

## REVIEW: *TRANSFORMING NOMADIC RESOURCE MANAGEMENT AND LIVELIHOOD STRATEGIES*

Reviewed by Daniel Winkler (Independent Scholar)



Andreas Gruschke. 2012. *Nomadische Ressourcennutzung und Existenzsicherung im Umbruch: Die osttibetische Region Yushu (Qinghai, VR China)*. Dr. Ludwig Reichert Verlag. 504pp, map, notes, glossary of terms & place names, bibliography. ISBN 10:3895006432 (hardcover 136USD).

In late 2012, Andreas Gruschke published a densely packed, 450 page book based on his PhD dissertation, on the transformation of nomad livelihoods in Yushu [Yul shul] Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (TAP).<sup>1</sup> It is volume fifteen of the series of 'Nomaden und Sesshafte (Nomads and Settled People)' published by the Sonderforschungsbereich Differenz und Integration – Wechselwirkung zwischen nomadischen und sesshaften Lebensformen in Zivilisationen der Alten Welt (Special Collaborative Research Center, Difference and Integration: Interdependency Between Nomadic and Settled Life-forms in Old World Civilizations). The background information, rich data, dozens of detailed interviews with former and current nomads, and the findings in this publication are the result of eight years of study, including a total of sixteen months of fieldwork by Gruschke in Tibetan areas of Qinghai Province and neighboring Tibetan areas. This book contains case studies that have never been previously presented, and introduces these highland communities' current situation in a clear, detailed, and discriminating light that is rich in data.

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<sup>1</sup> Wylie equivalents are given in square brackets.

The greatest disappointment with Gruschke's important study of nomads' livelihood strategies is that it is only available in German. There are not even English, Tibetan, or Chinese language summaries. It is surprising that such fundamental sections were omitted. Luckily, reading the multitude of tables filled with detailed data such as household budgets, expenditures, and so on, information can be gleaned with a little effort and minimal language skills. Many of the very interesting verbatim case studies of diverse people with a *drokpa* ['*brog pa*] 'nomad' background sharing their economic life stories exist in English, but are not published yet. It is hoped that many more of the findings of this very detailed study will be made available in English for future reference. This study is a welcome addition to previous studies on the livelihood of communities in Eastern Tibet as published by Manderscheid (1999), Costello (2003), Ptackova (2011), and Sulek (2012), to name a few.

The extensive bibliography, featuring about 900 entries, contains hundreds of English and Chinese titles, the latter including their original Chinese titles and English translations. Furthermore, a map of Yushu and several tables giving place names in, Chinese characters, Chinese Pinyin, Tibetan Pinyin, and Wylie Tibetan, help to clarify the multitude of names available for each location in the study area. However, the common transcriptions of these place names commonly used in maps, research, and reports before Chinese took control are missing.

The main body of the study begins with an explanation of its theoretical concept, integrating the body of research on nomadic livelihood with a focus on issues of socio-economic resilience in the context of livelihood strategy adaptation to local resource availability and ensuing management approaches – especially in nomadic communities as expressed in seasonal mobility. Of special interest are adaptations to spatial resource management and studies of how communities are adapting to the continuous transformation of their environment, be it political, social, economic, or ecological. The geography, ecology, climate, natural resources, and economic potential of the study area in Eastern Tibet, much of it known in Chinese as Sanjiangyuan ziran baohuqu, 'the Three River National Park' is described in detail.

Social and political hierarchies and their history are also analyzed. Gruschke presents monastic institutions that once wielded great power in the region as entities separate from the community. However, it was common practice in the 'old' Tibet for every family to have members that were part of these institutions, and thus they were commonly well integrated in the community. This section is followed by an analysis of the demographic and socio-economic structure of Yushu and pastoral resources.

The core of the publication consists of detailed case studies from eight communities in four very different environments. Each case study elucidates the current conditions – socio-economic, ecological, and so on – and presents the unique circumstances of the region. Furthermore, the current situation and its recent history come alive by first presenting short life stories of selected community members. Through these case studies, the current economic opportunities and challenges are demonstrated and transformational trends become evident. These include increasing migration and participation in non-herding economic activities, for example, wage labor, employment, trade, dog breeding, and especially caterpillar fungus collection. A key component of this chapter is the discussion of how households adjust to change and challenge, and how they try to minimize risks, or fail to minimize the risks.

The first set of case studies are three different *drokpa* communities consisting of traditionally nomadic households living both on the periphery of small towns and out in the vast periphery of the Eastern Tibetan Plateau. The second set of case studies are communities, which Gruschke refers to as being "in the agrarian periphery," that besides herding, also have access to farm land – less than 0.1 percent of Yushu TAP can be farmed, however, areas with farming land have traditionally been important settlements. Out-migration from the communities is crucial for the economic survival of the herders, because limited pastoral resources cannot support the increased population and its demands. The remaining case studies examine households that have left the pastures to make a living elsewhere, the "periurban context" of Yushu, the "urban alternative" of nomadic livelihood in Gyegu [Skye dgu], the prefectural capital of Yushu TAP.

A common thread is how Tibetan nomads must adapt to a continuously changing environment. In the early second half of the twentieth century, nomads struggled to adapt to economic models designed by revolutionaries who were unfamiliar with conditions on the pastoral periphery. Economic liberalization and population growth brought a whole new set of challenges. Although nomads were again allowed to graze pastures based on their traditional knowledge, modernity has transformed nomadic society. The Chinese version of capitalism, a.k.a. "socialism with Chinese characteristics" successfully took root, aided by a booming trade in *yartsa gunbu* [*dbyar rtswa dgun 'bu*] 'caterpillar fungus' (*Ophiocordyceps sinensis*), an extremely valuable myco-medicinal commodity. Gruschke reports that this wild medicinal fungus has become such a valuable commodity in Yushu that the value of the annual harvest in Yushu TAP exceeds the prefectural government's annual budget! This is truly remarkable, especially taking into account that society is dominated by a powerful government sector (see Fisher 2012). The substantial fungal income allows for a variety of adaptations in household livelihood strategies. Most local households base their economic survival on *yartsa gunbu* income, making themselves very vulnerable to poor harvests or a price crash. Without the fungal industry, many households that are new to an urban setting and whose members often lack the skills to compete in an urban employment market, would be unable to sustain themselves. Many households that have recently settled in small towns or in Gyegu still revisit their homelands to collect caterpillar fungus. Still others use the profits from the *yartsa gunbu* trade to establish themselves successfully in a new small town or urban environment.

In sum, Gruschke demonstrates that *drokpas* cope successfully with continuous change and have diversified their livelihood strategies as a response to a multitude of external and internal pressures.

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## NON-ENGLISH TERMS

*drokpa*, 'brog pa འཇོག་པ།

Gyegu, Skye dgu རྩེ་དགུ།

*pinyin* 拼音

Qinghai 青海

Sanjiangyuan 三江源自然保护区

*yartsa gunbu, dbyar rtswa dgun 'bu* དབྱུང་ལྗོངས་དགུན་ལུགས།

Yushu, Yul shul ཡུལ་ཤུགས།