Coping with Commodification: Resiliency and Agricultural Change in an Ersu Tibetan Village

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This paper draws on ethnographic data to explore historical changes of the agricultural system in an Ersu Tibetan village in Central Sichuan that have resulted in the recent commodification of a local agricultural system. The research analyzes qualitative data collected from 24 semi-structured interviews with local villagers to gain a better understanding of local perceptions of agricultural change. Additionally an ethno-history is created from archival sources and a series of unstructured interviews with local government officials. Historically speaking, the ecology of the valley has been resilient to drastic agricultural changes from the period of feudal land tenure organization to collectivization to the more recent market reforms. Many of the socio-cultural features of the local Ersu culture have been a benefit to an ecology coping with more than 60 years of regularly changing agricultural practices. The more recent commodification of agricultural products poses a new challenge to the culture and in turn the resiliency of the local ecology. In this village commodification is diversifying through two separate processes: 1) whole-sale market opportunities and the introduction of new cash crops to the local ecology; and 2) the increasingly popular trend of rural or even green tourism that is developing in China. In the first form villagers are realizing the profitability of certain crops now that they have secure lines of transportation to markets and more accurate pricing information. The second form of commodification finds a family growing popular varieties of vegetables to supply their “Nongjiale”s (or Bed and Breakfasts) with a rich menu. These enterprises often forgo the use of chemical agricultural inputs in order to claim the authenticity of a “Green” establishment. Both forms of commodification are encouraging the diversification of crop variety; none of the new species were previously known to be grown in large quantities. This research reveals that from the perspective of local villagers there are more than just market-based structural drivers influencing these very recent forms of agricultural change. Institutional drivers are seen in policy implementation from different levels of government. There are also cultural changes happening within the village due to increased contact with the world beyond the village. The salience of obtaining income and subsistence from the land is changing from a cultural perspective, especially with regard to transmission of traditional agricultural knowledge. Interviews with the local villagers clearly identify their own perceptions of agricultural change over time. Through such an ecologically based ethnohistory we can understand why villagers are likely to accept commodification as a coping strategy to the changes currently taking place in their community. This research shows that historically the cultural values of the villagers strengthened the resiliency of the local ecosystem. The concern is whether the commodification processes which are having an impact on local cultural values will have a secondary impact on the resiliency of the ecology of the valley.