Trading caterpillar fungus in Tibet

Tina Harris

Reviewed title

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

Emilia Roza Sulek. 2019.

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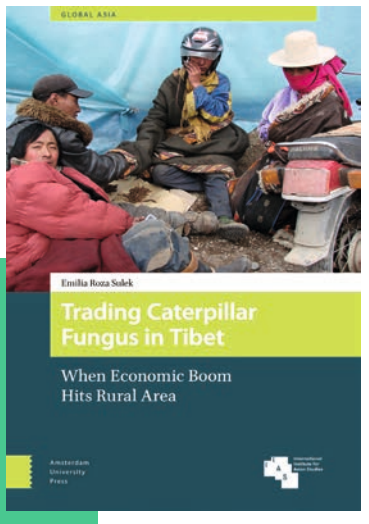


The caterpillar fungus (*ophiocordyceps sinensis*) is a curious species, ubiquitous in the Himalayas and in southwest China, but almost unheard of in other parts of the world. In the Tibetan language, the term for the creature is *yarsta gunbu* (literally summer grass winter worm), due to its peculiar nature: it is a parasitic fungus that slowly takes over and replaces the body of the larvae of a moth. Emilia Roza Sulek's book explores the people, practices, and livelihoods that revolve around the harvest and exchange of this caterpillar fungus (*yartsa* in short). It is one of those wonderful ethnographies where complex economies unfold through a single important commodity.

What is so special about *yartsa*? Mostly valued as a miraculous cure-all treatment in China and abroad, sometimes referred to as the 'Himalayan Viagra', it is rarely used as medicine amongst the Tibetan pastoralists themselves. In the early 2000s, spurred on by post-reform changes in China – increased infrastructural links in the region, rising consumerism, and a growing concern with health – its popularity and price skyrocketed "to such a degree that its market value overshadowed its other uses" (p.86). *Yartsa* began to be used and exchanged as currency itself and was said to have exceeded the price of gold up until the 2008 financial crisis. While other books about single commodities – for instance salt or jade or cod or tea – focus on the objects themselves, Sulek's book prioritises the *people*, the pastoralists in Golok, eastern Tibet, whom she dubs 'the protagonists'. Paying close attention to the contemporary transformation of their land and lives, the focus is less on the *yartsa* itself and more on the broader question, 'what happens when the land you live on suddenly increases in value and importance?'.

According to Sulek, economic improvements in Golok had more to do with the caterpillar fungus trade than with state investments (p.19). While it can also be read as a book about recent rural development in Tibet, Sulek rightly avoids a linear or teleological understanding of the term. Sulek demonstrates that the *yartsa* trade reveals creative adaptation and 'flexibility of existing structures', showing how a single product can completely reorganise a society. This is especially clear when Sulek explores what happens when informal trading practices begin to be regulated by the state, although somewhat unofficially. While state discourse maintains that digging *yartsa* is environmentally detrimental, they put the onus on pastoralists to self-manage their trading land as 'protectors of the environment'. What this meant in practice was that outsiders could not come to the region to help dig for *yartsa*. Sulek keenly observes that under the guise of giving the pastoralists more self-management, such regulations actually *limited* their management, justifying interventions into pastoralists' lifestyles, such as sedentarisation programmes (p.210).

Sulek's book is clearly written, even sensual. The author has a gift for descriptions of nature, somewhat reminiscent of Hayao Miyazaki films. Take for example this passage: "Soglung is a long valley with a small stream murmuring on its stony river bed. The water swarms with tiny fish and there are swampy meadows with frogs" (p.52). Ethnographers will recognise the thickest of descriptions during an account of a day of *yartsa*-digging, preceded by milking the *dri* (the female yak), a methodological exemplar of 'deep hanging-out'. Sulek spends months on end living with and picking *yartsa* with families, providing us with rich, micro-level descriptions of pastoralist life, and pinpointing where the various flows of money are going – not an easy task unless one understands the ins and outs of daily exchange practices. This book also contains an excellent up-to-date description of Tibetan bargaining techniques; negotiating the price of *yartsa* by grasping combinations of the buyer's or seller's fingers under long sleeves or a hat.

My only two minor qualms have little to do with the content of the book itself. First, the steep price means that only a small minority of readers will be able to obtain it, likely through limited access to a university library or interlibrary loan. It is a pity that the relative inaccessibility of Sulek's book may reproduce the idea that it is 'specialist', while it is in fact of interest to much wider audiences in Himalayan/China Studies, Development, Anthropology, Geography, and related disciplines. An open access version would be highly welcome. Secondly, the majority of the numerous footnotes contained fascinating information that I would have liked to have seen in the main body of the text.

This is a captivating and enjoyable book to read in its entirety. It may not provide cutting-edge theoretical arguments, but that was not Sulek's aim. Rather, it is a detailed ethnography that unfolds to reveal socio-economic change in a subtle, slower way. In fact, its focus on how capitalist change occurs in practice, long-term ethnographic engagement, and future outlook can be compared to other detailed ethnographies of rural change, such as Tania Li's *Land's End* (Duke University Press, 2014). Sulek captures snapshots of contemporary pastoral life in Tibet and provides a solid example of how a sudden influx of income can change lives. Since the Tibetan pastoralists hardly use or identify with *yartsa* in the same way its consumers do, Sulek shows how rural pastoralists can creatively capitalise on their own resources to their own advantage. *Trading Caterpillar Fungus in Tibet* does not contain simple people-versus-the-state arguments. Much more complex, it exposes how pastoralists become the "creators of the transformations of their own socio-economic lives", but never in a uniform way (p.258).

Tina Harris, University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Nomad's land

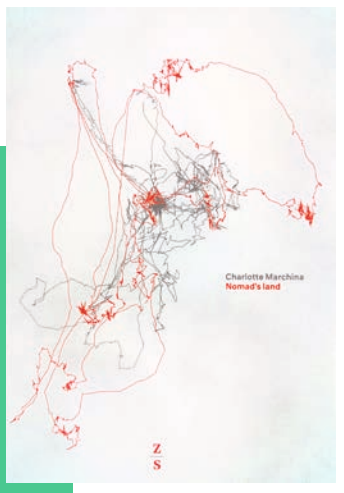
Simon Wickhamsmith

Reviewed title

***Nomad's Land: Éleveurs, animaux et paysage chez les peuples mongols* [Nomad's land: Herders, their animals and the landscape among the Mongols].**

Charlotte Marchina. 2019.

Paris: Zones Sensibles
ISBN 9782930601397



The relationship between Mongolian nomads, their animals, and the landscape through which they move is both complex and tender. Traditional nomadic life is based upon livestock herding, and upon the efficient and organic interaction between human and non-human persons. The slaughter of an animal initiates not only the production of nutritious food, but also of materials for clothing, sheltering, herding, and even entertainment: nothing is wasted, and no trace is left. This ecological imperative is driven by considerations both practical and spiritual: for a herding family to waste any part of one of their own animals is to lose out on vital and fragile resources, and to deny the natural cycles of the Earth, and so cause offense to their ancestors, to local guardian spirits, to the Buddha, and to the shamanic sky god Tenger.

Charlotte Marchina's new book is an important cross-border study of these relationships in two primary field sites: one in the region of Aga-Buryatia (in the Russian administrative division of Zabaykalsky Kray), and the other in Mongolia's Arhangai *aimag*. This distribution is particularly interesting in the light of how the Buryat nomads consider themselves in relation to Mongolian nomads: "I realised that, for [the Buryats], 'nomads' was a return to the livestock breeders who live in an 'old-fashioned' way and in 'encampments' - that is, to use their term, 'primitive' people." ["*Je compris alors que les «nomades» renvoyaient pour eux à les éleveurs qui «vivent à l'ancienne» (jivut po staromu), sur des «campements» (stoibishche), bref, des gens «primitifs» (primitivnye), pour reprendre leurs termes.*"] (pp.12-13) Reading Marchina's book with this distinction in mind makes her achievement in distilling the nature of Mongols' 'nomad's land' all the more admirable.

The book's four chapters deal with nomadic movement, the idea of homeland (Mongol *nutag*; Buryat *nyutag*), the negotiation of nomadic space between pasture and encampment, and the interactions between species within the nomadic space. This superficial overview fails to show the natural Venn diagram which develops among the chapters as the book progresses, and the conceptual cycles which connect and revisit the key elements of the narrative. Indeed, while this is a solid work of anthropological enquiry, there exists also the constant substratum of the nomadic cosmovision, common to both Buryat and Mongol herders, in which extended transspecies space (of a family, of a community) is shared with awareness of different capacities, intelligences, and needs. So, when Marchina asks a herder why he places goats and sheep together in one herd, his explanation is both logical and (for western readers perhaps) surprising: "Sheep are stupid, they don't know where they live. But the goats know. If we don't put the goats with the sheep, [the sheep will] head off without realizing they're not coming back home." ["*Les moutons sont stupides, ils ne connaissent pas leur maison. Les chèvres, elles, savent. Si on ne mettait pas de chèvres avec les moutons, ils iraient toujours tout droit sans se rendre compte qu'ils ne rentrent pas à la maison.*"] (p.81) I have now become used to watching cattle wandering home across the steppe in the later afternoon, but this transspecies collaboration of the nomadic community – though it might be "natural", and unrecognized perhaps by all but the humans involved – is striking in its simplicity, but also indicative of an inclusive attitude towards non-humans all but absent from contemporary human society.

The maps scattered throughout the book respond effectively to the text, and reveal the daily and seasonal movements central to the lives of herding communities. By showing the way in which different families cleave to much the same routes and herding trajectories, the graphics emphasize as much the significance of social interaction and community learning as how the landscape determines, and even assists, herding behaviors. The maps, moreover, are complemented by black and white photographs, the majority of them merely indicating humanity by dint of their very existence, or by the occasional *ger* (yurt). Mongolia's landscape, as presented in these photographs, might appear empty to the eye of an untrained reader, but (as I can attest) the trained nomadic eye notices incremental topographical shifts, and the movement traced by the maps illustrates choices based upon such topographical features, like the ones shown (if you look closely) in the photographs.

The complexity of the ecological relationships which Marchina describes from her fieldwork on both sides of the Russo–Mongolian border resonate even in our own more urbanized and 'easier' lives. In her conclusion, she points out that Mongol nomads do not live "'symbiotically' or 'in harmony' with their environment" ["*«en symbiose» ou «en harmonie» avec leur environnement*"], as some might wish to believe, but that their situation nonetheless offers us the chance "to reflect on the relations which we would like to enjoy with our own environment" ["*de réfléchir aux relations que nous-mêmes voulons entretenir aujourd'hui avec notre environnement*"] (p.206). This of course is key to a profitable engagement with such a work of anthropology: a book like Marchina's, while valuable as scholarship and as a way to broaden our understanding of how 'other people' live, also asks us to think about our own lives. The ways in which we interact with the non-human persons with whom we share our environment, our treatment of our shared environment, and our attitude towards tradition and innovation together define the 'broad vision' according to which we as a society move forward. Such are the questions which this book provoked in me, and for that – as well as for its eloquence and elegant production – it is to surely be recommended.

Simon Wickhamsmith, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, United States