undergone due to the caterpillar fungus trade. Improvement in the general economic situation enables pastoralists to choose more freely which of their products they want to sell. Consequently, there was a decrease in the sale of yaks to slaughterhouses and of dairy products to the market. Pastoralists explain these changes

with reference both to their additional revenue stream and their religious values. On the one hand, they no longer need the income from selling butter and cheese, and they perceive this as benefitting the growth of their yak herds since it leaves more milk for the calves. On the other hand, they stress that according to Buddhism it is bad to kill animals; selling fewer yaks to slaughterhouses reduces the accumulation of negative karma. Sulek shows that at the time of her research the pastoralists viewed yaks as less crucial for their economic survival than they had done in the past. Herds continue to be kept because of diet, lifestyle and, most importantly, the preservation of pastoralists' self-understanding as yak-breeders. In contrast, sheep flocks diminished in size or disappeared altogether due to a combination of educational, environmental, and economic factors. First and foremost, though, pastoralists emphasise that as a quick source of cash sheep were replaced by caterpillar fungus – the latter is simply seen as an easier source of income. These shifts in pastoral production fuel debates among Sulek's research participants about the social effects of *yartsa gumbu*. Some pastoralists view the consequences of the caterpillar fungus economy as problematic since these appear to be linked to a decline in what is perceived as a more traditional pastoral lifestyle.

In chapter nine, Sulek reveals that improvement of the material situation due to caterpillar fungus is linked to complex transformations in the local society. She shares stories of what pastoralists have done with the previously unimaginable amounts of money they earn and what, in turn, this money does to them. Certainly, pastoralists consume and purchase more commodities such as furniture, electrical appliances, mobile phones, cars, and motorbikes – all of

which introduce new dynamics into everyday life. The availability of washing machines and fridges make infrastructural changes in the form of running water desirable. Cars and motorbikes ease seasonal migration and extend mobility beyond sites of immediate pastoral activities, namely the county seat and urban centres farther afield. At the same time, households save up substantial funds. They make long-term investments, for example by building roads leading to their pastures or new houses, which are thought of as the best way of investing one's savings. Chapter nine in particular complicates views that exist in the local community as to pastoralists' supposedly short-lived consumption habits.

The conclusion suggests that the local authorities which interpret formal regulations concerning the caterpillar fungus economy often turn a blind eye to certain practices, or side with their communities rather than representing state interests. This subtlety of observation negates a simplistic understanding of "the state" as a monolithic category. Impersonal constructs such as "the state" or "the government", after all, consist of individual people who have multiple positionalities and interests. In addition, the author convincingly argues for an understanding of caterpillar fungus as a symbol within broader political processes. Ultimately, it is through this commodity that some pastoralists feel they can take a symbolic revenge on the state as well as against Han Chinese men who rely on a product from the Tibetan plateau. Han Chinese men must be in such dire need of this natural Viagra, so a common explanation in Golok goes, that they are willing to pay any price and believe in all sorts of magical stories about its effectiveness. But why is the state not interfering more directly in the caterpil-

lar fungus economy, which in many aspects stays outside of its tight control? Sulek sees one key explanation in the widespread belief by the Chinese authorities that material satisfaction leads to political stability and harmony. According to this logic, as long as the pastoralists are generating and spending money, they share in the state's goal of economic development, which diminishes the likelihood of political unrest.

In the insightful afterword, Sulek reflects on her research process and methodology. She describes her fieldwork as "partisan research" (p. 265) carried out as a series of several three- to four-month stints due to the lack of an official research permit. Moving around on a tourist visa allowed her to navigate practices "at the border of the law" (p. 267) more easily, while not speaking Chinese and coming from a former communist country created a degree of curious familiarity between herself and many of her research participants. It is unusual at the end of an ethnography to learn about the challenges but, importantly, also the advantages of conducting fieldwork without official research status, as well as the mobile nature of such a research project and its sampling methods. However, Sulek's declared aim to put the pastoralists centre stage from the outset and the fact that the chapters can be read in any order explain this decision. Since critical discussions about difficulties and dilemmas arising from research in the region mostly take place privately or are hidden away in footnotes, Sulek's afterword is a valuable addition to the few existing accounts on the messy realities of fieldwork in contemporary Tibet.

The book's particular strength lies in its evocative, vivid, and clear language, as well as the numerous rich ethnographic descriptions attesting to the power of sustained fieldwork in a region that is generally not

easily accessed and travelled by researchers. Photographs, maps, and comprehensive tables depicting quantitative data on caterpillar fungus pricing, ownership of livestock, and household appliances complete this thoroughly researched and enjoyable ethnography. Readers looking for a comparative approach on sudden economic booms and commodity chains might feel that the book lacks a more global perspective, including a discussion of literature on similar phenomena beyond rural Tibet and China. However, the author's explicit aim was to analyse Golok pastoralists' everyday lives, the rapid transformation of their livelihoods and, finally, the socio-economic shifts observed in a region due to a new form of income; in this the book admirably succeeds. Emilia Roza Sulek has produced a beautifully written and accessible monograph that will be of interest to scholars working on pastoralism, shadow economies, and resource extraction, as well as processes of development and state-making in Tibet, the Himalayas and China. This book is not only an illuminating piece of work for undergraduate and graduate courses on Central and East Asia, but also offers a comprehensive case study for courses in economic anthropology.

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GIFT EXCHANGE: THE TRANSNATIONAL HISTORY OF A POLITICAL IDEA

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Grégoire Mallard's monograph *Giftexchange: The Transnational History of a Political Idea* adds to scholarly work that reinterprets Marcel Mauss' seminal essay *The Gift* (2011 [1925]) in the light of his political writings.

Mallard's interpretation goes against the grain of what has become a consensus among anthropologists, i.e. the idea that in *The Gift* Mauss investigated non-contractual and ambiguously disinterested yet constraining intra-group socio-economic solidarity. Instead, Mallard argues that for Mauss gift exchange provided a blueprint for building inter-group or international solidarity. Mallard abundantly demonstrates that in the context of widespread colonialization – contemporaneous with Mauss and his essay – such a theory had a dangerous colonial underbelly. Mallard's book, however, does not stop at pointing to the pro-colonial ends to which the theory of gift exchange could be used. He tries to decolonize the gift exchange as a doctrine for constructing international relations by exploring how it has been employed and could be employed in debates around national sovereignty and international socio-economic interdependency. This brings Mallard to his second central argument: Mauss-inspired gift exchange theory reminds us that – contrary to the present-day doxa – illegitimate sovereign debts can be forgiven, if debt forgiveness serves to increase inter-societal cooperation.

Grégoire Mallard is a sociology professor who works on global governance, law and expert knowledge regimes. His interest in Mauss' work and political engagements was sparked almost accidentally, when he and his wife rented the apartment of Mauss' biographer Marcel Fournier in Montreal. Mallard's findings on Mauss' involvement in interwar politics was first translated in a 2011 article and now in this monograph. The seven chapters that compose the book do not draw only on Mauss' political writings made widely available by Fournier, but also on extensive archival work, writings of Mauss' contempo-