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

Geoff Childs
Washington University in St. Louis

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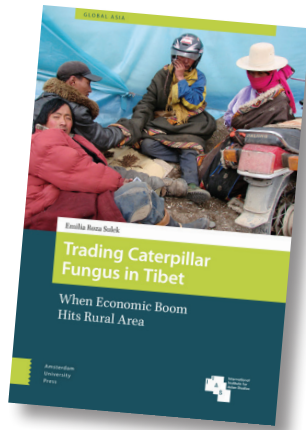
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**Trading Caterpillar Fungus in Tibet:
When Economic Boom Hits Rural
Area.**

Emilia Roza Sulek. Amsterdam:
Amsterdam University Press, 2019.
326 pages. ISBN 9048536294,
9789048536290.

Reviewed by Geoff Childs

Recent years have witnessed a flurry of research on “caterpillar fungus” (*Ophiocordyceps sinensis*; *yartsa gumbu* [dbyar rtswa dgun ‘bu] in Tibetan). While most studies published thus far are limited in scope and based on short-term fieldwork, Emilia Sulek has produced the first book-length account of a commodity that is transforming the social, cultural, and economic lives of communities across the Tibetan Plateau. Based on eleven months of fieldwork between 2007 and 2010 in Golok Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, China, Sulek provides a sensitive, nuanced portrayal of people who gather and trade caterpillar fungus in the shadow of government regulators.

The book’s aim is to document how income from caterpillar fungus has been used by pastoralists to transform their lifestyles. The slim theoretical scaffolding centers on development and modernity, and makes the not very novel points that development is a problematic

concept because it implies a unilinear march of progress and that “Western patterns of modernity are not the only ‘authentic’ ones and modernity is not one but many” (pp.20-25). Critiquing unilinear models of social evolution has a century-long history and advocating for “multiple modernities” to critique modernization theory began decades ago. Nevertheless, Sulek delivers the most detailed account to date of *yartsa gumbu*’s impact on a society, so the weak theoretical framing does not detract from the study’s strengths.

The book centers on two groups: rural pastoralists who collect caterpillar fungus and town-dwelling traders who purchase it. The state is omnipresent with its regulatory aims that collectors and traders must navigate. Following the introduction, chapters move through an overview of Golok as the research site, a detailed account of digging for caterpillar fungus, a discussion of *yartsa gumbu* as a medicinal commodity, an examination of markets and traders, an analysis of rules and policies designed to regulate the commodity, and three concluding chapters dealing with cash generated from the sale of caterpillar fungus. The author intersperses evocative, first-hand accounts with useful data on *yartsa gumbu* prices and survey findings to shed light on the relationship between a household’s composition and engagement with digging, the gendered dimension of gathering and selling activities, and the ways people use their *yartsa gumbu* income.

The most fascinating insights emerge from rich ethnographic descriptions, for example the tactile depiction of trekking into the hills at dawn in search of the elusive fungus, and a discussion of

pastoralists’ strategies to balance selling some *yartsa gumbu* “fresh” (uncleaned) which requires less processing time but yields lower profits, versus taking time to clean each piece which risks lowering the price through breakage. She describes a bartering process, illustrated by a diagram, involving price signals conveyed through gestures between buyer and seller while their hands are concealed in each other’s sleeves. Theoretical interludes appear in measured doses. For example, in a section called “Dangerous Money” Sulek draws on Simmel, Marx, and Taussig to discuss moral issues that arise when people dig for *yartsa gumbu* on auspicious days. Golok’s fungus collectors must consider the consequences of disturbing *zhibdag* (*bzhi bdag*) who dwell in the ground and are considered the ultimate owners of the commodity. The moral precariousness of money varies depending on when caterpillar fungus was gathered (e.g., auspicious days) and how fast one accumulates profits. Risk mitigation strategies include consulting an astrologer to find out where and when to dig and devoting some proceeds to religious offerings to pacify the *zhibdag* (pp. 186-191).

In the penultimate chapters the reader learns how caterpillar fungus income is transforming several dimensions of Golok society including mobility (the acquisition of motorbikes and cars) and accommodations. Families that lived exclusively in tents not long ago now have two or more houses. Although the structures retain certain traditional principles, for example the way they are sited in relation to hillsides and exposure to the sun, they have become progressively larger, sturdier, more subdivided into multiple rooms with several stoves, and embellished with gables and other design features. In addition

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to interiors being festooned with appropriate signs of political loyalty such as posters of China's political leaders, houses include shrine rooms decorated with images of Buddhas, deities, and *tulku* (*sprul sku*, reincarnate lama). From the author's survey we also learn the extent to which houses became populated with consumer electronics. Such technological acquisitions prompted further changes, for example, piped water systems to spare women the time it takes to fetch water for their washing machines. By documenting careful household strategies for uplifting living standards and investing in the future, this chapter challenges allegations that Golok residents squander most of their sudden wealth on cavorting and gambling.

In the concluding chapter Sulek addresses a key question: why does the state not regulate the caterpillar fungus trade more aggressively? The author suggests that leaving this part of the economy "uncontrolled and unregulated may actually serve the state and officials' interests" (p.260). The logic draws from the PRC philosophy that political stability is rooted in economic concerns; if people are satisfied that their standard of living is on the rise, they are less likely to cause trouble. Pastoralists who evade regulations and officials who turn a blind eye are therefore engaging in a symbiotic form of economic collaboration that advances the interests of both sides. Yet some people in Golok

find the newfound wealth to be problematic on the grounds that it leads pastoralists astray from traditional lifestyles and practices. This is a fitting conclusion to the book as it highlights how economic improvements are fraught with conflicting values.

Following the concluding chapter, the afterword on research methodology is an articulate and honest reflection on conducting research under very challenging circumstances. It would have been more useful to include this account in the book's introduction to preclude any impression a reader might form that the fieldwork was unsystematic or unrepresentative of much beyond a select group of individuals. To the contrary, the author reveals a heightened attention to sampling, to interacting with individuals on all sides of the commodity chain, and to using multiple methodologies including a survey that provides contextual data to support the arguments. Sulek reveals not just the ordeals of conducting research in an unofficial capacity, but also how precarity opened doors and increased rapport with her interlocutors. The afterword is a testament to the author's fortitude, and a valuable addition to any qualitative research seminar's reading list.

In summary, the dearth of theory in this book has pros and cons. On the positive side, it is written in a clear, engaging manner and illustrated with abundant

ethnographic details, which is not always the case when theory eclipses data. As such, it will be very appealing to scholars of Tibetan societies, the Himalayan region, and China. On the other hand, the lack of theoretical engagement with studies on commodities and the political economy of production and consumption will make the book less visible to a broader audience of social scientists. Regardless, Emilia Sulek is to be commended for this invaluable contribution to our understanding of social and economic processes in contemporary Tibetan societies.

Geoff Childs is an anthropological demographer who studies the interplay of culture and population processes (fertility, migration, and aging) in Himalayan societies. He is a professor at Washington University in St. Louis, and the author of several books including From a Trickle to a Torrent: Education, Migration, and Social Change in a Himalayan Valley of Nepal co-authored with Namgyal Choedup (2019, University of California Press).