

## China's latest anti-corruption scandal features Himalayan Viagra fungus worth more than gold

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The fungus grows on fossilised caterpillar and emerges during summer. (Weibo: Xu Yingcheng Tibetan Grass Fragrance)

A Chinese herbal medicine worth more than gold and nicknamed "Himalayan Viagra" is at the centre of the latest [anti-corruption scandal in China](#).

The rare caterpillar fungus — also known as yarsagumba in the Himalayas — has been described as the world's most expensive parasite, selling for up to 400,000 Yuan (\$83,800) per kilogram, according to Chinese state media.

That's around \$80 a gram, more than the current stock price of \$59.40 for a gram of gold.

### Key points:

- The fungus is more expensive than gold and has been used to bribe Chinese officials

The centuries-old aphrodisiac is called Dong Chong Xia Cao in Mandarin, which literally translates to "winter worm, summer grass".

It can only be found in mountainous areas of the Himalayas and has become a rare form of currency used to bribe corrupt officials.

Let's take a look at what exactly Himalayan Viagra is, why it's so expensive, and how it's tied to corruption in China.

## What is Himalayan Viagra?

It's a parasitic fungus that grows on caterpillars generally found 15 centimetres below the surface in earth in the Himalayas.

Classified as a medicinal mushroom, it has been used as an aphrodisiac in traditional herbal Chinese and Tibetan medicines for centuries.



The fungus can fetch for up to \$83,840 per kilo, according to state media. (Weibo: Xu Yingcheng Tibetan Grass Fragrance)

You can find it across Nepal, Bhutan, Tibet and India, but only at some 3,000 to 5,000 metres above sea level.

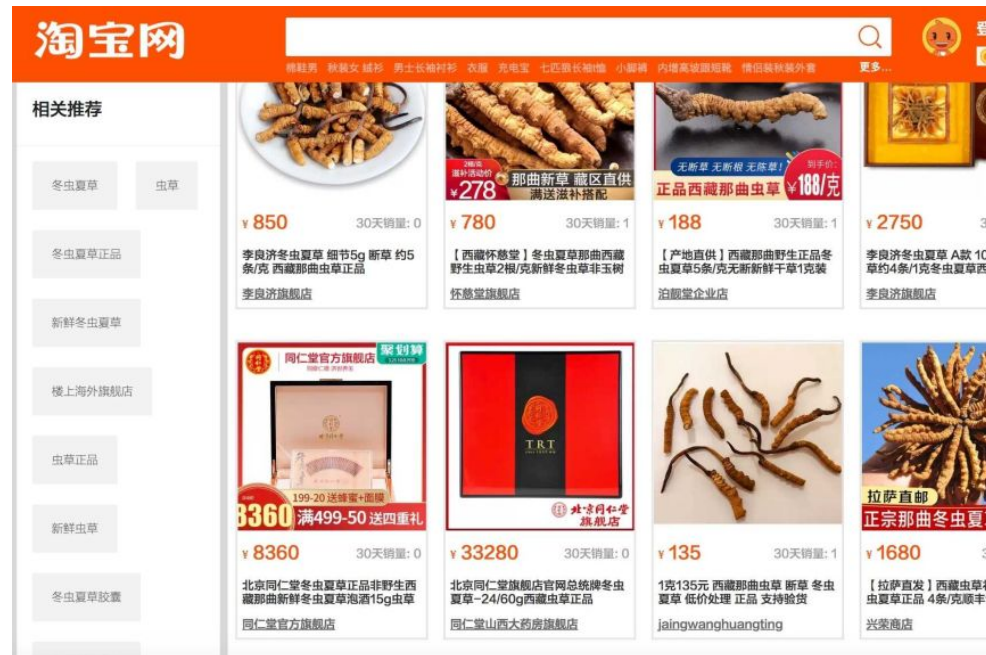
The fungus itself is scientifically known as *Cordyceps sinensis*, and infects caterpillars before eventually killing it.

- It's coveted for a range of benefits including increasing libido and treating cancer
- China's anti-corruption body said it is cracking down on officials being bribed with the fungus

Once infected, it starts growing a dark brown mushroom resembling a stalk from its head.

The mummified caterpillar eventually pokes above ground during the Himalayan summer, and is hand-collected before being sold whole.

## What's so special about it?



The fungus is in high demand and considered as an endangered species in China. (Supplied: Taobao)

It's been described as "biological gold", as claims of its health benefits are wide ranging: from increasing libido, to restoring reproductive and kidney functions, to treating obesity and cancer.

It's also very rare: it only grows below a temperature of 21 degrees, and scientists have found the effects of climate change and over-consumption are making it an endangered species in China.

While there are scientific arguments for and against its alleged health benefits, it has become a status symbol of prestige for people who possess and consume it.

People can prepare it in a number of ways, including making tea or soups from it, or stuffing it inside a duck before roasting.

## How is it connected to corruption?

An anti-corruption body in China's Qinghai Province this month announced a three-month campaign, cracking down on officials being bribed with the fungus.

The statement — released by Qinghai's Commission of Discipline Inspection — said specialist teams were targeting officials exploiting their positions for "personal gain" through the fungus.

It said officials' use of the "special products" for personal gain mainly fell into to four categories: "illegal purchase using public funds, illegal receiving and giving [gifts], illegal possession and use, [and] illegal intervention."

State media has also reported a number of cases in the past of officials [being found guilty of accepting bribes of the fungus](#).

This includes a case uncovered in a 2017 state television documentary, which showed a high-ranking official in Guangdong Province found with 200 kilograms of the fungus worth millions of dollars in his home.