



Summer Grass, Winter Worm
July 2005

I was showing my work at the Fungus Federation's yearly fair in Santa Cruz, California, when a tall, young man named Todd Stagnaro came up and started chatting. He mentioned he was learning Mandarin Chinese as well as a couple of dialects of Tibetan. He also said that if I felt so inclined, he would be interested in a mushroom hunt with me in some remote parts of Tibet. Wow, I thought, what an opportunity! Within a few months I went from planning to plane tickets to packing, and we met in Xining, China, to embark on our journey.

We timed the trip so we could see the Jyekundo Horse Festival as well as the *Cordyceps* markets in some of the more remote villages. Todd had planned that we would travel south from Jyekundo to the sacred lake Yilhun Lhatso, Manigango, Derge, and return. There would be several possibilities to hunt for mushrooms on the way south and then later on the trip back.



Above and below: Jyekundo Horse Festival



Tibetan yaks

I was very interested in the culture and local industry that revolves around *Cordyceps sinensis*. Both Xining and Jyekundo had large outdoor markets with buyers, sellers, and onlookers. They were very attentive to the quality, size, and price of the highly sought after fungus-infected moth larvae (right and pg. 94).



Cordyceps sinensis sidewalk market

On our return trip from Derge, we had hired a car and driver to take us back to Manigango and the nearby Lake Yilhun Lhatso. We had just come over a 16,000 ft. pass when we saw many groups of Tibetan Buddhists standing by the roadside in the rain. We found out that there was a High Lama coming our way. Many of these groups would slow us down and look into our car just to see if the Lama was with us. Two western travelers were not exactly what they expected, and one group got a big surprise. Todd, a practicing student of Buddhism and a very competent Tibetan-style throat singer, got out of the car, spoke a little Tibetan to them, and then belted out a prayer chant. They all exploded into smiles and laughter.



Todd (far left) entertains Tibetans waiting in the rain for a High Lama



Todd Stagnaro examining a yet-to-be-identified *Boletus*



Tents at the Jyekundo Horse Festival



Derge from above



Cordyceps sinensis (above) is a fungus which infects the ghost moth in its larval stage. It is cited in ancient Tibetan literature and is one of the most revered elements of traditional Chinese medicine. Once it has been harvested and dried, it becomes an important commodity in Tibet (and gets its own billboard, above center). The Tibetan name is *yartsa gunbu*, translated into English as "summer grass, winter worm."



Above and below: *Sersha* (*Floccularia luteovirens*) is a favorite mushroom of Tibet. A Tibetan saying goes: "Why eat yak when sersha is on the table?"



The smile says it all!



Dried *Ganoderma lucidum* in the market



Above and below: Sellers and buyers of *Sarcodon* sp. (Hawk's wing) in Derge



Derge, Tibet



Mushroom soup



Dried *Auricularia* sp.



Public toilet in Xining, China

Manigango
August 2005

Todd said that good karma was with us, and he was right. The only bus going to Manigango for the next week was parked outside our rooms, and was owned by a friend of the hotel manager. When the driver showed up, our packs went into the luggage compartment. We got in and headed to the bus station where everyone got out again. A tense hour or so passed as the booked passengers took their berths, and we waited to see if we were really “in” or “out.” In the end, it was Todd, a Tibetan college girl, two young monks, and me in the back of the sleeper bus, five across, upper level.

By some blessing of fate, I got a window berth, which gave me a little extra room. More importantly, being next to the window gave me some control over letting the cigarette smoke out and keeping the diesel smoke from coming in. However, the back of the bus is the worst for travel sickness, so I took a Dramamine without thinking about it. Speaking of motion, at one point in 400 kilometers of bumpy roads, the five of us levitated at least six inches, knocking my elbow into the upper window jamb. I was happy that at least I landed in the same berth.

After eighteen hours, three tire repairs, and other mysterious stops, we arrived in the dark at the little truck-stop town of Manigango. At the bus stop, an offer of accommodation in a dorm room behind the corner shop seemed a better option than hiking up the road in the dark and rain.

The place looked comfortable enough. Several beds lined the walls of a very woodsy room lit by a typical one-candlepower light bulb. There were old, striped, plastic tarps loosely nailed to the low ceiling, and a sliding wooden door and doorway that were not nearly high enough for either Todd or me. After a dinner of “pour the hot water over the noodles in plastic,” we went to—what should have been—sleep.

Now next to this place was a huge, steel, three-sided billboard that (except for the steel frame) was completely in tatters with a large sheet of metal dangling and banging against the steel frame in the wind. Other than that, bed okay, comforter good, extra blanket nearby, lights out, and now what? Rats.

They used the plastic on the ceiling to get to different parts of the house, and their main highway was right over my head. At least there weren’t holes in the plastic to pass droppings onto my face. After a couple of hours, the rats finished their running around, and I fell asleep, but not for long! Then, it was dogtime!

The goal was to bark as many times as possible as fast as possible until something louder took over. One o’clock, two o’clock, three o’clock, bark! I must have gotten some sleep though because, according to my watch, it was 4:30 a.m. when a woman and two or three men came chattering into the front room next to ours. That covered the dog for about fifteen minutes and then one of the men went out and started up the one-cylinder *Mao-plow** tractor, conveniently parked next to our only window.

After about fifteen minutes of the tractor noise, they all disappeared with the fading “putt-putt” of the engine. As that receded, the dog took over again. Just as I had gotten used to him, the rats returned overhead, searching for breakfast before the owners opened up the kitchen. Sometime after the sun came up, both Todd and I gave up any hope of sleeping.



By the time the bus got rolling, both aisles were filled with extra passengers



**Mao-plow* is the name I use for an engine and accessory system from China that can become, among other things, a tractor, pick-up, or plow

Sleep and accommodation mishaps notwithstanding, it would turn out to be the start of the best day so far. We spent it at the beautiful and sacred Lake Yilhun Lhatso which had many mushrooms sprinkled around large, carved mani stones.

Remember to breathe!
Lake Yilhun Lhatso
August 2005

At 14,000 feet, life flourishes here where most American mountains peak out. It is clean and quiet, the lake is green and cold, and there are mani stones all around the area. It is obvious why the Tibetans consider this a sacred lake. It is really beautiful here.

To add to the beauty, there were plenty of mushrooms. Hunting them meant a lot of energy output and oxygen input. As I was puffing from one mushroom to another, Todd pointed out that two-thirds of the Earth’s breathable oxygen was below us. That meant you had to take three deep breaths where you were used to taking one. If I got down on the ground to look at or photograph a mushroom, I would have to think about my breathing before I tried to get up. “In, out, in, out, in, out. Okay, I think I’m ready now.”



Photographing an *Amanita* at 14,000 ft.



Mani stone by Lake Lhatso



Boletus sp.



Phlogiopsis sp.



Panaeolus antillarum



Lepiota sp.



Sarcodon sp.



Phaeocollybia sp.



Clitocybe sp.