

Emilia Róża Sułek.

Trading Caterpillar Fungus in Tibet: When Economic Boom Hits Rural Area

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Dr. Emilia Sułek's monograph *Trading Caterpillar Fungus in Tibet* is an excellent work of scholarship that presents a comprehensive investigation of one of the most interesting and significant topics in modern Tibetan studies – the emergence in areas on the Tibetan Plateau of a lucrative caterpillar fungus industry. Dr Sułek employs an ethnographic case study approach to examine this issue as it has played out in one of the most important caterpillar fungus areas – the pasturelands of Golok prefecture in Qinghai Province.

Caterpillar fungus is a product that grows naturally in many of the high pastoral areas of the Tibetan Plateau and can be collected for a few months in late spring/early summer each year. Sułek's study examines in detail how it has become a highly sought after and lucrative product over the past two decades and shows how the enormous increase in the monetary value of this commodity has produced what she calls a Caterpillar fungus 'boom' or 'craze' in the areas like Golok where it is found. Thousands of local Tibetan pastoralists and non-Tibetan migrant collectors go to the high pasturelands each Spring to collect the fungus, which starts a process that moves the fungus from the remote pastures in Golok to fancy shops in places like Shanghai, Beijing and beyond. Sułek's ethnography examines in depth all stages in this process, discussing not only the Tibetan pastoralists, but also the traders and markets that are important parts of the overall caterpillar fungus economy, as well as the others who come to Golok seasonally to collect the fungus there. To accomplish this, she has used a powerful multi-method approach that combines intensive fieldwork/participant observation with quantitative methods to explain how the fungus is collected, how it is processed, how it is sold and how the pastoralists weigh the costs and benefits of different strategies of participation.

Sułek's study also examines the evolution of the state's policy regarding the collection of caterpillar fungus, from the time of decollectivisation in the early 1980s, revealing an important and often overlooked disjuncture between 'the state' and its local government representatives. For example, in Golok, although the official law bans outsiders from collecting the fungus, Sułek explains how local government officials were basically turning a blind eye so that the pastoralists could earn income by charging outsiders high rental fees to use their pastures for collecting, thus providing them with an important second source of income from the fungus production system.

The book also examines how the caterpillar industry has impacted on the pastoralists' lives in Golok, revealing in detail how profit from this new commodity has grown to dwarf the income generated by pastoral production and has made most of the pastoralists in Golok relatively affluent, facilitating a vastly improved material lifestyle that now includes new houses, vehicles, motorcycles, TVs, washing machines and so forth.

Finally, the study also shows convincingly that the common stereotype of Tibetans in China as powerless victims exploited and marginalised by the state, is not supported by

the data. Instead, Sułek reveals in great detail how the Golok pastoralists exercise significant and meaningful agency with respect to their socio-economic life and the caterpillar fungus industry, and how they are choosing to adapt their traditional pastoral management system to the new situation, showing clearly the complex manner in which they have successfully managed their dealings with the national and local governments as well as with a mix of traders and labourers.

In conclusion, this monograph is an excellent and important comprehensive study of the caterpillar fungus phenomenon in Tibetan areas such as Qinghai. It is a must read for anyone interested in how the caterpillar fungus industry has changed and is still changing the way of life of Tibetan pastoralists in Golok and, in particular, how the pastoralists have been able to use their agency to manage and control the new opportunities for their own benefit.

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