The Future of Young Tibetologists

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Young Tibetologists have a short lifespan: officially, no more than five years, though extensions of this period have been recorded. This tragic brevity immediately evokes the notion of the beautiful and evanescent, for which the art and literature of the host nation of the third conference of the International Seminar of Young Tibetologists are so celebrated. But the barren plateau of Tibet is not known for its cherry blossom, and a brief meditation on the transience of youth, and how that state might lead to maturity rather than annihilation, would be better served by a zoologically more appropriate model.

I am thinking, of course, of butterflies. In the expanding field of Tibetan Studies, which has moved from its roots in philology, history and religious studies to draw in numerous disciplines, such as anthropology and ecology, it is gratifying to see that the domains of lepidoptery and mycology are increasingly being represented.

The Lepidoptera that have particularly attracted the attention of our field are the so-called Ghost Moths (*Thitarodes spp*.), insects that share with young Tibetologists the feature that they remain in a state of transition, as caterpillars, for up to five years, inhabiting underground burrows and subsisting on a diet of roots. The impulse to remain in this condition for any longer is inadvisable and dangerous. The denizens of these burrows are susceptible to serious fungal infections that, in the case of the Ghost Moths at least, may prove fatal. Contrary to the case of Young Tibetologists, the commercial value of fungus-ridden Ghost Moth caterpillars increases vastly once they are dead: their desiccated bodies become an important economic resource for Tibetan villagers and entrepreneurs in the form of *dbyar rtswa dgun 'bu*, and this economic phenomenon in turn becomes a fertile subject of research for Tibetologists, young and old alike.

If the overextended youth of the Ghost Moth carries a stark warning, so too does the life cycle of another Eurasian species—the Large Blue butterfly.

Caterpillars of the Large Blue (*Maculinea arion*) feed not on roots but on wild thyme and gentians, until, after their third moult, they encounter an ant. In response to the ant's exploratory caresses, the caterpillar exudes a sweet substance pleasing to the ant, which then carries it back to its nest. After a winter of hibernation in the labyrinths of the anthill the caterpillar awakens in spring to be milked by the ants and to be fed, in return, on the eggs and larvae of the ants themselves. After nine months spent feasting on this rich harvest the caterpillar pupates inside the burrow, and when the butterfly

hatches out underground in spring it is escorted into the open by the ants, which form a protective circle around it until its wings have dried and it flies heavenward.

Such a complex period of transition is not without risks from which Young Tibetologists would do well to learn. Too many caterpillars of the Large Blue in a single anthill will result in a critical depletion of the ant eggs and larvae on which they feed, and all the caterpillars will starve to death. Or else if, for whatever reason, the caterpillar fails to make the appropriate noises, its hosts will recognise it is an impostor and devour it. In England, the species of ant (*Myrmica sabuleti*) that supported the Large Blue required short grass as its habitat, a condition that was provided until the Middle Ages by an abundance of wild deer. Deer were subsequently replaced by rabbits, that had been introduced by the Normans, but in the 1960s the British rabbit population declined sharply as a result of the disease myxamatosis. The grass grew long and, unnoticed by conservationists, the ants that had shown such hospitality to the Large Blue butterfly were replaced by a hostile species.

In 1979, the Large Blue butterfly was declared extinct in the United Kingdom. The significance of this will not be lost on the present audience: 1979 was, of course, the year that saw the creation of the International Association for Tibetan Studies.

If ever there was a butterfly that might serve as a totem for the Young Tibetologists, it is surely the Apollo. These butterflies—of the Parnassius family—do hibernate for several winters, but in rocks rather than in fungally infested earth, and without dependence on unpredictable partners. Numbering more than 50 species, they extend through alpine regions and across the Tibetan Plateau up to an altitude of 5,600 metres, and great variation can be observed even within a single species. As members of the Papilionidae family they are related to the English Swallowtail (*Papilio machaon*) and to Rajah Brooke's Birdwing (*Trogonoptera brookiana*), but have none of the showiness of these distant cousins. They are perfectly at home in their challenging environment. The wings of some species are darkened to generate body heat from the sun, and the bodies themselves are generously endowed with fat and hair to equip them against glacial conditions. Nevertheless they are cautious, and can be seen on the wing only in bright sunshine. And finally, the much-discussed rising cost of dried Ghost Moth caterpillars pales into insignificance when we consider that single adult specimens of certain Apollo species can sell for several thousand dollars.

Never did evanescence come in more sturdy, vigorous, and well-adapted form, or hold more promise for a shining future.

It is great honour to have been invited to address these few words to you from a

distance. I extend my warmest congratulations to the architects of the International Seminar of Young Tibetologists, and to the organisers of the third seminar in Kobe, and wish all the participants an instructive and enjoyable conference. I look forward to seeing you less than a year from now in Ulaanbaatar.

Fontainebleau
2 September 2012

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