CONTEMPORARY VISIONS IN TIBETAN STUDIES

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The growing popularity of Asian medicinal systems has reached Central Europe. At a post office in Warsaw, Poland, people can have a look at a little stall, a mini-pharmacy, selling herbal remedies from the Far East. They will find there a little flyer that advertises a product called Cordyceps Mycelium Capsules. Imported from China, it is an extract of a fungus called kordiseps (original spelling). The author of the flyer introduces a few interesting details about this unknown fungus’ place of origin and its life cycle: “[k]ordiseps belongs to the kingdoms of plants and animals at the same time. It grows in the highlands of China and Tibet. In summer it is a fungus, in winter it lives in the ground as a parasite with a moth larva (...) In spring it begins the life-cycle of an organic fungus again thus reproducing its biological cycle.” This obscure and exotic information about a Tibetan medicinal fungus refers to something that really does exist in Tibet. It is Cordyceps sinensis, known in Tibetan language as yartsa gunbu (dbyar rtswa dgun ’bu) and for English speakers as caterpillar fungus, native to the Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau and adjoining mountain valleys.

Caterpillar fungus collected by local populations has become an important economic factor in many parts of Tibet. Its importance is highlighted by worrying news appearing from time to time on Tibet-related websites. In July 2007, for example, World Tibetan Network News (WTNN) reported that fighting broke out between people from Kardze (dKar mdzes) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (hereafter
TAP) in Sichuan Province when residents of two neighboring townships took up arms and hand grenades to dispute the border line between their yartsa grasslands. Six people were killed and over one hundred injured. In June unrest broke out in Nagchu (Nag chu) Prefecture of the Tibet Autonomous Region. A group of Tibetans in Sog (Sog) county protested against Hui Muslims and their arrogant behavior at the market. A simple quarrel over a yartsa transaction turned into a bigger conflict when a growing number of agitated Tibetans got involved. As a result, up to thirty Tibetans were arrested, and the Huis kept their shops closed for the next few days. These two examples come from two parts of Tibet that still keep their pastoral character, but unconfirmed rumors of clashes between the nomads competing over yartsa resources are heard of in other areas of pastoral Tibet as well.

Yartsa gunbu at the post office in Poland, or any other country where so-called alternative therapies are in vogue, is a distant link in a long lasting and far flung process. Collected by people in Tibet, bought up by local middlemen, sold to pharmaceutical companies in mainland China, processed and widely distributed in China and the world outside – yartsa has to travel long distances to reach the hands of its customers. A dietary supplement, aphrodisiac, ingredient of expensive dishes in upscale restaurants in Chinese metropolises, yartsa is priced for its strongly marketed universal qualities. The surge in its price and consumption in the past two decades reflects economic reforms and availability of disposable income in China. The high demand for herbal medicines in China and abroad has an indirect and complicated impact on the situation in Tibet, where the flow of yartsa begins. It impacts the lives of people such as those described in the post office flyer: “[T]he healing qualities of kordisper were discovered first by Himalayan cattle and sheep herders – they observed that their animals became more vigorous after eating the fungus.” While the healing qualities of cordyceps were long known by medical practitioners, in the last decades developments in the market for alternative therapies enabled Golok nomads to discover the market value of yartsa gunbu.

RESEARCH OUTLINE

This chapter is based on research conducted in Golok (mGo log) TAP, Qinghai Province, China, throughout the yartsa harvesting season of 2007. Out of the six counties that comprise Golok, the main fieldwork area covered parts of two – Machen (rMa chen) and Gabde (dGa’ bde) – known for yartsa resources and recent rapid economic changes. The research consisted of participant observation and interviews (in Tibetan) within communities of pastoral nomads collecting yartsa.
on the grasslands, local Tibetan traders and their trading partners in Golok marketplaces, towns and villages. It reports first-hand observations from the lives of yartsa gunbu collectors and traders.

The study focuses on the new developments in the yartsa business in Golok TAP in 2007. It introduces historical background and general setting of the yartsa trade, and the present day social and economic life in Golok during the yartsa cropping season, when people’s activities and concerns center around the fungus harvesting, buying and selling. In addition, it discusses the place of yartsa digging in the nomads’ cultural codes of behavior and their attitudes to the environment, and it reports opinions expressed by influential locals in Golok on the phenomenon of the yartsa trade and its importance for the area. Finally, it touches upon the intra-ethnic cooperation networks, and competition on the yartsa market in Golok TAP, and signals the development of the new entrepreneurial class in the local Golok society resulting from the boom in yartsa trade. Tibetan traders’ own narratives of their careers and motives that made them quit the herder’s life and enter business punctuate this report.

**RESEARCH PARAMETERS**

The Golok TAP lies in the southeast corner of Qinghai. It covers an area of over 78,000 sq km, though this is not the entire land area labeled in early 20th-century writing as Golok; parts of the former Golok territory are now incorporated into other provinces and prefectures. Golok is famous for the Amnyemachen Mountain Range (A myes rma chen), one peak of which, Machen Gangri (rMa chen gang ri), at 6,282 m, was once thought to be even higher than Mt Everest. More importantly, Amnyemachen is a popular pilgrimage site, and the abode of the chief of all territorial deities of northeast Tibet/Amdo. Its impact is widely recognized in and around Golok. The Amnyemachen circumambulation route might become a popular trekking route, as the Golok tourist bureau officials hope. The source of the Machu River (rMa chu/Yellow River) is located in the west of Golok. The Golok territory can be roughly described as stretching from the sources of the Machu along its upper part through the mountain grasslands that merge into forest farming villages of south Banma (Pad ma) county. The Machu source area is a part of the so-called Three Rivers Area (Mandrydzagsrum; rMa 'Bri Dza gsum) in Golok and Yushu (Yul shul) Prefectures, and has been designated a natural heritage site by the Chinese authorities. It is a popular theme of Chinese postcards, which show the natural treasures of the Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau, and is a recurring theme in the Chinese environmentalist rhetoric.
The terrain of Golok rises from the southeast to the northwest, shaping the climate and ways of life of its inhabitants. While the average annual temperature is around 0°C, in winter the temperature can drop to as low as -30°C (the lowest temperature in Dawu/rTa bo\(^2\) in 2007), and in summer it can rise to about +25°C during the day, but still fall close to freezing at night. Snow and hail are common at all times of year. In 2007 there was snow on the ground in Dawu in July, and the hills around the town were covered in snow as late as 28 July. The annual amount of precipitation decreases from east to west. The high humidity in the “lower Golok” – Jigdril (gCig sgril) and Banma counties to the southeast – makes the climate milder, and allows small-scale field cultivation. When the land rises up with the Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau, Golok gets drier, and the “upper Golok” of Martod (rMa stod) county in the northwest consists of grasslands over 4,000 and up to 5,000 m high above sea level; this area has been subject to rapid desertification of the pastur- e farms in recent decades.\(^3\) In the public political discourse in China the blame for that is often falsely placed on the local residents and the “traditional” pasture system that supposedly runs contrary to environmental protection. This is generally recognized as a pretext for the state-imposed program of mass resettlement of a large part of its rural population. The counties studied, Machen and Gabde (along with Darlag/Dar lag, which is not covered in the present study) form the central core of the whole Golok TAP. This “middle Golok,” which stretches between Amnyemachen to the north and Bayankara mountain range to the south, is characterized by treeless rolling hills of grassland up to over 4,000 m above sea level. It is a home for nomadic pastoralists who depend for their subsistence on their large herds of yaks and sheep. The sale of livestock and livestock products is a major source of income for the mainly rural population of Golok, which is the third least populated of the Qinghai prefectures.

20th-Century Historical Overview

In the first half of the 20th century, before the Chinese government was established in Golok, the Goloks were organized on a tribal basis, still recognizable in contemporary local society. They formed loose polities that comprised a confederacy, and most of the Golok tribes retained political power and varying degrees of independence from the centers of authority outside of Golok. The advent of the Communist era in Tibet brought the incorporation of Golok tribes into the modern state of the People’s Republic of China, and the founding of Golok Tibetan Autonomous Region in 1954, which was renamed Golok Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture the following year. Communist attempts at building a uniform socialist society backed
by a strong central authority emanating from Beijing were more difficult to resist than the Hui warlords (principally Ma Qi and Ma Bufang), who had de facto power over a large part of Qinghai and tried to bring Golok tribes under their direct control by arms during the period of the Chinese Republic (1911–49). Many Chinese would probably agree with the statement by Sun Shuyun in her book on the Long March: “[t]he warlords’ internecine wars, their lack of any moral values and ideals except for keeping their power and territory, and the damage they inflicted on the nation, were among the curses of the 20th-century China.”

When the Communists replaced the warlords on the political stage, the new “altruist” justification for political actions was introduced to replace the criticized warlords’ “egoist” one. However, from the perspective of Golok and other Tibetan parts of Qinghai, the situation did not change objectively. Golok and the whole of Qinghai is remembered for persecutions and mass killings of the local populations, mentioned in the late Panchen Lama’s famous critique of the crimes of the Cultural Revolution. Leaving aside the extremities of Chinese politics in Tibet, the new communist authorities instituted a whole panorama of political and economic reforms on Marxist-Leninist lines with Soviet assistance.

The introduction of the commune (nyamli; mnyam las) system by the end of the 1950s and early 1960s opened the list of changes in state-planned livestock management: the herds changed their ownership from individual households to collectives that were the only permitted production and day-to-day management units. In the early and mid-1980s, when economic reforms swept across China, the state communes were disbanded and the livestock was returned to the private ownership of nomad families according to family size. However, this reprivatization did not affect the rangelands ownership and the pastures were still used communally. In 1985 the government formulated the Grassland Law of the People’s Republic of China (Zhonghua renmin gongheguo caoyuanfa) and land contracts were granted to individual households as long-term leases. The Goloks have the right to manage the land and use the profits, but the land is still owned by the state. Big infrastructure developments in Tibet, which started in the 1990s, were speeded up in the Jiang Zemin era with the announcement of the “Great Opening of the West,” or Xibu da kaifa campaign, in 1999 designed to bridge the economic gap between the poor “Wild West” of China and the rapidly developing East. The campaign has resulted in major material improvements, primarily affecting county towns and to a lesser extent villages. This has included health care and education facilities, electric power plants and investments in transportation infrastructure.

The construction of a network of roads brought markets within easier reach of most Golok families, thus facilitating both the selling of livestock products and the
purchasing of food and necessary household commodities. Roads in Golok were a kind of Achilles' heel of the region and this, taken together with the Goloks' reputation as notorious brigands, robbing caravans and strangers who trespassed on their land, no doubt discouraged many outside traders from coming to the area. Thus the locals traveled long distances to the outside markets of Labrang (bLa brang), Kumbum (sKu 'bum) or Ngaba (rNga ba) to trade their products for barley, tea and other supplies unobtainable from their land. With the recent Chinese road construction projects the appearance of Golok towns has visibly changed. And even though two decades ago a main town like Dawu had just one road and not much more than two lines of buildings along it, today the town is busy with life and has all sorts of shops, with vegetables trucked from Sichuan, boutiques selling trendy urban clothes and photograph studios where one can have pictures taken of oneself in an elegant Western wedding dress or a Chinese princess' outfit. There still are many areas in Golok that one can reach only on horseback or on a motorbike negotiating floods, ice sheets and the destruction caused by summer rains. Hospitals in county towns and smaller villages show little trace of recent financial input, and there are no petrol stations other than a shed with drums of petrol in smaller settlements. There are not many facilities that could be enjoyed by tourists whom the local tourist agencies want to bring to the area in order to increase the prefecture's income. Whatever the situation in smaller counties looks like, the recent economic changes in Golok have been considerable, and this is partly the outcome of the new road construction projects.

Contemporary Golok society faces similar economic problems as other parts of Tibet and pastoral minority areas in China. Declining productivity of the grasslands is probably the most significant problem, and to reverse pasture degradation the program of relocating pastoralists from the endangered areas to new, mostly urban housing was announced. Resettling nomads in Golok TAP covers not only the most degraded parts of the prefecture and areas around the Machu river sources that are under the Three Rivers Area protection plan. On the contrary, the program stretches through the whole of Golok, and in every county one easily finds concrete resettlement quarters for the nomads built within or in vicinity of towns and villages. It is difficult to collect accurate information about the program. The nomads generally receive free housing and financial and material (coal, wheat) support from the government. However, the amount of money they receive and the length of time they will be aided differ even within one resettlement site, where households from various localities are placed. Moreover, rules about whether a family can retain its livestock and keep the animals on the grassland or be forced to sell them vary as well, though it is no secret that many families skip this rule and entrust the animals to their relatives, hoping for
better times to come back to the highlands, or simply rejecting the mass killing of their whole herds. A local official from Darlag county was quoted by the Xinhua news agency: "... due to erosion and desertification, more and more people are realizing the benefits of resettling... The government has done a lot to persuade those who are truly reluctant to move." While it remains true that a number of resettled nomads declare their satisfaction with their new life (especially elderly people whose children migrated to the towns long ago, or ones from the margins of economic sustainability), the "traditional" leaders of local communities express their concern with the state's resettlement program, seeing it rather as aiming at the nomads' cultural status quo than at improving their life and the environmental conditions.

Cutting the size of herds and dividing and fencing off pasturelands are further strategies for developing rural regions and making herd management more "scientific" and economically predictable. However, the implementation of these policies differs from place to place, and in Machen and Gabde counties fenced pastures are found in some parts, while not in others. Fencing is expensive and carries a potential for exacerbating local conflicts over boundary demarcation, the size and quality of the allocated rangelands, transfer from summer to winter pastures and access to water or yartsa resources.

All these policies, as well as the establishment of roads, have complex implications for the structure of pastoral communities in Golok. They affect the way nomads shape their community life and the way they interact with urban centers. It brings them closer to the sphere of state-promoted consumerism. Collecting medicinal plants for their own consumption and occasional sale was a part of economic life in Golok before, but the development of the yartsa trade on the scale that is now observed in the area was possible only thanks to contemporary developments aimed at opening Golok to the state-promoted socialist market economy. In the new history of Golok that started with its incorporation into the People's Republic of China, the area has been known as one of the poorest parts of Qinghai, with 80 percent of the prefectural budget still financed through subsidies from the provincial or central government in the early 1990s. Golok is still one of the smallest economies in Qinghai, but the boom in yartsa trading has opened a new chapter in the economic life of the Golok highlands.

YARTSA RUSH

In the beginning of May when the time of yartsa harvesting approaches, a genuine yartsa rush breaks out in Golok. Harvests are one of the most common topics
to talk about behind the wheel and at the table. Everybody seems to talk about yarsta – nomads, townspeople, Tibetans, strangers, men and women, lay people and monks. The importance of yarsta harvests is reflected in the everyday language: the usual Cho demo? or Cho erka? (How are you?, Khyod bde mo? Khyod e dka’?) is often replaced by phrases: Yarsta e yo ka? (Have you got yarsta?; dByar rtsha e yod ka?) or Yarsta mang nga e yo ka? (Have you got many yarsta?; dBya rtshwa mang nga e yod ka?). After such greetings, a reply should come: Yarsta mang nga me ka (I haven’t got many yarsta; dBya rtshwa mang nga med ka). This standard complaint does not represent the real state of a person’s business or yarsta-hunting results, and is a routine question to start any conversation. The harvests are the topic people talk about, a reason for personal pride and a subject of dreams for some and fears for others. In a photograph studio, a Hui trader, Mr. Ma, was taking photos of his newly bought yarsta pieces, proud to be the owner of such splendid specimens. And a monk from Ragya (Ra rgya) Monastery admitted that he dreamt of many yarsta. Although many monks search for yarsta, he never did. Neither was he one of those monks to whom people come for divination concerning when and where to go to get good harvests. But he took his dream as a bad omen for the Golok grasslands. “The extinction of yarsta may happen soon,” he said.

The fear of the forthcoming over-exploitation of yarsta resources was one of the ways the local authorities explained a regulation banning entry to Golok to all people who have neither land of their own in the prefecture, nor relatives who do. One inescapable feature of the landscape for anybody visiting Golok in the spring 2007 was the checkpoints (rtartog bziesa; lta rtogs byed sa). A traveler to Golok had to pass many control posts, set by the local administration or by the nomads themselves. At the checkpoints all those who wanted to enter the prefecture had to show identity cards, or in any other way prove their right to be there during the yarsta cropping season. On the road between Ragya and Dawu (76 km), a three-hour journey on motorbike that crosses a 4234 m mountain pass, there were four checkpoints. From Dawu to Jigdril, the usual eight-hour bus journey was extended by two more hours due to the stops at five control posts, with the biggest one in Mendrin (sMan ‘brin) where the old track to Jigdril runs over the mountain pass above the village crossroads. However, the biggest checkpoints were set on local dirt roads, leading nowhere but to the grassland, and among the strictest in Machen was the one that led to Domkhok (sDom khog), an area famous for rich yarsta fields. A barrier, a few tents and a queue of cars, nomads on motorcycles and groups of people sitting at the roadside, all waiting for somebody to lift the barrier closing the way to the pasturelands, clarified the picture of how highly sought after the local yarsta resources are, and how important it is to guard them.
IN THE LAND OF CHECKPOINTS

This is supplemented by the stories of unsuccessful gatherers who did not manage to get through the control posts, and of those successful ones who had good luck and got to the grasslands to live the dreamt-of life of a yartsa gatherer. These constituted the hope, luck and despair that came with the new spring and the new yartsa harvesting season.

A YARTSA GATHERER’S DAY

The yartsa gatherer’s working day can last up to ten hours. Having drunk a few bowls of milk tea, everybody who is able sets off in groups for the mountains. A long march up the hills of the family land leads through ice-covered streams, between herds of yaks and up the stony slopes. The path rises up steeply, and on the way to the alpine yartsa meadows the gathering teams stop several times to rest. Having arrived up there, to the heights of the family land, the gatherers proceed slowly, on their knees or crawling, or bending the body and leaning on a small hoe with the eyes fixed on the patch of dry grass in front. Each gatherer carefully “scans” every square centimeter of land. “Look first in front of you, then look further ahead” (rNgun na rnung du ti, de ni thag rang nga ti; sNgun na sngun du bitas, de nas thag ring nga bitas) was the simplest advice on how to search for yartsa. Skillful gatherers do not need to put their nose in the grass to find the fungus — some are able to see it from two or three meters distance. But if nothing is found, the gatherer takes a few steps more and continues his search elsewhere.

The gatherer’s equipment is simple and does not include anything special for yartsa harvesting. The basic tool is a 25 cm or longer iron hoe (kakle; kag le or zhur; gzhor) with a blacksmith-made blade and a metal or wooden handle; this is used in every rural household to chop dry dung. Once the yartsa gatherer finds a tiny brownish “head” (gor; mgo) of the fungus sticking out from the ground, the whole bulk of topsoil is lifted out with the hoe. The fungus is skillfully extracted and the soil should be replaced and compacted. The fungus goes into the pocket of the happy gatherer where, wrapped in a plastic bag like those for instant noodle soup, it will travel for a few hours before everybody gets home. The gatherers do not wear any special clothing either, and only ladies take care to wear gloves to protect the hands, dust masks (khayol; kha yol or khadym; kha thum) against strong sun and dusty air, colorful cloth sleeve-protectors (purhyb; phur shubs or lakhyb; lag shubs) and hats.

A long working day in the mountains ends in the evening, when the whole team runs down the slopes of their pasturelands jumping between dry bushes and
pica holes from one mound of earth to the other, whistling to the yaks to bring them home on the way. At home the yartsa is counted, and each piece is cleaned of its layer of earth with a toothbrush (sochy; so ‘khru or sobshi; so bshi), and left to dry. Everybody agrees that it is best to dry it the sun, but it takes a shorter time to dry the fungus on the stove. The cleaned and dried fungus will wait now for somebody to take it to town for sale; if the town is close to the settlement, or instant money is needed, one may carry fresh yartsa to the market for on-the-spot sale.

The work of yartsa gathering is strenuous; it might even be described as boring. It requires a certain degree of fitness but at the same time gives a chance for social bonding. During the day, the settlements of the gatherers’ families are almost empty. Only the oldest and youngest members of the household stay at home. Everybody who is fit enough to walk up to the mountains takes a chance to earn money from yartsa. In four-generation families, the elderly take on the task of house-keeping when the others are away – no need to hide the key under a stone in the yard and the stove will be pleasantly warm when the gathering team, hungry and worn out, finally returns. Neighboring households can share the cost.
of renting a babysitter to look after the kids and keep an eye on the household when the people are away.24

The cropping season is an occasion to have the whole family in one place. Children who attend boarding schools away from home enjoy a special holiday so they can help their families with the harvesting. The Golok Prefecture High School (mGo log khul bod yig mtho rim slob ‘bring) has a break over twenty days long, Snowland Nomad Girls’ School (Gangs ljongs rtswa thang bu mo’i slob grwa) near Ragya enjoys a five-week break and Dr Dargye’s Snowland Charitable Medical College (Gangs ljongs dar rgyas kun phan sman rtsis slob gling) in Dawu is closed for over a month from late April until the end of May. Relatives who have quit the life of a herder in hopes of “catching up” with modern life in a big town outside of Golok come back home. Monks leave their monasteries to look for additional income through yartsa, even though the codes of Buddhist monastic discipline prevent them from digging. As ever, reality runs counter to prescribed behavior. Singing and breaks for lunch make the working time pass pleasantly and gives the yartsa harvests their social dimension.
Yartsa is the most sought after natural commodity in Golok. However, the trade is often seen as a new phenomenon, introduced to Golok in the last decades. As a sixty-year-old Gabde trader puts it: “when I was a little boy, there were no Chinese, and the grass belonged to yaks, sheep and horses. There was no other use for it.” It is hard to locate the beginnings of the trade exactly, but the 1970s are recollected by the nomads and traders as the first time that news spread of the yartsa trade with mainland China. “When I was herding around Nyenpoyurtse (gNyan po gyu rtse) in 1975, I heard that somewhere in Golok and Gabde people trade with bags of yartsa,” another trader says. Individual reports mention ten-to-twelve gyama / jin²⁶ quotas that the nomads in Gabde had to meet in a month of a cropping season under the commune system. However, before the communes were dissolved and official restrictions on private business removed, the business could not develop.

The Golok highlands are known for their abundance of medicinal plants used in the traditional Tibetan and Chinese medicine. Some of these had been collected as part of a profitable business in previous decades.²⁶ However, with the rise of yartsa, the price for other medicinal plants found in the Golok uplands has appeared unsatisfactory to the gatherers, and the number of suppliers has declined. Even pimo (pas mo; Fritillaria), formerly collected by Golok nomads as a supplementary source of income, seems to have been slowly abandoned since the yartsa boom started. No middleman was prepared to pay as much for it as for the caterpillar fungus. One gyama (500 g) of pimo sold for between 500 to 600 yuan in 2007. The same amount (one gyama) of yartsa sold for 40,000 to 50,000 yuan (spring 2007) depending on the quality of the fungus. High prices paid for yartsa make the effort worthwhile for the middlemen to travel to the nomads’ settlements to buy yartsa directly on the grassland.

The great popularity of the yartsa trade is understandable when the number of yartsa pieces that one person can collect in a season is considered. Thirty to forty pieces a day sounds moderate, but it gives over one thousand pieces for a four-to-five-week-long season per gatherer. This result is not uncommon, and is by no means the smallest figure. The price paid at the Golok markets for a single piece of caterpillar fungus in spring 2007 averaged from 15 to 20 yuan depending on the fungus’ quality and size, although the nomads reported that for a particularly good yartsa the price could rise up to 30 yuan or more.

In a good harvesting season, income from yartsa is unparalleled with anything else in the area. For a household that fully engages in yartsa hunting these days, the income, supplemented with livestock products from a middle sized seventy-yak herd, can easily provide a comfortable living, bank savings, investments
in the winter house, children's higher education (primary and middle schools in Golok were free in 2007), etc. At the grassroots level of everyday expenses, the mathematics is simple: for the price of one middle sized caterpillar fungus one could buy 10 kg of roasted barley tsampa (rtsam pa) flour or over 2.5 kg of mutton or yak meat or 1.5 kg of butter (prices for May/June 2007; Dawu).

The range of goods and services that one could spend yartsa money on is broad, and luxury expenditures, such as whitening creams and mobile phones, sell well in the yartsa harvesting season. The red-light district of Dawu is also busy with life in the season.

It is common for families to keep a record of the total income from yurtsa gathering, though clearly some of the proceeds are retained for private use and are not recorded. Reliable figures are thus not easy to calculate. Being easily convertible into cash, yartsa is a good way of keeping one's savings. On the one hand, caterpillar fungus connects such places as Golok to the market economy, but on the other hand, it retains its “barter” value. Some fungus does not need to be converted into cash, and transactions involving binoculars, wristwatches and

Figure 3: Door-to-door sellers of calculators and other simple goods in a restaurant. The nomad at the table wants to pay for his shopping in yartsa. Traders are estimating the fungus’ value; the one standing at the door holds yartsa. (Photograph: ES)
leather belts changing hands in exchange for a few pieces of yartsa are not unknown. However, it is not barter in the sense of exchanging goods without referring to money. Current “conversion rates” for yartsa are widely known, and the fungus will not circulate as an object of use, but will be sold at the yartsa market soon after.27 Nomadic communities in Golok have historically lived with low supplies of cash. Transactions are often credited and accounts settled after the yartsa season. Dried yartsa is easy to store without the risk of deterioration. Therefore, it gives its owner a chance to enhance its market value over time. It may well be imagined that it serves as an alternative currency for the locals.

MARKET LIFE

The yartsa market space in a Golok town or village has a “spontaneous” street character. The transactions happen on the street, away from the township’s official market precincts, which are too small to house a large number of yartsa sellers and buyers. During the day, but also late in the evening, groups of people sit on the pavements discussing yartsa prices: the sellers with backpacks or suitcases full of yartsa brought straight from the mountains; the buyers with cardboard boxes for newly bought fungus; chairs and a folding table for those traders who need more comfort; and noisy spectators, eager to sneak a look over somebody’s arm to watch the transactions, or to back up one or another of the other business parties. Only rarely do traders rent a shop that becomes a fixed point on a town map where one can conduct business. Alternatively, general stores selling boots, horse tack and expensive coral beads can be used as seasonal storehouses for yartsa.

For nomads coming down from the hills to put yartsa on the market, this is a rare opportunity to take a break in town, so discussions over yartsa drift along and nobody is in a hurry to hop on his horse or motorbike to go home. The traders count and weigh the fungus with metal scales (gyama; rgya ma _ the same term used as a unit of measure). Haggling lasts a long time and transactions are discussed individually, between buyer and seller, and depend on the quality of collected fungus and personal connection between the two parties: yartsa can be traded either per gyama (500 g) or per piece. Mobile phones ring every now and then; those without a telephone cannot be realistically imagined to do business in Golok. Detailed notes are taken in a notebook that a professional trader carries with him. Calculators are in play in the traders’ hands, but many transactions are discussed secretly. The secrecy of the business is the key to success and the prices are voicelessly negotiated in the language of gestures in the folds of the overlong sleeves of Tibetan robes. Yartsa is not an exception here, and the price of sheep
or horses is discussed similarly. Selling yak hides and sheep skins in autumn and winter also takes place everywhere, showing that the *modus operandi* of *yartsa* trading does not differ significantly from common trading patterns.

Among the middlemen buying *yartsa* are Tibetans, Hui Muslims and Han Chinese. They form a hub of a true “commodity ecumene,” with a network of relationships crossing trans-cultural borders. Han traders are clearly visible in the prefectural capital and the peripheries of Golok, such as Ragya township, but their numbers shrink noticeably within the Golok highlands. Public discourse in Golok holds the Muslims in low esteem, and they are blamed for many misfortunes by the local population. Ma Bufang’s atrocities are well remembered by the elderly and these memories are transmitted to the young generations. Reliable informants say that in 2005 the Dawu government initially granted, and then withdrew permission for the building of a mosque in the town. The summer horse festival in 2007 brought inter-ethnic unrest; it started with an infamous incident in a Hui restaurant when a Tibetan nomad found something resembling human tooth in a dish of food. “The police said it wasn’t human,” a Tibetan *yartsa* trader said,

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*Figure 4: At a yartsa market, the prices are voicelessly negotiated in the language of gestures in the sleeves of Tibetan robes. (Photograph: ES)*
suggesting that the restaurant owner bribed the policemen in charge of investigating the incident. It reveals the widespread belief that the Huis are influential and cooperative with the Chinese. Also, most Tibetans believe that Hui traders are the most powerful players in the yartsa business.

However, the laws of the market seem to prevail over prejudice. When the spirit of commerce comes on the stage, economic interests win over ethnic differences, even if only temporarily. “I sell to the one that pays me more,” most Tibetan middlemen claimed. Tibetan traders today open cooperatives with the Muslims; while the Tibetan partner has a better social standing in the area, the Hui partner ensures that Chinese documents are properly filled in and tax regulations duly followed. The capital and imagined personal connections of the Muslim traders might inspire Tibetan traders to open a business with the Huis. Andrew Fischer observes that Tibetans ought to have a “natural advantage” in the yartsa business. However, an impression shared by outside observers that Tibetan middlemen are rising in power and gaining control over a growing part of the yartsa business in the area is contradicted by the complaints of the Tibetan traders themselves: “I sell to you, you sell to me, and yartsa can circulate endlessly between Tibetan hands with a very small profit.” The lack of capital, experience, intra-ethnic solidarity and entrepreneurial spirit is blamed for the still low position of the Tibetan middlemen in the yartsa business.

**YARTSA QUALITY**

The story of Tibetan–Muslim cooperation must be supplemented by narratives of supposed swindles played by competitors at the market, especially the Huis: “It would be good if the Chinese big bosses came directly to us, otherwise Huis paint the yartsa yellow so that it has a better color and insert pins in them so that the yartsa gains weight. These are not honest tricks,” many informants complained. This narrative briefly describes important quality markers: the yellowish color and large, firm larval body of the yartsa are the two main attributes impacting its price. The fact that yartsa is normally bought in gyamas tempts sellers to increase its weight fraudulently. Traders say the harvesters soak the fungus before bringing it to the market and inject it with salt water. The extreme of reported yartsa tricks is represented by circulating stories of a “fake yartsa” produced somewhere outside Golok. This yartsa, made of dough, has been seen by purchasers of the end product at markets in Sichuan and elsewhere in China.

Caterpillar fungus harvested at the beginning of the cropping season has a short “head” or fruiting body. This kind of yartsa is in particular demand on the
market. The short “head,” sticking 1–2 cm out of the ground, is a reason for the harvester’s pride in finding the fungus even though it is hardly visible. It will raise the fungus’ market price, too. Larger specimens are always in demand as well. Some traders say they keep the biggest yartsa for their own use. Put into a bottle of good baijiu (spirit alcohol) with deer antlers, pimo and medicinal herbs, it makes menchang (sman chang), a medicinal drink that helps to restore health and is the main way the locals use yartsa at home. Hot water can be used instead of alcohol. Another factor influencing fungus quality is the altitude at which it grows. “Very rarely do the traders pay attention to this,” a village doctor says, but the price list for using another person’s pastures for yartsa gathering mentions the highest fees for gathering in the uppermost parts of the valleys. This suggests that altitude is sometimes taken into account in yartsa price negotiations.

Roadblocks and the Black Market

In previous years, researchers working in Golok Prefecture reported attempts by local authorities to control the amount of yartsa digging. Similar attempts were reported from other areas of Tibet. Roadblocks were set up in the Golok TAP to control the seasonal influx of people in the cropping season and to collect the user’s fee that yartsa collectors from outside of Golok had to pay to enter the Golok highlands. Part of the money was meant to go to the herders who owned the rights to the plot of yartsa land the newcomer was going to use. Otherwise the money should “return” to nomads through county and prefecture programs aimed at patching up the environmental consequences of the grassland exploitation. That tension over the final use of prefectural and county money has been a hot issue was shown by international reports over the past years highlighting social unrest in several areas of Tibet, where inhabitants protested against misappropriation of the fee money by local officials.

The informal leaders of local communities in Golok express concern with the overexploitation of yartsa fields and pollution of the local environment: “the Chinese and Huis they come here, cut the trees, leave rubbish everywhere, and throw their socks on the mountains and in the rivers.” Religious leaders show concern with the danger of offending the mountain gods, zhibdag (gsi bdag) or yulha (yul lha), with careless digging of yartsa in the mountains, and the profaning of a sacred land by those who are unaware of its sanctity. There is a danger that the gods will leave their mountain abodes in Golok. Digging of yartsa is also blamed for worsening quality of the pasturelands, along with fishing, building hydroelectric power plants and gold digging. Yartsa and gold mining are often mentioned
simultaneously as examples of environmentally destructive and economically exploitable politics of today’s China, which running counter to the long term interests of the Tibetan population. Herders comment on the worsening state of the grassland: “I was born here, I live here, and will die here, and through my life I could see that since yartsa digging started the horses, yaks, and sheep are getting weaker and weaker. Gold, yartsa, pimo – all of that should stay in the ground for the benefit of animals, and all people.” Yartsa is eaten by herds, the herders say, and it influences the whole grassland ecosystem. Eliminating it from the grassland not only drains grassland resources. Digging yartsa by careless gatherers leaves holes in the ground that contribute to the on-going deterioration of the pasturelands.

It is important to stress, however, that whereas researchers to Golok 10 years ago reported only a small percentage of nomads engaged in yartsa harvesting, today’s situation is different. The herders criticize the gatherers for destroying their land, but a growing number of nomads either gather yartsa on their land by themselves or lease the land to outside gatherers. Given the regulation banning entry to Golok TAP to outside gatherers, leasing the land under yartsa gathering was illegal in spring 2007. The yartsa “underground” had (and one can

Figure 5: Evening at the checkpoint. On such dirt road checkpoints like this one everybody knows everybody else, and checking identity cards is not necessary. (Photograph: ES)
expect that it will still have) a vital life in local society. Complaining of the gatherers' poaching of the nomads' resources is more a figure of speech in a situation where the nomads themselves benefit highly from the yartsa gathering.

The official argument behind the new policy of limiting the number of yartsa gatherers in Golok speaks of environmental protection. The same concern, although less grounded in the modern scientific discourse on environmental protection, is repeatedly expressed in everyday discourse in Golok. However, the new policy finds its critics also among those who speak of the environment. “If they want to preserve the environment, they should start by closing the gold mines in Martod,” a local doctor said. Among the yartsa traders who come from a nomadic background, the closing of Golok TAP to outside yartsa collectors was welcomed with mixed feelings: gratitude by some, discontent by others. “For us traders, it’s pretty bad that they banned entry to Golok for other gatherers, as it simply causes less yartsa to reach the market. But for herders it’s better – nobody walks through their pastures and destroys the delicate and scanty grass,” Dube (gDu bhe), a middle-aged middleman, commented on the recent policies.

However, the strictness of control procedures varied. So did the consequences of breaking the ban on entry to Golok grasslands. New employees coming to Golok to take their job in a restaurant or at a building site were asked for papers and guarantees from the employer. People caught on the way to the pasturelands, and having no identity cards and no way to explain their presence in a given county, could expect to be sent back from whence they came. And the “illegal” hunter caught on the way back from the grassland would be fined, the harvest could be confiscated, or the driving license taken. Yet the varying degrees of control procedures and the help of well paid intermediaries made evading control possible, and there were people who managed to pass through control posts. “Money can buy everything,” a local community leader says, suggesting that the checkpoint workers and owners of the land have an informal deal on charging outsiders for coming to Golok.

The formal closing of Golok did not entirely exclude people from other areas from hunting yartsa in the prefecture. Nomads gathering yartsa on their land sometimes see a few silhouettes far away on the mountains. And although their first comment is: “Thieves! Must be some Chinese” (Rkun ma! Gya chazyg yin kha zyh re; rKun ma! rGya cha tshig yin kha zig red), not only Chinese and Huis travel to Golok for the yartsa cropping season. Nomads with abundant pastures sell the right to harvest fungus on their land to other diggers. “I am the owner of the land and I decide how much the fee is,” a seventy-two-year-old nomad says, and mentions sums ranging from 2,000 to 4,000 yuan per gatherer who will set up a tent in “his” mountains and hunt for yartsa for the whole season. “I have
people from Guinan, Guide, Hualong ... the nomad goes on, saying how far the fame of his yartsa resources extends.

Being unable to estimate the possible income from yartsa hunting, a collector from outside the prefecture might be put in a difficult situation, like Amchok (A mchog) and his two relatives, who arrived from Drango (Brag 'go) in Sichuan, and found a Golok nomad who sold him the right to collect yartsa on his land for 1,800 yuan. After several days in the mountains, it turned out that either the gatherers had no luck or yartsa didn’t grow there. Amchok’s wish to cancel the unwritten contract with the nomad met with a claim for 6,000 yuan compensation for all three members of the unsuccessful team. The nomad took Amchok as a hostage, and let the others return home to fetch money, threatening their families with phone calls and warnings that the hostage would be carried away, to a place where nobody could find him.41

THE NOMADS AND TRADERS

Tibetan nomads and traders are the first link that opens a flow of yartsa from Tibet via mainland China to the outside world. The yartsa trade allows nearly everybody with modest capital to invest and do business. Among the Golok middlemen there are many life stories told. Some traders, such as Lhundup (IHun sgrub), owned a herd of eighty yaks just a decade ago, but decided to sell the animals and move to town to look for a better future for his family. Others, like Yadon (Yar dung), continue their herders’ life, saving money from selling animal products to invest in the yartsa business. Yadon moves to the town for every yartsa season and hires seasonal workers to herd his sheep and yaks when he is away. Last year he hired the herdsmen for a longer period and went on holiday to Malaysia with his business partner. Riga (Rig dga’), a fifty-year-old trader, the only son of his elderly mother, lacking the hands in his household to do the herding jobs, entrusted his animals to his cousins and opened a clothing shop, doing yartsa business on the side. For the owner of just a tiny herd, unable to save money from trading livestock products, or having no animals at all, like Sherten (Sher bstam), an ex-monk, there is only one solution: borrow money. Sherten borrowed 3,000 yuan at 5 percent interest and for the first time in his life bought yartsa to sell later at a profit. Bank loans are not the most common source of capital to invest in the business. Most traders claim to have other sources of money, and Hui Muslim friends are much sought after when a loan is needed.

For many Tibetan middlemen, entering the yartsa trade was the first step into business other than the occasional selling of animal hides, meat or milk products.
Becoming a professional trader is a long process. Geleg (dGe legs) says he started his business when he was twenty. He drove a motorbike to nearby nomad settlements to buy yartsa. Having just 2,000 yuan to invest, he had to sell the fungus on the same day he bought it, and his profit was no more than 2 jiao on a piece of fungus. Now, seven years later, he has an elegant jeep and two houses, and usually buys and sells 30–35 gyama of yartsa in a year, getting 6,000 yuan of profit on every gyama of fungus that goes through his hands. But this is nothing compared to the profits of Muslim traders, he says. Tibetans just do not have enough money to keep yartsa for a long time and to buy large quantities. In Geleg's estimation, Muslims are much more commercially minded than Tibetans; although 6,000 yuan of profit is enough for Geleg, he knows that his Muslim partner will get a 100 percent larger profit on every gyama of the same fungus.

Temdrin's adventure with the trade started soon after de-collectivization. Being a child of a large family, he decided to take a business challenge and left his share of state-allocated animals to his brothers. Today he is a prominent local figure, and his life story has been published in a local newspaper:

"From 1982 I was going all over Golok and buying medicinal plants, mainly yartsa. In the beginning the profit was good, so I invested heavily in the business. In more than 15 years there were many ups and downs in managing the business, and sometimes I even had to worry about my food and clothing. Then I came to Machen County and borrowed 200 yuan from somebody. In the morning I was buying hides and wool from nomads and selling them to others in the evening, and I tried to enjoy life even though I earned very little money. In five years of making small profits, I saved up 20,000 yuan. The profit from livestock products wasn't bad, but was changeable, and it was hard to make any prediction (…), so I was afraid it would go like that yartsa business before. I told myself I needed to open a shop that would give me more stability in business. I imagined that opening a Tibetan products shop would be the right idea, and from 1993 I invested 20,000 and opened a shop. The shop soon became very popular, and in one year I got a profit that doubled the invested money. The array of products was slowly getting bigger, I became rich and got a position in the county. In 2001 I got a good opportunity to invest in property development in Dawu, invested 200,000 yuan, and built a three-storey hotel. (…) I am a happy man."43

Unlike many Tibetan middlemen, Temdrin (rTa mdrin) is a full-time trader. He buys and sells yartsa all year round. In winter, when the fungus runs scarce at the market, its price rises, and anyone who does not need an immediate income and can take a risk in business may get a much higher price for his spring harvests: in December 2007 the price rose to 77,800 yuan per gyama of the best quality
fungus. “I lost my money not once but twice as the prices can change between morning and evening several times,” the traders often boast about the risky nature of their business. The future prices of *yartsa* are hard to foretell. They rose as rumors circulated that the Chinese swimmers who won gold in the diving contest in May 2007 did so as a result of their intake of *yartsa* dietary supplements. One may expect that the successes of Chinese athletes at the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing will offer another proof of the marvelous effects that *yartsa* products can have on the human body’s condition. Therefore, Temdrin cannot realistically foresee the end of the *yartsa* business, and he says that the fungus prices will rocket from the Games year onwards as demand rises. Yet contrary to expectations, 2008 brought a worsening of the *yarsta* market. Steady growth was cut short by travel restrictions and the general economic downturn.

**Why *Yartsa***?

For the discussion on the economic processes in contemporary Golok and the other *yartsa* cropping parts of Tibet, medicinal qualities of caterpillar fungus are relatively unimportant. The medicinal reputation of *yartsa* is reflected in its price. The principal value of the fungus for its collectors and traders is its money-generating power. The economic processes that dictate *yartsa* prices are hard to follow for an average *yartsa* gatherer at the local level. It is common knowledge that guests at expensive restaurants in Shanghai can order a special meal with *yartsa* that – seen in the context of prices and salaries in Golok TAP – costs astronomic sums of money. But hardly any of the gatherers are aware that in the Tibet Hotel in Beijing, for example, *Pure Yartsa Capsules* by Tianzhi cost up to 9,000 yuan for 50 g, and 2,800 yuan for the 12 g set. In a stylish hotel hall they are sold among elegant shirts, shoes, cigarettes and many Tibet-related souvenirs from China. Exposed in glass display cases, on red or gold velvet, *yartsa* triumphs in this collection of products recommended as a visiting-card of today’s China. In Poland, to buy *Kordiseps Mycelium Capsules*, advertised on the post office flyer quoted in the introduction, one should be ready to pay 160 PLN (around one-tenth of a teacher’s average monthly net salary) for a forty-day package. The price would increase if the product were officially approved – not having state approval, it circulates in the time-honored communist tradition of selling on the black market.

In the common discourse in Golok, there are several examples of *yartsa* usage. It is usually claimed to be a good medicine against cancer and aging; as the Golok nomad says: “I don’t know what the Chinese use *yartsa* for. I’ve heard its good for cancer, and when hair goes gray it helps to restore the color.” However,
it is difficult to explain why yartsa is in such demand in mainland China. One explanation is that people there have much spare money and can spend it on perhaps useful but not absolutely necessary products, like yartsa, to show their prestige and financial status. Doctors of traditional Tibetan medicine can comment more extensively on the trade and the reasons of its fast growth. They, too, albeit admitting historical usage of yartsa by Tibetans, see the fast growing demand for yartsa as a phenomenon more of social and economic, rather than “medicinal,” character. “The quality of yartsa will never match its price,” a Tibetan doctor from Golok says, explaining the reasons why demand for yartsa seems to grow endlessly. “Nowadays people have lots of money and think of having a good life. Men, especially businessmen, want to retain their sexual potency, and yartsa has a good influence on sexual enthusiasm. They want to stay forever young, as if they were always thirty. Epidemics like SARS in 2003 also remind people of the need to take care of their health. And eating yartsa helps to build up the immune system and prevents illness,” the doctor says. But in his own medical practice, yartsa is not much used. “It has mostly nutritional value, and not any specific medicinal one,” he says. “But this is its power, that it can be used for everything, even put in expensive meals in Chinese restaurants in Shanghai. The Chinese pharmaceutical companies will use it more and more, people will buy more yartsa products. The demand will rise, and the number of yartsa at the market will drop, so the prices will go up, and the market will not collapse soon. Especially since attempts to make synthetic yartsa have not brought satisfactory results so far,” the Golok doctor explains. The yartsa gatherers in Golok might be unfamiliar with the product markups in Beijing or other commercial centers in China, but the buyers from distant metropolises also have very limited knowledge of the processes that go on in the Golok economic context, thus they have to go through middlemen in making business with the faraway land of Tibetan nomads.

**Conclusion**

When the next yartsa season is over, the situation returns to normal. The price of everyday goods goes down, and dozens of beggars from other parts of Tibet and China who migrate to Golok to earn money by begging during the yartsa season go back home. But the long-lasting effect of the yartsa boom will be visible longer. Czesław Miłosz, a Polish poet and 1980 winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, wrote about life under a state-planned economy: “[i]n the countries of the New Faith […] the liquidation of small private enterprises gives the streets a stiff and institutional look. The chronic lack of consumer goods renders the
crowds uniformly grey and uniformly indigent." Yartsa collecting and trade has contributed to the economic development of Golok, and the prestige consumer goods, shining motorbikes and Buddhist temples that have mushroomed in the last decade are signum temporis, a sign of the more prosperous times.

Yartsa is a cash crop of Golok and as such its importance for the area is hard to overstate. In the last fifty years the Golok highlands were affected both by economic engineering administered on pastoral communities by the Chinese state authorities and by the declining productivity of the land resulting from the gradual drying of the Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau, increasing population pressure and the debacles of central planning. In a modern China that tries to successfully combine its socialist heart with the capitalist call to get rich, and to start business and build the welfare of the nation by taking up commercial initiatives, there are not many possibilities to step on the path of a semi-capitalist life, especially in such “Wild West” lands as Tibet. Yartsa hunting is a relatively easy and popularly available means of supplementing household income, and it easily finds its place in a timetable of pastoral activities in Golok. The increasing involvement in the “commodity economy” pushes the Golok pastoralists into cash-earning activities, among which yartsa gathering is relatively accessible. Being a reserve for an individual’s or household’s savings – in cash or in kind – yartsa serves as cash for a rainy day, an insurance that people can turn to when animal epidemics, natural disasters, economic failures or political disturbances – of the kind that were frequent in Golok in the last century – occur. The seasonal yartsa rush that breaks out in the area annually shows the newly gained importance of yartsa in the economic and social life of Golok.

While on a general level the yartsa outflow to China awakens patriotic sentiments and a feeling of regret that the main benefactors of yartsa business are outside Tibet, on the individual level the yartsa trade seems to offer a chance to change one’s life for the better. For those that have decided or been forced not to continue their lives as nomads, the yartsa business is a chance to start a new life in town. The same holds true for all sorts of people displaced from their customary lifestyles and places of origin. Golok towns are slowly getting crowded with resettled nomads being relocated and urbanized according to the state’s directives on the environmental protection of pasturelands. For them – deprived of their conventional livelihood, having no herds and no “urban” job – to dig yartsa is a question of economic survival. Resettlement policies are explained by the nomads as a tool to protect the grassland. According to this logic, a ban on digging yartsa would be a natural consequence of new environmental directives issued by the state and prefectural authorities. However, the resettled nomads can still come back to their pasturelands in spring and collect the fungus that
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grows on their land. "If they ban digging altogether, we'll be hit hard," says one of many resettled nomads whose family yearly income depends to a large extent on yartsa collecting. The nomads resettled into Golok towns can still benefit from the yartsa trade, albeit by being shifted into a changed set of social relationships and networks, sometimes far from their home area. In any case, the formation of a new entrepreneurial class in Tibetan societies in China is of crucial importance for these people's economic, cultural and political survival.

The commercial activity around caterpillar fungus digging and selling in the last two decades far exceeds any of the previous stages in this species' history in the area. The increasing demand for yartsa raises the competition for its resources. Prices paid for yartsa, and prefectural and township strategies for controlling the flow of fungus out of Golok, reflect this situation. With the tightening of control over the number of gatherers entering Golok each season, individual creativity and local arrangements functioning beyond the control of the state flourish. Future yartsa scenarios may vary. The available material is obviously too scanty to permit political speculation as to what shape future yartsa policies will take.

One may wonder though: did the Golok authorities listen to the local voices of dissent about large numbers of fungus diggers flooding the prefecture, which Susan Costello reported? This sensitivity to civil disobedience would be a big achievement, not only in China. Closing access to pasturelands to non-residents and instead allowing the locals to benefit from their land, letting them employ harvesters working on "their behalf," seems to be the solution that many nomads in Golok would favor today. To devise a policy that benefits everybody is undoubtedly a hard task, and experiments take time to work. To see if this experiment will bring more failures or more successes, one needs to monitor future outcomes in the region.

Notes

1 This paper was envisioned as a field research report. It was my priority to make it a vivid "flesh and blood" description of the cultural and social milieu of everyday life in Golok, as dominated by yartsa harvesting and trade. "It's now or never," as Elvis Presley sang, to try to describe the field and the people with this down-to-earth approach; I also tried to capture some of the atmosphere of the place — in a way that Richard Hoggart did so bravely in his book on British working-class life. Great thanks go to my friends from Xining and Golok TAP, to AC, AL, G and his family, Tsl. and Ch, as well as Agata Bareja-Starzyńska, Adam Koziet, Bianca Horlemann, Andreas Gruschke, Emily T. Yeh, Roman Fraćkowski and Tina Niermann. I am grateful to Brandon Dotson for going through my paper so carefully, and to my anonymous reviewer whose comments helped me improve the text. Special thanks go to Mona Schrempf, Toni Huber and Melvyn C. Goldstein for their constructive criticism and never-ending encouragement in my
studies. Finally, my warm thoughts go to RAS and IJ. The research was conducted under the auspices of the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, China.

2 In this paper, Tibetan words are transcribed according to local pronunciation. The Wylie transcription in brackets indicates the Tibetan spelling. When two names for one thing are in use, both are given: the first one used in gorked (mGo skad), Golok dialect, and the other one in a dialect used by the Wanah (sBra nag) part of the population of Golok TAP.

3 "Tibet" means one thing for the government of China, and another for the Tibetan Government in Exile. While the former claims that "Tibet" stands only for the area within the borders of the Tibet Autonomous Region, the latter says that this name could be applied also to the ethnically Tibetan areas that form so-called Tibetan Autonomous Prefectures within today's Qinghai, Gansu, Yunnan and Sichuan Provinces of China. Whatever the intricacies of local politics in Golok in the pre-PRC past might have been, there is no doubt today that Goloks and Wanahs in Golok TAP declare themselves to be Tibetans, and their land part of Tibet. In this paper, "Tibet" will be used to identify both the TAR and the TAPs in those four Chinese provinces.


5 Tibetan Center for Human Rights and Democracy (TCHRD), "Commotion between two Communities lead to Arrest of 30 Tibetans" (July 2007), 4.

6 Conflicts over yartsa were highlighted during the horse racing festival in Lithang (Li thang), Sichuan, in August 2007, when a nomad, Rongye Adrak, stepped on to the stage, grabbed a microphone and gave a speech to the thousands of nomads who had gathered to watch the horse racing. He demanded the Dalai Lama's return to Tibet, and the release of the Eleventh Panchen Lama. But he started his speech by calling the nomads to stop getting into petty fights among themselves for land and gathering caterpillar fungus. See Maria Kruczkowska, "Setki aresztów anycz po awanturze o Dalajlamę," Gazeta Wyborcza 181 (04.08.2007-05.08.2007), 9. For more examples of conflicts over harvesting of yartsa, see also Kunga Lama, "Crowded Mountains, Empty Towns: Commodification and Contestation in Cordyceps Harvesting in Eastern Tibet" (MA Thesis: University of Colorado at Boulder, 2007), 96-99. One informant told me that in 2007 in one of the mountain “villages” in Machen (rMa chen) County, a Hui yartsa gatherer trespassing the local nomads' yartsa fields was killed in a fight (personal communication, 1 June 2007).

7 It is difficult to decide when exactly yartsa gunbu found its way into Tibetan materia medica. The doctors in Golok point out that yarsta, under the name dabshid (da byid), was mentioned already in the rGyud bzhis, the fundamental treatise of Tibetan Medicine: gYud thog yon tan rgon po, bDud rtsis snying po yon lag brya yed pa gsang ba mang ngag gi rgyud (Ziling: mTsho sngor mi dpe skrun khang, 2002), 74. Other historical sources of information about yartsa used by medical practitioners in Golok are 18th-century writings of De'u dmar bstan 'dzin phun tshogs, gSo rig gces bya rin chen phreng ba (Ziling: mTsho sngor mi dpe skrun khang, 1993).


10 Personal communication, Jigdril, 18 May 2007.

11 The three rivers are Machu (Yellow River, Haange), Drichu (‘Bri chu; Yangtze) and Dzachu (Dza chu; Mekong).
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12 With reference to the prefectoral capital of Golok, the primary name used in this discussion will be Davu because that is the most widely known name for the place. Locals refer to it simply as “Golok” too.

13 Among the other purported reasons for the desertification of Martod grassland, digging medicinal plants reaches 31.8 percent in statistics published in “Bod kyi skye kham la ba dang bre lha blik lag deb.” In rMa rgyal ganga thigs (rMa yul skyes kham khor yug srung skyob bsogs pa, nd.), 11. “Unchecked digging up of herbs” is one of the main causes of land degradation in China according to state officials; see Dee Mack Williams, “The Desert Discourse of Modern China,” Modern China 23.3 (1997), 335.


18 This quotation from a Darlag county official, see “100,000 Tibetan Nomads Ordered to settle in Towns,” http://www.sinodaily.com/reports/100000_Tibetan_nomads_ordered_to_settle_in_towns_999.html (accessed 1 May 2007).

19 Personal communication, Machen, 21 May 2007.

20 “Scientific planning” was also a postulate to be employed by herders in Inner Mongolia. This, as well as other ideological conceptions revealing the state’s view that the pastoralists’ way of managing herds is economically irrational, is described by Williams: Dee Mack Williams, Beyond Great Walls: Environment, Identity, and Development on the Chinese Grasslands of Inner Mongolia (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 31, and has many parallels in Tibet. See for example Daniel J. Miller, “Tough times for Tibetan Nomads in Western China: Snowstorms, Settling down, Fences, and the Demise of Traditional Nomadic Pastoralism,” Nomadic Peoples 4.1 (2000), 83–109. Contemporary China’s concern with employing science in herd management has its roots in the 1920s Soviet Union: “its belief in scientific planning of an economy and the state ownership of industry, and its obsession with heavy industrial and military development as the keys to state power,” see W.C. Kirby, “China’s Internationalization in the Early People’s Republic: Dreams of a Socialist World Economy.” In The History of the PRC (1949–1976), ed. Julia Strauss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 22. It has been elaborated by contemporary authorities of the PRC that have widened the spectrum of applicability of centrally administered science to the realm of the Tibetans’ herd management. On the other hand, calls for “development” are often a key phrase used by modern states to execute policies running contrary to the citizen’s benefit. This can be observed in many countries of the West, too. Pro-development
and pro-environmental rhetoric in contemporary China can be observed in state pronouncements in Qinghai, where the two change places easily depending upon often temporary priorities.

Emily T. Yeh, “Tibetan Range Wars: Spatial Politics and Authority on the Grasslands of Amdo,” Development and Change 34.3 (2003), 500. However, my own informants from Golok often say that fencing resulted in decrease in conflicts over land in the area. They tend to agree with conclusions of Fernanda Pirie: “Feuding, Mediation and the Negotiation of Authority among the Nomads of Eastern Tibet,” Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology. Working Papers 72 (2005), 22.

Medicinal plants were one of the export “products” of Tibet in the first half of the 20th century: Robert B. Ekvall, Cultural Relations on the Kansu-Tibetan Border (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 6. In those days, as Ekvall writes: “in a sense, the Chinese and Moslems of the region [were] the intermediaries in the trade between the Tibetan country and the outside world.” The situation as he describes has parallels with today’s business relations in Golok (see further in this paper).


It is hard to verify the stories of specialized yartra season bands that roam the land and rob the yartra gatherers’ houses/tents when the owners are away. However, yartra season babysitters have not only to look after the family’s children but also the property; the neighboring household being sometimes in the next mountain valley. It is not surprising, therefore, that the salary of a male babysitter can reach up to 3,000 yuan. This indicates the size of the income coming from yartra harvesting in nomad households that can afford such a salary within its monthly budget.

A weight measure used for yartra is gyama (rgya ma) or jin (Chin.), an equivalent of 500g.

Plants that grow in the Golok highlands and are used in traditional Tibetan medicine include: ranje (ra mnye; Polygonatum circrifolium), nyeling (mnye shing; Asparagus sp.), wa chy (ba spra; Mirabilis himalaica), hcholamar (sro lo dmar po; Rhodiola sp.). See Christa Kletter and Monica Kriechbaum, Tibetan Medicinal Plants (Stuttgart: Medpharm Scientific Publishers, 2001); Tsewang J. Tsarong, Tibetan Medicinal Plants (Kalimpong: Tibetan Medical Publications, 1994).


The common belief among Golok Tibetans says that Muslim cooks put human ashes, bath water or the urine of an imam into meals served to the Tibetan guests in order to convert then to Islam. For more on tales about the Muslims told in Golok and other areas of Amdo, see Andrew M. Fischer, “Close Encounters of an Inner Asian Kind. Tibetan-Muslim Coexistence and Conflict in Tibet, Past and Present,” Crisis State Programme Working Papers, 68 (2005), 19.

The Huis’ entrepreneurial talents were recognized as an aspect of their ethnic identity and a part of their minority culture during the period of the minzuethnic minorities identification; see: Dru Gladney, Dislocating China: Reflections on Muslims, Minorities, and Other Subaltern Subjects (London: Hurst, 2004), 87. This interesting example of ascribing to an ethnic group such a “secular” ethnicity marker as being gifted businessmen suggests there might be similar state-recognized assumptions concerning other ethnic groups’ business abilities or disabilities. These assumptions might be reflected in people’s self-image. Tibetans often complain of Muslim businessmen’s dominance in the market. The number of souvenir shops run by Huis in tourist sites such as Kumbum, small scale “catering” business for Tibetan monks at lunch time in monasteries and the lack of similar petty businesses run by Tibetans is explained as a result of the Tibetans’
supposed bad luck in business and their disinterest in earning money. Such opinions expressed by Tibetans themselves would be surprising for authors who travelled to Tibet in the past and praised the Tibetans’ trading skills: see for example Bell’s accounts: “[a]s with the Arabs from of old, so with the Tibetans. Many are devoted to robbery, all to trade, while religion overshadows everything,” Charles Bell, _The Religion of Tibet_ (1931; reprint, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 2000), 7.

31 Andrew M. Fischer, _State Growth and Social Exclusion in Tibet. Challenges of Recent Economic Growth_ (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2005), 166.


33 Not only from Qinghai (Yushu, for example), but also from Yunnan Province and the Tibet Autonomous Region; see Daniel Winkler, “Yartsa Gunbu – _Cordyceps Sinensis._ Economy, Ecology and Ethno-mycology of a Fungus Endemic to the Tibetan Plateau,” www://ourworld.cs.com/danwink/id_m.htm, accessed 1 May 2007), 13. Such yartsa digging was also mentioned to me in personal communication from Andreas Gruschke (1 December 2007), Michelle L. Olsgard (12 August 2007) and local informants (May-June 2007).


35 Toni Huber writes of the practice of “sealing of territory” to protect the local resources, plants included, and to guard against disturbing the local territorial deities in Amdo. Angering them might result in “bringing various kinds of misfortune to the community who lived within their sphere of influence”: see Toni Huber “Territorial Control by ‘Sealing’ (rgya sdom pa). A Religio-political Practice in Tibet,” _Zentralasiatische Studien_ 33 (2004), 142. Some informants from Golok say that if disturbed by members of neighboring non-Buddhist populations, the mountain gods do not turn their anger onto Tibetans unless the outsiders were helped by the Tibetans themselves.

36 The Golok highlands were known for their gold deposits for much longer than the existence of the People’s Republic of China. The Ma clan, which is remembered as so oppressive of the Tibetans in Golok in the first half of the 20th century, was also gold-fever driven. The 1980s saw a minor gold rush in the area. In 2002, there was a ban on all alluvial gold mining in Qinghai, see Tibet Information Network (TIN), _Mining Tibet: Mineral Exploitation in Tibetan Areas of the PRC_ (London: 2002), 26, but local witnesses say that private gold washing is still met at a few sites in Banma.

37 A television advertisement on Qinghai TV, Amdo dialect service, broadcast in spring 2007, showed Tibetans climbing the mountain slopes. They dug yartsa, but did not replace the soil in the resulting hole. The next shot of the short movie showed the desert encroaching on the mountain grassland, and the fertile alpine meadow turned into a barren field of sand. In everyday discussions about the problems arising from yartsa exploitation, it is always the “others” – Han Chinese or Huis – who are blamed for not replacing the soil after digging out the fungus.


39 The people whose stories and opinions are quoted here hide behind pseudonyms taken from the names of popular singers of spring 2007 in Golok. Their music accompanied every interview, and kept its influence on the research and writing process.

40 Guide (Trika; Khri ka) and Guinan (Mangra; Mang ra) are counties in Tsoholo (mtSho lho)/Hainan TAP, Qinghai, approximately 293 and 238 km to Dawu (from the county seats). Hualong (Bayan; Ba yan) Hui Autonomous County in Tsohar (mtSho shar)/Haidong TAP, Qinghai.

41 To read more, see Emilia Sulik, “Tseren’s Last Gold Rush. Tales of yartsa hunting in Tibet,” _International Institute for Asian Studies Newsletter_ 46 (2008), 20–21.
42 One jiao is one-tenth of one yuan; ten fen make one jiao.
43 dPal chen rDo rje, Kha char bu yig khorod nas ’tshar long byung ba’i khros po (Newspaper article, source and year unknown), 1.
44 The official exchange rate was approximately 8.00 yuan for 1.00 American dollar at that time, data from 22 April 2007.
46 In fact, some foreign pharmaceutical companies claim that they have cultivated a Cordyceps that even exceeds the potency of wild yartsa. See for example “Heilpilze: Cordyceps” (Institut für Ernährungs und Pilzheilkunde, available online: http://www.mykotroph.de/pdf/MykoTroph_Factsheet_Cordyceps.pdf, accessed 25 August 2007), 3.
48 The situation is far more complicated than that, and the “campaigns of destruction” – the Great Leap Forward (1958–1961) and the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) – under Mao Zedong, who explicitly called for the conquest and harnessing of nature on the way to achieving China’s “greatness,” highlight many examples of centrally administered mismanagement being a simple failure of imagination. Reservoirs, dams and irrigation projects proceeded from the Soviet school of thinking on the environment. The damage wrought by these often disastrous large-scale projects was exacerbated by deep plowing, fertilizers, eliminating pests and implementing such ideas as described by Becker: “[i]n Qinghai, for example, prison inmates tried to make iron-hard soil suitable for plating by digging little holes and filling them with straw and grass which were set on fire;” Jasper Becker, Hungry Ghosts: Mao’s Secret Famine (New York: Free Press, 1996), 70–82; see also Elisabeth Economy, The River Runs Black: The Environmental Challenge to China’s Future (London: Cornell University Press, 2007), 50 ff. According to some writers, pressure from the central government to increase production is to be blamed for the “four decades of overstocking;” Dillard H. Gates, quoted in Sylvie Dideron and Marie-Louise Beurling, “The Socio-economic Situation of the Herders in Guoluo Prefecture. A Review of Research Conducted under the QLPD.” In Living Plateau: Changing Lives of Herders in Qinghai. Concluding Seminar of the Qinghai Livestock Development Project, ed. Nico van Wageningen and Sa Wenjun (Kathmandu: ICIMOD, 2001), 36. The elderly herders in Golok remember similar examples as those given by Becker from the commune era, when they were ordered to plough the grassland and try to cultivate crops, with no results.
49 A Chinese-English-Japanese language coffee-table book, Qinghai. A Remote Province of China, is not likely to reach the hands of nomads in Golok, but if so, some of them would be outraged to read what follows: “[w]ith the pollution-free ecological environment the highland Qinghai has been planned as the treasure house of the Traditional Chinese Medicines and Tibetan Medicines, including Chinese caterpillar fungus” (emphasis added). Qinghai. A Remote Province of China (Xining: China Travel-Tourism Press, 2004), 82.
50 Human Rights Watch (HRW), “‘No One Has the Liberty to Refuse’. Tibetan Herders Forcibly Relocated in Gansu, Qinghai, Sichuan, and the Tibet Autonomous Region;” Human Rights Watch 19.8 (June 2007), 49.
51 Costello, 94.