# Tibet

**Emilia Roza Sulek, *Trading Caterpillar Fungus in Tibet: When Economic Boom Hits Rural Area***

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Although much research has been published over the last decade on the Chinese policy of relocation—usually meaning some form of urbanization—of pastoralists on the Tibetan Plateau, Emilia Roza Sulek's study stands out by bringing the reader very close to a Tibetan pastoralist community, which at the time of the fieldwork on which the book is based (2007–2010), was still living in small clusters in its habitual location. One reason for this was perhaps the recent relative affluence of the community, due to the flourishing business based on collecting the parasitic "caterpillar fungus," in Tibet called *yartsa gumbu*, "summer herb, winter caterpillar," much sought after among Chinese for its supposed medicinal properties.

The book is about the caterpillar fungus trade in the Golok Prefecture in Qinghai Province, a traditionally pastoralist area in the northeastern corner of the Tibetan Plateau. It gives a broad picture of the practice of fungus collection and its trade, largely as seen from the perspective of a specific local community but sometimes stepping back to discuss the wider context of the province and indeed the entire country. The author applies a multilayered analysis, enabling her to reveal "the hidden mechanisms of adaptation and the flexibility of existing structures" (27). In so doing, a series of insights result, most importantly the fact that the pastoralists themselves "are active agents of change" (258). The caterpillar fungus trade may provide considerable profit to middlemen—largely Chinese Muslims—but the income generated for the Golok pastoralists has brought them modest affluence and enables them to purchase consumer goods on an unprecedented scale, many households typically acquiring a car, several motorbikes, a refrigerator, a washing machine, and so on. Moreover, private affluence has radically changed the traditional pastoralists' way of life; they no longer live in tents but in quite well-built houses, at the outset subsidized by the authorities as an incitement to "modernization" and a sedentary lifestyle, though the pastoralists quickly adapted to living in houses, improving and expanding them.

One of the major themes of the book is "modernity." The author wishes to avoid contrasting it to "tradition" or "backwardness" and therefore adopts the concepts of "alternative modernities" and "multiple modernities," following scholars who emphasize that the transition to modernity can have different results in different cultural settings. On this basis, the author can argue that Golok pastoralists can thrive in a cash economy and generally embrace modern conveniences that make daily life easier.

The changes brought to the local economy by the caterpillar fungus trade are profound. Thus, as the author points out, "when the caterpillar fungus economy takes a step forward, the pastoral economy takes a step back" (26). However, Sulek's research (especially chapter 8) shows that pastoralists have not ceased to supply local as well as regional markets with pastoralist products, especially meat and wool, and, more recently, milk. A substantial amount of these products is also consumed in pastoralist families themselves. Many pastoralists feel that while the caterpillar fungus trade has given them a welcome economic boost, the high prices that this product has fetched cannot be expected to last forever and that hence it is prudent to maintain pastoral production as a backup. There is also the non-economic factor of widespread pride in their traditional culture and lifestyle, motivating a considerable number of families to retain at least a manageable number of animals, although there is a marked shift from raising sheep to raising yaks instead.

The author points out that there are divergent views among the pastoralists with regard to the caterpillar fungus boom. As stated, "every ethnography should be read as a polyphonic story" (25). A critique, often voiced by locals, of the social effect of the sudden affluence (recorded but not espoused by the author) is that "it taught people that they can earn money without any effort" (220). This critique is counterbalanced by the current drive, vigorously promoted by prominent Buddhist monastics, toward vegetarianism across the whole of eastern Tibet. This campaign against raising livestock for the market and in general against slaughtering animals and eating meat—believed to cause the accumulation of sin and hence inauspicious rebirths—has certainly contributed to the diminished importance of the traditional livestock-based economy, compensated by the caterpillar fungus trade, which is regarded positively as it makes it possible to lessen the necessity of sinful actions (221).

Another emic evaluation goes against a positive view of the caterpillar fungus trade. It concerns the belief in the local mountain deity, homonymous with the sacred mountain Amnye Wayin, who can protect and help people but who reacts angrily to activities that disrupt the integrity of the mountain, including "destroying vegetation, disrupting the surface of the earth and polluting the land, air, and waters, either with material rubbish or even smells" (183). Digging caterpillar fungus obviously entails a breach of these norms, and individual trespassers can be severely punished by Amnye Wayin, especially by being struck by lightning. However, Golok pastoralists believe that living on land close to the sacred mountain, they may be more prone to being punished than thoughtless outsiders, as they have the responsibility of protecting Amnye Wayin's mountain. Droughts, floods, and animal plagues can be unleashed by the deity on the local community as a collective punishment for failing in fulfilling its duty, and the "essence of the land" can be diminished, rendering it less able to nourish livestock.

Sulek has written an afterword outlining her methodology. This is an account of how she carried out her fieldwork over a period of three years, at no time having a research permit and—for that very reason—maintaining maximum visibility in the local community. She shares with the readers an extraordinary experience of how a relationship of real friendship and mutual trust developed between herself and the local Tibetans, including some working in the administration. For my part, I can only say that it is the most engaging presentation of a methodology I have ever read.

*Trading Caterpillar Fungus in Tibet* is an important book, shedding light on a phenomenon that has had great impact on the economy and social life in eastern Tibet.

It tells a story of ordinary Tibetans who in a short space of time have moved from near-poverty to modest affluence, with the author never losing sight of the individuals involved, nor of the larger picture. Not only anthropologists active in the study of Tibetan society but anyone interested in contemporary Tibet should read this well-written and well-researched book.

Per Kværne
*University of Oslo*