In the struggle for the Tibetan cause, Buddhists are often popularly cited as the only members of a religion who do not resort to violence no matter what the provocation and true stories of incredible bravery, compassion, and patience have emerged from this tradition of non-violence. Yet this version of the story also comes alongside a larger discursive process, one which involves “forgetting” that this struggle for independence involved violent resistance by an all-volunteer Tibetan army of men mainly from the Kham region, called the Chushi Gangdrug. The story of Chushi Gangdrug is an essential part of the story of the development of a Tibetan nationalist sensibility, and its absence from the discourse of public Tibetan exile history tells us as much as what remains in the narrative. For nearly 20 years, at times in concert with the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), Chushi Gangdrug was a key part of the Tibetan nationalist movement and shaped the diaspora community as it is today, although it is not spoken of nor acknowledged publicly by the exile government or the Dalai Lama himself. This dualistic process raises a dilemma for the men who fought as members of this Tibetan Buddhist community, yet who exist in an “arrested history” (or histories) as living proof that contradicts the larger political and social narrative. McGranahan’s ethnography and exploration of these arrested histories gives excellent insight into the larger processes at play in what she calls “history-making.”

June 16th is a date that is marked in the Tibetan community by its ordinariness. Yet on this date in 1958, a golden throne was presented to the Dalai Lama as part of a special Kalachakra ceremony, the highest in Tibetan Buddhism, to bless and protect Tibet and its people during a time of crisis, symbolizing a link between Buddhism, political authority, and a fairly united Tibetan community. This significant event has been cited by some theorists as the “official” start of modern nationalism in Tibet (Dreyfus 2000), yet only a few members of the resistance army gather to celebrate it today. This uncelebrated date, McGranahan argues, is an active rather than passive act of forgetting, an ongoing social process of history and memory that is infused with politics and power, both internal and external to Tibetan society. Instead the community celebrates March 10th, or “Uprising Day,” the day in which the 1959 uprising against the Chinese occupation began and then led to the Dalai Lama’s exile. Chushi Gangdrug also claims to have started the uprising and was responsible for the successful secret escorting of the Dalai Lama into exile in India during that time. While this is “forgotten,” the men of Chushi Gangdrug patiently await the day that their sacrifices in battles against the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and dangerous missions with the CIA will be recognized publicly. Vivian (2010) argues similarly that remembering and forgetting are not opposite concepts, and both acts can be productive for creating and adjusting to new cultural realities, what McGranahan calls “non-linear” histories, and the stories of the Chushi Gangdrug are starting to emerge and influence the official history.
“History is truth and fear. And some lies,” (201) explained one informant in the Tibetan community of Boudha in Nepal. Many social scientists have recognized the strong influence fear can have upon social narrative and history, including the fear of embarrassment and shame to speak a truth which contradicts social norms and hierarchies and the fear of pain (Zerubavel 2006). McGranahan focuses mainly on the “pain of belonging” (Das 1995) as a main driver of the silence which stems from fear in the Tibetan exile communities in India in which multiple layers of regional, class, and religious loyalties and identities, and above all loyalty to the Dalai Lama, control relations and discourses in which an individual operates. Similarly, the Chushi Gangdrug was formed mainly of Khampas, people who self-identified as Tibetan from a region which is now mainly in China’s Sichuan province, and who, McGranahan argues, saw their identity as complementary to the national Tibetan identity rather than opposed to it. However in exile, the nationalist discourse and identity has been highly influenced by the intelligentsia coming from Lhasa and the central province.

McGranahan argues that the image of non-violent monks versus violent reactionaries embody these contrasting and competing discourses. Yet for the men of the Chushi Grandrug they lived both, thus leading to their arrested state. Rather than distancing themselves from Buddhism, the Chushi Gangdrug worked closely with Buddhist leaders for guidance and consciously asserted their defense of Buddhist principles, a major uniting and motivating factor for resistance fighters, and many were former monks. After the war many of the fighters, lay or monk, have been in constant prayer to atone for the sins accumulated during the 1950s and some for over twenty years of resistance. The constant public narrative of non-violence and Buddhist prescriptions against the taking of lives have not helped to ease their consciences.

While the book is exhaustive in its examination of Chushi Gangdrug, McGranahan leaves unexplored one key aspect of history-making indirectly related to her analysis. Collective suffering, which as she argues is an important element of the social process of history-making and the pressure to forget, is taken for granted in her analysis and not questioned on a social or individual basis. Just as history and celebrations can be changed according to shifting power relations, so too can social and individual expressions and treatment of pain. To grieve and suffer too much is perceived as “un-Buddhist” and bitterness would contradict the playful jolliness of the Dalai Lama despite his and his nation’s hardship and does not display the detachment exalted by Buddhism. Das (1995) also examines in her book a theory of pain in which “pain is a condensed expression of the trauma of individuals and can be read as a production of criticism by the body of the injustices to which the individual has been subjected” (1995: 181). While on fieldwork in India with a fellow student in a Tibetan exile community, we observed the intense collective pressure not to acknowledge individual suffering. McGranahan often glosses over and denies this individual suffering as Tibetans themselves do by accepting that “laughter” and prayer are sufficient for coping with many traumatic personal experiences and that “everyone” has had to go through something similar so why should they wallow in their personal misery. To admit severe personal pain would be to admit injustice, selfishness, and contradict Buddhist and communal principles.

McGranahan not only gives an interesting insight into the social construction of history and memory, but also gives the men of the resistance the recognition and release they have been hoping to have for over fifty years without ostracizing themselves from their community. This is an excellent ethnography of history-making, forgetting, and remembering through the
lens of international politics, religious discourse, communal constraints, with excellent
treatment of the multiple processes that go into the “social being of truth” (Taussig 1986).

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