

Narrative Dispossession: Tibet and the Gendered Logics of Historical Possibility

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To possess something is an unpredictable combination of the following: to have, to own, to know, or to control. Land, stories, resources, equanimity, and loyalty are all examples of materially incommensurate things a person might possess. Even without material wealth, for example, one might be said to be in possession of a wicked sense of humor or a good memory or despite all else, one's own life story. Possessing one's own life story, however, is not a given. Thinking of one's life as a story, as something that can be narrated, involves social processes and conventions operative well beyond individual processes of reflection or experience. Narrating one's life, then, is to situate oneself and to be situated in dialogue with society.¹ As such, whether one's narrative is consensual with or contradictory to social norms, such narration signals possession of shared structures of possibility, including normative understandings of history, memory, knowledge, and truth. To narrate one's life is not just an issue of how, but also a matter of *if*.

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¹ On Tibetan Buddhist notions of the self (in relation to Western feminist thought), especially the social constructedness of the self, see Klein 1995. For a discussion of selfhood, religion, and autobiography in Tibet over the last several centuries, see Gyatso 1998.

The question of who narrates what story is fraught with power. In the Tibetan refugee community, narrative possibility is intimately tied up with political hegemony and social reproduction. In pre-1950s Tibet, the audacity to speak historically in the first person, that is, to posit one's self in historical time, was a privilege designated by class and gender in that both history and historiography belonged to the elite, and primarily to the male religious elite.² In exile, however, non-elites have persistently worked to create new narrative spaces. Lay commoners, mostly men, but some women as well, have begun to narrate the historical self as a component of the Tibetan political struggle. This narrative opening puts new sorts of "experience into circulation" on a national and international level.³ Yet, experiences chosen to circulate as representative are not random but instead tend to be those that validate existing power structures as a condition of their existence. As a result, the conversion of experience to narration and the social recognition of such narration are all processes as generative of dispossession as they are of possession.

Sociality always exceeds the individual: the social grounding of the language available with which to narrate the self is perhaps the clearest example of this.⁴ Language always comes to us irrevocably steeped in and formative of the social. As a result, giving an account of the self always involves dispossession in that "no 'I' belongs to itself."⁵ Instead, to narrate the self is to replicate truth as understood in the Foucaultian sense of a "regime of truth" that establishes available parameters of discourse and action.⁶ In *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Judith Butler builds on Foucault to contend that attempts to narrate the self bring dispossession via the operation of the norm and the presence of an addressee.⁷ As she explains: "There is the operation of a norm, invariably social, that conditions what will and will not be a recognizable account, exemplified in the fact that I am used by the norm precisely to the degree that I use it. ... [I]t is also the case that I give an account *to* someone, and that the addressee of the account, real or imaginary, also functions to interrupt the sense that this account of myself is my own.... It is only in dispossession that I can and do give any account of myself."⁸ Dispossession thus both enables and constrains one's ability to narrate. In Tibetan refugee society this ironic position is animated by culturally specific norms and conditions, including those governing gender.

² See Gyatso 1998; and Gyatso and Havnevik 2005. On the politics of autobiography and memory in contemporary Tibet as part of the People's Republic of China, see Makley 2005a.

³ Victor Turner quoted in E. Bruner 1986, 12.

⁴ Poststructuralist scholars make this point especially well; see, for example, Butler 2005; Foucault 1991; and Riley 1988; 2000.

⁵ Butler 2005, 132.

⁶ Foucault 1972.

⁷ Butler 2005, 36.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 36–37.

“When I tell my story, it sounds like hearsay.” With these words, Dorje Yudon opened the formal part of our interview about her exploits leading fighting against the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) in Tibet in the 1950s. Prior to this meeting, I had visited her home in New Delhi several times; I knew one of her sons, a high-ranking politician in the exile Tibetan government, and had interviewed her husband for my research project on eastern Tibet (*Khams*) and the Tibetan resistance army. Our conversation took place with her daughter-in-law in the room and with her elder sister present for part of it. Yet, even with a supportive audience, her story felt like hearsay to her, as if it could be possibly or even probably not true. As I understand it, Dorje Yudon’s experience is subject to multiple processes of dispossession, and as a result, stories such as hers tend to exist in the recesses of narration, in the memory of times long past. Yet, nostalgia did not define her stories; she did not tell them wistfully but instead with the matter-of-fact tone that often accompanies stories that reside in the genre of the untold.⁹ Women’s stories are not the only ones told in this manner. Almost all of the histories I collected about the resistance were told as such, quietly, humbly, and infrequently, if at all. A number of reasons explain this unassuming approach— notions of social status and rank, senses of propriety and humility in discussing oneself, and specifically, a community-wide prohibition on histories of the resistance understood to be linked to the Dalai Lama himself.

From 1956–1974, the Chushi Gangdrug resistance army defended Tibet, Buddhism, and the Dalai Lama from the PLA. In 1949, soon after defeating Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalist army and establishing the People’s Republic of China, Mao announced his intention to liberate Tibet. Tibet, however, was an independent state not seeking liberation or union with China.¹⁰ Nonetheless, in 1950, PLA troops marched into eastern Tibet and by 1951 they were in Lhasa, Tibet’s capital. At the time, Tibet had only a small, weak army, and the Dalai Lama’s government decided to cooperate with the Chinese. After several years of tense, but mostly peaceful relations between the two governments, things disintegrated rapidly when the Chinese introduced sweeping social and political reforms in eastern Tibet. In 1956, villagers began armed protests against the reforms. More and more Chinese troops were sent to the region until eventually many Tibetans fled toward Lhasa where they formally established the all-volunteer Chushi Gangdrug army. Chushi Gangdrug was partially supported and trained by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, and

⁹ On the “availability and amenability” of narrative forms for certain types of memory, see Stoler and Strassler 2000.

¹⁰ Tibet’s political status during this period remains contested. In exile, and among the veterans with whom I worked, the belief that Tibet was an independent country at the time is widely held to be true, even among those who disagree on other core political issues. On this period, see Goldstein 1989; and Shakya 1999.

exists at present in the exile community as a social welfare and political organization.¹¹

Anthropology is in part the analysis of how we “get from cultural forms to lived life and back again.”¹² This process can be charged and contradictory, and is managed through a range of practices including historical narratives. The production of history, including the designation of what is not history, is as cultural a project as it is a political one.¹³ In the Tibetan refugee community, the making of history is key to the management of society. In terms of the Chushi Gangdrug army, I argue that histories of their resistance war have been “arrested” in that they are suspended through a culturally authorized process until a politically expedient time in the future when they may be told.¹⁴ When histories are arrested, they are held in abeyance or told only quietly until a figure of authority such as the Dalai Lama announces their release. Narratives of women and war involve further compromises of historical possibility and temporality through often overlooked, but culturally prescribed ideas about gender. Thus, although resistance histories are arrested in general across categories, I argue here that women are further dispossessed in terms of social recognition of the individual as historical actor.¹⁵ In the exile community, men and masculinity are privileged in ideas of nation and history. The case I want to make, however, is not that women’s histories are suppressed within Tibet in general (they are) or within the Chushi Gangdrug resistance army in particular (they are again), but that the cultural organizing of history in gendered ways affects not just how we record the past, but also how people live their lives in the present, including how people and communities make, remake, and give accounts of themselves.

BLOOD, BULLETS, AND THE TIBETAN ORDER OF THINGS

Bu mo gcig kyang yod ma red—“There was not one woman.” These simple words eliminate women from the Tibetan resistance army. Lobsang Tinley was the first to tell me this, to state that there “was not even one woman” within the Chushi Gangdrug Army. The force of his statement surprised me and over the course of interviews with other veterans, his sentiment and tone was repeated ad nauseam. Others all claimed there were no women in the resistance. But, women had certainly fought in Tibet. Women organized villagers’ uprisings, fought against Chinese troops, and aided the resistance army in invaluable ways. The official Tibetan battlefield, however, was an exclusively male domain. In both theory and practice, in the twentieth century at least, this

¹¹ On the CIA-Chushi Gangdrug connection, see Knaus 1999; McGranahan 2006; 2007.

¹² Geertz 1986, 375.

¹³ On the production of history, see Trouillot 1995.

¹⁴ On the concept and practice of historical arrest, see McGranahan 2005; and n.d.

¹⁵ For more on gender and culturally-available frameworks for narration, see Steedman 1987.

held true since women did not serve in either the governmental Tibetan Army or the grassroots resistance army, Chushi Gangdrug (*chu bzhi gangs drug*). As resistance veterans explained to me, this was due to the particularly dangerous feminine combination of power and pollution.

Tibetan battlefields were places of religion. Soldiers prayed and consulted with their lamas before going into battle. All Chushi Gangdrug soldiers wore a “*tson-sung*” (*mtshon srung*) protective amulet. These vary in shape, size, and form, but are commonly stylized metal boxes of several inches in diameter, with fancy metalwork on the outside, a glassed window for a photograph of a high lama, and an open space inside for blessed objects, prayers, precious pills, religious images, and other sacred items. Blessed objects from the Dalai Lama were considered especially powerful. Once consecrated, Tibetans believe a *tson-sung* will protect against the following: accidents, misfortune, illness, bad dreams, evil omens, dog bite, injury by wild animals, pollution, poison, theft, injury by lightning, failure in business, harm to the harvest, and harm by weapons.¹⁶ Designed to name and thus prevent certain possibilities, this list creates order among otherwise unrelated items by endowing them with shared cultural meaning. In so doing, it works to tame the “wild profusion of existing things,” to guard against “dangerous mixtures,” and to localize and manage potential “powers of contagion.”¹⁷ Although these are the words of Michel Foucault, each could possibly be from the pages of a Tibetan Buddhist text. In Tibetan Buddhism, there is much to be tamed, guarded against, and managed. With this in mind, Chushi Gangdrug soldiers commonly wore their *tson-sung* protective amulets under their clothes, on their skin, and believed the amulets made them bullet-proof in battle.

The Tibetan order of things is deeply Buddhist, hegemonic, and gendered. For Tibetan soldiers, being bulletproof was a cultural state of being, a status reliant on shared knowledge and practice, limitations and opportunities. Each and every soldier, for example, knew clearly those things that, although named as possibilities against which one was protected, were sometimes impossible to gain protection from. On the battlefield, soldiers especially feared female pollution, which they believed could weaken one’s protective amulet or even eliminate its powers. While polluting substances or actions were to be avoided in general, soldiers believed polluting substances of the female body could fully cancel the powers of their protective amulet. Specifically, if a bullet was dipped in women’s menstrual blood, then the protective powers of the *tson-sung* amulet were lost.¹⁸ A blood-dipped bullet would kill you.

¹⁶ See de Nebesky-Wojtkowitz 1993 [1956], 503–37.

¹⁷ Foucault 1973, xv.

¹⁸ Bullets from Russia that had a small amount of gold in the tip were also thought to be especially dangerous. Interview, Jagod Se Dhonyod, Bir, India, 13 Mar. 1999.

Tibetans gauge the cultural distance from the possible to the actual in terms of faith. That is, the possibility of protection and the reality of pollution are grounded in religious teachings converted into lay cultural beliefs. In both potential or realized forms, amulet failure rests on categories of order that shape social and historical possibility. Foucault's notion of the order of things as "the fundamental codes of a culture" is useful in thinking about the ways women both uphold and challenge those codes.¹⁹ As one of the fundamental codes, gender systems are historically contingent, politically engaged means of organizing experience and action in that they order cultural possibilities but do not provide a closed system for action.²⁰ As a result, the conditions of possibility of any particular history, cultural practice, or women's life are always gendered. As Begoña Aretxaga argues, in an ethnography of women's political participation in Northern Ireland, women's practices challenge political discourse and pre-assigned subjectivities.²¹ In working against both unrecognition and misrecognition, women's political practices constitute "disturbing presences that break the order of authorized historical narratives and in so doing raise questions about the nature of such order."²² Dorje Yudon's experiences on the gendered battlefield, for example, raise necessary questions about "real gendered agents in the cultural order."²³ In addition to adding women's voices to existing historical accounts, gendered analyses also reveal the prejudices of prevailing discourses, practices, and interpretive frameworks.²⁴ Our understanding of the past is not only always partial, but also gendered in ways that matter. But, one might ask, don't we already know this?

GENDER, GENRE, NARRATION

We are now two decades out from Joan Scott's classic article "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis" and subsequent book *Gender and the Politics of History*.²⁵ In a 2008 forum in *American Historical Review*, historians weighed in on Scott's contributions in part by showing how a gendered analysis of history is still needed in many historical fields. In the context of Eastern European studies, Maria Bucur explains that while the poststructuralist elements of Scott's argument "resonated with intellectuals in Eastern Europe, the notion that gender itself was a category that needed to be deconstructed as an essential step toward understanding how societies work did not generate

¹⁹ Foucault 1973, xx. My understanding of how the production of gendered subjects is "fundamental to the making of a body politic" is indebted to Stoler 1995; 2002.

²⁰ Ortner 1996.

²¹ Aretxaga 1997.

²² *Ibid.*, 6.

²³ Ortner 2006, 227.

²⁴ Spivak 1988. On how women's stories are often not incorporated into official histories or are incorporated in ways different than are men's stories, see also Canning 2006; Morgan 2006; and Scott 1988.

²⁵ Scott 1986; 1988.

much of an echo.”²⁶ Tibet and Tibetan Studies present a similar example. According to Janet Gyatso and Hanna Havnevik, it is not solely gender that is eclipsed in the Tibetan literature, but women as well.²⁷ As they argue, there are few “women’s autobiographies in the entire history of traditional Tibetan literature. Indeed women are rarely discussed in historical writing at all, except for the briefest mention of someone’s mother, or consort, who not infrequently is nameless or referred to only elliptically.”²⁸ In the Tibetan refugee community, there is neither a literary or popular tradition of women’s history. There is not a special genre of or for women’s history, nor do Tibetan women disguise their histories in other privately or publicly acceptable genres. Instead, most of those with whom I spoke tell their stories infrequently. When they do tell them, it is in the genre of straightforward, first-person historical narration.

Some of these narratives came to me; others I went in search of. In a conversation about his war experiences, a male veteran told me that “bullets dipped in menstrual blood cancel out even the strongest protective powers” of one’s amulet. Although I had already conducted dozens of interviews with other veterans, no one had told me this before. I remember interrupting him to make sure I had understood him correctly. He confirmed what I thought I had heard, and I then went on to ask other veterans about it. Some were clearly embarrassed by the topic, some matter of fact about it, and others enthusiastically went on to differentiate between types of blood and their respective polluting powers. Although the resistance army was clearly a space gendered male, my efforts to collect women’s stories alongside men’s had not seemed all that valuable until this moment. As men narrated the absence of women and their danger as well, it became increasingly clear that cultural contradictions were being played out on women’s bodies. This abstraction clearly contributed to the dispossession of women’s personal narrations of war experiences. In a sharp reading of Lata Mani’s work on sati, Aretxaga explains “the entanglement of gender and sexuality within ... discourses of identity often makes women neither objects or subjects of political dispute, but the actual terrain in which those disputes take place; in this context it is difficult for women to find a space from which to assert their own historical subjecthood.”²⁹

Public discourse on women’s history in exile is almost exclusively reduced to one day, 12 March, or Women’s Uprising Day, which marks a women’s protest in Lhasa in 1959. In many ways, this one day (and its supporting organization, the Tibetan Women’s Association) stands in for the spectrum of

²⁶ Bucur 2008: 1381–82.

²⁷ Gyatso and Havnevik 2005.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁹ Aretxaga 1997, 165, in reference to Mani 1987.

women's history from 1950 to the present. Combined with the troubled historical status of the resistance, and of the difficulty of narrating violence in relation to the Dalai Lama's policy of nonviolence, little public space exists for histories of war. Resistance histories were thus told to me by men and women in private spaces, mostly homes, sometimes in one-on-one conversations and sometimes with small groups of family and friends listening. Their narratives exist between the categories of personal story and national history, with significantly more value assigned to the latter category. In my experience, listeners' understandings of these stories from comments made before, during, and after narration place them into the category of Tibetan history. That is, the audience comprehended the narrative they heard as part of Tibetan history rather than as only an individual's personal history. None of my interlocutors or their audience ever used the terms *rang rnam*/autobiography or *rnam thar*/biography, but instead most commonly referred to the narratives as one of the main Tibetan historical forms—*lo rgyus*/history.

Translating into English as the “tiding of the years,” *lo rgyus* tend to “present a narrative of events, historical, quasi-historical, or even ahistorical, in rough chronological sequence.”³⁰ As narrated to me, *lo rgyus* could be the product of one's personal experience or memory, or knowledge learnt from others. It could be one's personal history or life story as well as what we would consider event or place history; *lo rgyus* has no pre-assigned subject. At times, however, the narrative histories told to me were referred to as *sgrung*, a word that translates as “story,” but which is not assumed a priori to be fictional rather than factual. Indeed, Tibetans who described their own or other's historical narratives to me as *sgrung* consistently spoke of them as factual.³¹ Following the lead of my interlocutors, I use both story and history to refer to historical narratives presumed to be true.³² I differentiate between the two in considering stories to make weaker claims to historical authority than do histories. Counter to both *lo rgyus* and *sgrung* would be Dorje Yudon's invocation of hearsay, which in her usage referenced something that seemed as if it could not be true.

The social production of truth—and in this case, of narrative possibility—rests at least partially on categories of difference. In the exile Tibetan context, difference coheres around axes of gender, sect, region, refugee camp or town/neighborhood, school, generation, and class. Dorje Yudon, for example, is a member of the older generation, one born in Tibet. For this generation, region and sect are overtly meaningful categories, and class is one with muted but

³⁰ Van der Kuijp 1996, 42–43.

³¹ Larry Epstein (personal communication, 2001) suggests that this notion of *sgrung* as factual history (and not just fictional story) might be specific to eastern Tibet as opposed to central Tibet, where *sgrung* are more explicitly associated with fantasy and fiction.

³² Tibetan senses of truth are strikingly post-structural. One sentiment that I heard repeatedly was that there were multiple and changing versions of the truth.

powerful meaning. Class is a contentious issue in the exile community, with power accruing to some based on prior class statuses in Tibet—for example, aristocrats, chieftains, kings—and to others due to class status achieved in exile via personal or familial accrual of financial or social capital. Dorje Yudon comes from an eastern Tibetan chiefly family, one that possessed local power or prestige, but that nationally was not the equivalent of Lhasa aristocrats. In exile, her family has achieved new forms of class status through the government service of their children, most notably through her son Lodi Gyaltzen Gyari, special envoy of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Issues of class rest uneasily in the homogenized social landscape of the exile community, so that class is internally and externally difficult to discuss.³³ But as crucial as class is on many grounds, I found gender to make a bigger difference than class in marking different modes of production or narration of resistance histories.³⁴ By this I mean that women across classes narrated their stories in similar and somewhat contradictory ways, including by acknowledging that these experiences were really not to be narrated at all. Class made a difference in the stories men and women possessed, but not necessarily in their ability to narrate it. Gender, on the other hand, was clearly key in not just what was to be historicized, but how or if one could narrate it.

I was repeatedly struck by the fact that those listening were not familiar with the stories being told except perhaps in the most general of outlines. Even among intimate acquaintances, these stories are not necessarily told, they do not have the well-polished sheen of family stories passed down through the generations or traded over the years between friends. Most Tibetans do not know these histories. At the end of my interview with Dorje Yudon, her daughter-in-law thanked me, saying that although they lived together in the same house she had never heard these stories before. Instead, she said, they usually just sat around “gossiping and talking about the weather.”

WOMEN AND WAR

My conversations about women and war often took place among mixed groups of men and women. Veterans did not always explain the absence of women in the Chushi Gangdrug resistance army as due to the threat of pollution. One man claimed the reason women were not in the resistance army was because it was “too hard, too cold, and fighting was for the men.” His wife immediately challenged him, saying it was women who did hard work throughout the year and who could certainly fight alongside men if needed. He backed down, laughing

³³ Such discussions either take place privately among friends, or publicly but anonymously online (at, for example, such sites as phayul.com.)

³⁴ On this point, Janet Gyatso writes, “Tibetan religious literature was relatively accessible to members of all classes but the same cannot be said of gender. Nuns tended to be poorly educated, and lay women published little” (1998, 282, n. 10).

knowingly at his wife's impassioned intervention, and with an abashed look, agreed that pollution was at the heart of the issue.

In Tibetan society, menstrual blood is one of the most powerful forms of contamination, or *grib*. Anthropologist Toni Huber explains that *grib* "is generally conceived as a form of both physical and social pollution that is associated with various substances and prescribed social practices and relations, as well as with deities inhabiting both the body and the external world."³⁵ In the context of war, the soldiers considered contact with menstrual blood to hold very real physical repercussions.³⁶ Other types of blood—both men's and women's—also posed defilement and danger to the soldiers. A Tibetan soldier, for example, who got a Chinese officer's blood on his uniform was required to throw away his uniform.³⁷ Wounded Tibetan soldiers posed similar dilemmas to battalion members who came to their aid as contact with their blood would weaken the protective amulets of those helping them.³⁸ Yet, only women's menstrual blood fully nullified protective blessings. The highest of lamas, or so the veterans claimed, did not have protection against bullets dipped in or filled with women's menstrual blood.

Danger came from the enemy as well. Tibetans who fought alongside the PLA supposedly told Chinese soldiers about the powers of menstrual blood. According to Chushi Gangdrug veterans, PLA troops would collect menstrual blood from their soldiers and prisoners in which to dip bullets.³⁹ Tibetans considered this an especially devious strategy. Women who fought in the PLA forces presented another menace to the Tibetan soldiers. One veteran told me of his horror at realizing that he was engaged in one-on-one combat with a female Chinese brigadier: "She was shooting at me with a semi-automatic rifle, and I realized that if she shot me, my protection would not work, so I shot at her like a madman—thirty-six rounds, killing her and a male soldier too." Even though they knew women served in the PLA, Tibetans did not expect to encounter female combat soldiers. Faith in their own cultural beliefs created a myopic gap between possibility and reality.

Off the battlefield, women were considered just as dangerous. Chushi Gangdrug soldiers were not allowed to have sexual relations with women the day or evening before going into battle. To do so would render useless one's protective blessings from injury or death. This fear was communal as an individual's transgression would affect his entire battalion. As a result, a ban on sexual intercourse with women was one of the twenty-seven rules of conduct for the

³⁵ Huber 1999a, 16.

³⁶ Blood and female sexuality are considered dangerous or polluting in various Tibetan contexts; for example, similar prohibitions apply to hunting. Personal communication, Toni Huber, Nov. 2005.

³⁷ Interview, Tachen, Kathmandu, 23 Apr. 1998.

³⁸ Interview, Jagod Se Dhonyod, Bir, 13 Mar. 1999.

³⁹ Interview, Lithang Chodak, Darjeeling, 1 Apr. 1998.

soldiers. Women appear in these army narratives as dangerous and sensuous, serving to highlight men's weaknesses and vulnerabilities on and off the battlefield. Although women fought in earlier uprisings and continue to serve in both Chinese and Indian armed forces, the veterans with whom I worked declared these cases to be different (for example, they were not the "real" army), if they acknowledged them at all. In their narratives, if and when women were recognized in the category of soldier, it was as an exception to the rule. Such claimed exceptions never tell the full story.

In exile, Tibetan women serve in both the Special Frontier Forces (SFF or "Establishment 22") in the Indian Army and the Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) under the Ministry of Home Affairs of the Government of India. While women primarily hold medical or office positions, they receive full battle training. Among those Tibetans connected to SFF or ITBP, stories circulate about the bravest and strongest of these women—about those who have climbed Mount Everest or who demonstrate the native strength of Tibetan women by, for example, parachuting from an airplane while eight months pregnant as did one female trainee in the 1970s. One former official in the Special Frontier Force explained the female presence to me as follows: "In India, the number of female Tibetans is slightly larger than the males. When Establishment 22 was started, we requested that the Government of India allow Tibetan girls there. This was done to provide them with job opportunities. In the army, the women can be employed as nurses, office secretaries, and so on. It is compulsory for both men and women to jump from planes. Everybody must do it. All are paratroopers." His explanation is in direct contrast to the Chushi Gangdrug exclusion of women from its forces. Serving in the Indian armed forces is a "job opportunity" for young women in exile, whereas not serving in the Tibetan resistance army allows women to protect those men fighting to defend their country.

Women fight: the literature on women and war repeatedly makes this point across cultures and times.⁴⁰ Women are not just passive victims of war, but are frequently active agents in all aspects of war. In some ways, then, there is nothing unusual about women in battle. Nor about women's stories being set aside in service of national or state projects.⁴¹ Deferral or denial of women's participation in order to serve the general good of society is a phenomenon seen across cultures, political formations, and time periods. In the Tibetan diaspora, gender factors directly into the question of how to historicize cultural transformation. Prohibitions on women in battle were activated at a moment of enormous rupture in Tibetan society. In exile, rupture continues in the form of cultural contraction and as in the moment of invasion, cultural practice

⁴⁰ See, for example, Das 1990; Enloe 1983; 1990; 1993; 2000; Goodman 2002.

⁴¹ See Kaplan, Alarcon, and Moallem 1999; Williams 1996; and for Tibet, McGranahan 1996.

works against certain transformations. At the same time, however, change is also inevitable.

BUDDHISM AND THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF POLLUTION

In her classic 1974 article “Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?” anthropologist Sherry Ortner explored the processes through which sex-gender systems surrender culture to biology, renaming cultural systems as natural ones. In the process of being named natural, culture is thus ironically privileged over nature. As Ortner argues, male worlds are often privileged over female ones in ways similar to the culture-nature relationship. Although Ortner wrote broadly across cultures and time periods, her ethnographic research at the time was among the Sherpa, an ethnically Tibetan people in Nepal. For an anthropologist of Tibet, her arguments ring true in local terms rather than as generalizations across cultures. They speak directly to specific cultural practices and beliefs that are instituted and defended as truth.

Truth in this instance is biological and Buddhist. Women, this truth proclaims, are subordinate to men. They are, among other things, uncontrollable, instable, soft, and weak; they are dangerous to the monastic order; they must not be allowed structural positions of equivalence to men.⁴² These negative attributes have an especially deep history. Initially the Buddha agreed to ordain women alongside men, but retracted this option for social reasons as Indian society at the time would simply not allow for such equality between men and women.⁴³ The Tibetan inheritance of this Indian social categorization was wholesale such that the idea that women may undermine the monastic order persists in the present day.⁴⁴ As a result, religious and social “anxieties about [women’s] uncontrollable sexuality” continue to have real effects on Tibetan women, their lives, and their bodies.⁴⁵ For example, in both dominant Buddhist philosophy and Tibetan cultural practice, women are systematically relegated to lower status. They are *skye dman*, or “lower born.”⁴⁶ In her ethnography of a nunnery in Ladakh, Kim Gutschow argues that gender is not just a “significant ... fault line in Buddhist discourse,” but also a hierarchical project in which male (and specifically monastic) power is built upon, and at times built by,

⁴² Gyatso 2003. Tibetan mappings of culture onto genetics are similarly gendered: men supposedly contribute white bone to offspring, and women contribute the soft, red parts such as organs. My thanks to an anonymous *CSSH* reviewer for this connection.

⁴³ Gyatso 2003.

⁴⁴ Ani Tenzin Palmo (2002, 71) argues that gender discrimination was not an intention of the Buddha, but introduced by later disciples such that rather than all bodies being seen as impure, male disciples directed this view outward, transforming it into “women are impure.”

⁴⁵ Gyatso 2003, 111; see also Havnevik 1989; Makley 2005b. On the combination of desire and fear of female sexuality, see Doniger 1980; 1985; Vance 1989.

⁴⁶ For example, the male bodily form is understood to be further along the path to enlightenment than is the female bodily form. On achieving enlightenment in female form, see Mackenzie 1999.

the female body.⁴⁷ Tibetan history rests on and reproduces this gendered fault line, extending the embodiment of such arguments well beyond the human world.

Buddhism did not come gently into Tibet. Eighth-century stories tell of an ogress who first had to be tamed in order for Buddhism to take root and flourish. Visualized as a woman lying on her back over the territory of Tibet, the ogress is pinned to the ground by a series of temples constructed on her body. In this subdued state, her powers persist in specific contributions to the Tibetan character—the qualities of bloodthirstiness, strength, and courage.⁴⁸ These qualities are both gendered and universal and the ogress/woman visualized in a highly sexualized position—prone on her back, tamed by a masculinist Buddhist order. The female body mediates land and religion, Tibet and Buddhism. Yet, the centrality of this mediating role is paired with the marked physicality of the female body, its protruding parts and its byproducts, and is overlaid with a moral discourse of purity and pollution. The ability to reproduce renders women physically and morally dangerous not just to men, but to the cultural and spiritual order.⁴⁹ In Buddhist Tibet, if not before, the female clearly signals disorder. Ogresses and women both need to be tamed in order to establish and maintain the status quo.

Tibetans consider women's menstruation to be particularly laden with symbolic danger. While the female form is inherently polluting, menstruation and the blood associated with childbirth or miscarriage is considered wildly impure. The battlefield power attributed to menstrual blood is linked to religious prohibitions against menstruating women (and sometimes women in general) in sacred sites.⁵⁰ Yet, at the same time that menstruation is feared and policed in general Tibetan cosmology and society, actual cultural practice does not always reflect such beliefs. Important inversions of menstruation taboos are also found. Women might be disempowered by impurity, but also draw a dangerous power, a latent power, from impurity. Tantric practice, for example, values rather than devalues menstruation, ritually transforming "menstrual blood from dangerous and polluting into bliss-giving and liberating in quality."⁵¹ Ochre powder suspended in the waters of the lake Phodrang Kyomotso is believed to be the menstrual blood of the deity Dorje Phagmo and is highly valued in tantric ritual.⁵² Stories also circulate that originally it was men who had the power to menstruate, but the Buddha decided to give women "the power of menstruation" to "reward their cleanliness and care."⁵³ For some

⁴⁷ Gutschow 2004, 200.

⁴⁸ Gyatso 1989, 45.

⁴⁹ Gutschow 2004; Gyatso 1989.

⁵⁰ See Huber 1994; 1999a; 1999b; and Makley 1994; 2003.

⁵¹ Huber 1999a, 124.

⁵² *Ibid.* On the Dorje Phagmo lineage, the first and one of the only female reincarnation lineages in Tibet, see Diemberger 2007.

⁵³ Gutschow 2004, 208.

women, this gift from the Buddha signaled “proof of why women were honored by the gods.”⁵⁴ Power also emanates from Palden Lhamo, one of the most powerful Tibetan deities and protector of Tibet and the Dalai Lama lineage, who is usually portrayed atop an ocean of blood, commonly understood as menstrual blood.

Anthropologists have long been interested in links between menstruation, cultural taboos, and notions of pollution. What we have found is that explanations for and experiences of menstrual taboos are culturally variable.⁵⁵ In many but by no means all societies, menstrual blood and menstruating women are considered polluting and dangerous, capable of effecting disastrous societal change, and thus in need of discipline.⁵⁶ In her classic book *Purity and Danger*, Mary Douglas theorized pollutants as symbolic “matter out of place.”⁵⁷ Prohibitions work to reign in the danger pollutants pose to cultural order, for example, to religion, society, kinship systems and so on. Menstrual blood holds a key place in Douglas’ analysis, specifically in that it “is seen as polluting when it symbolically encodes an underlying social-structural ambiguity regarding women and things female.”⁵⁸ The symbolic and structural aspects of menstruation, however, are only one component of things; attention to lived experience and political meaning is also crucial especially in relation to women’s status or power.⁵⁹

Dangerous substances may have multivalent meanings. Tibetan women I know in Nepal would joke with each other about being “dirty girls” when they were menstruating. Yet, menstruation barely seemed to affect their everyday lives. Tibetan anthropologist Losang Rabgey speaks of her mother’s dismissal of supposed cultural taboos around menstruation: in her mother’s experience in Tibet, women were not considered dirty, and were not subject to strict prohibitions around menstruation.⁶⁰ Cultural practices vary across regions in Tibet; thus, despite shared cultural logics, Tibet is not a singular cultural field in terms of interpreting or putting ideas into practice. Female pollution is not always as policed in everyday practice as it is in theory or scripture, or as policed in some places and times as it is in others. Being female in Tibet is not only or even predominantly about issues of pollution. Given the divergence between theory and practice, as well as the potential diversity of

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Buckley and Gottlieb 1988, 4–14. But see Sally Price’s 1993 critique of ethnocentrism in some cross-cultural efforts to reveal menstruation as a liberatory practice or as one that must be “either/or” in terms of degrading or empowering women. My thanks to David Akin for directing me to this text.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 25.

⁵⁷ Douglas 1966.

⁵⁸ Buckley and Gottlieb 1988, 28.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 30; Akin 2003; 2004. See also Begoña Aretxaga’s 1997 analysis of menstruation and the women’s “dirty protest” in prison.

⁶⁰ Devine 1993, 42.

female experiences across Tibet, how do we interpret the very real (and very male) prohibitions against and fears of women on the battlefield? Alongside this, how do we also understand those instances when women did fight? I turn now to just such a story.

WOMEN ON THE BATTLEFIELD: DORJE YUDON'S STORY

In the territory of Nyarong, uprisings against the Chinese in the 1950s unfolded with a twist—the leader of the revolt was a woman, Dorje Yudon of the Gyaritsang family.⁶¹ The Gyaritsang were one of four chiefly families who controlled the upper region of the vast and spectacular area of Nyarong in the eastern Tibetan region of Kham. As Dorje Yudon (and her husband Gyari Nyima) tells the story, it goes as follows: At the time of the Chinese Communist invasion, Gyari Nyima was the head of the Gyaritsang family. He had two wives, Norzin Lhamo and Dorje Yudon, sisters who were seven-years apart in age from the Miloktsang family. One day, the Chinese called the local chiefs to a meeting in Kanze. At this meeting, Gyari Nyima was shocked to hear that a series of “democratic reforms” were about to be initiated. These included political “struggle sessions” in which people were made to publicly “criticize” others, the establishment of communes, the elevation of common beggars to high positions, and the recording of the wealth of each family. The more that Gyari Nyima heard about these drastic changes, the more convinced he became that the time had come for revolt. He rushed home from Kanze to tell his wives the news. Together, the three of them sat down to discuss strategy.

Gyari Nyima's chieftain status meant that he was often under Chinese military surveillance. His senior wife, Norzin Lhamo, had a similarly high profile with the Chinese. Dorje Yudon, however, was less of a public figure and thus not watched as closely. They therefore decided she was the one who should organize the rebellion in their area. They chose eighteen men to protect the family and named this group the *stag phrug*, or “tiger cubs.” If their rebellion was unsuccessful, their back-up plan was to flee to Lhasa. Dorje Yudon allied her area with chiefs from the southern territory of Lithang, who, using the name *bstan srung dang blangs dmag*—“Volunteer Army to Defend Religion,” were coordinating a simultaneous revolt throughout Kham on the eighteenth day of the first month of the Tibetan year. In the meantime, Chinese officials summoned Gyari Nyima and other Tibetan chiefs for a meeting in Dartsendo, several days journey from Nyarong; upon arrival they were captured and guarded by sixty to seventy PLA soldiers at all times. In time, Norzin Lhamo was also summoned for meetings, and along with twenty-two other local leaders was placed under house arrest in the town of Renuk.

⁶¹ Interview, Dorje Yudon, Delhi, 7 Dec. 1997; interviews, Gyari Nyima, Delhi, 5 Apr. 1998, 20 Mar. 1999. Parts of Dorje Yudon's story are also told by Elwood 1989 and J. Norbu 1986. Thank you to Hubert Decler for providing me with a copy of the Elwood interview.

In the absence of Gyari Nyima and Norzin Lhamo, Dorje Yudon called a meeting of the remaining leading families of Upper Nyarong. She told them about the Chinese plans for democratic reforms and the Tibetan plan for rebellion. The leaders sealed their commitment to the rebellion by putting their guns together and making a solemn oath to join Dorje Yudon in revolt. Each family in Upper Nyarong that could afford to donate one gun and one horse to the Gyaritsang family for the rebellion army. Dorje Yudon sent messages to other Khampa leaders to inform them of her preparations. En route to Drango Monastery, her messenger was followed and her letter intercepted by the Chinese officials. They uncovered the rebellion plans and assassinated the head of the monastery. Word of this turn of events did not reach Upper Nyarong in time.

As part of their efforts to strip power from existing Tibetan leaders, the Chinese had bestowed the title of “model citizen” upon five hundred poor Tibetan families in the area. After discovering the Tibetan rebellion plans, the Chinese set the model citizens into action, sending them out with instructions to kill the chieftains and to confiscate all of their weapons. One group entered the palace of another Nyarong chiefly family—the Gyarishiba—and killed six people. Another model citizen tried to assassinate Dorje Yudon with a grenade but was stopped by her servants. Assassination attempts took place throughout Nyarong. The local people were shocked and realized that there was no longer time to wait for the coordinated rebellion; they needed to act immediately.

Dorje Yudon ordered the Tiger Cubs bodyguards and the one hundred community leaders to arrest all model citizens in Upper Nyarong. These individuals were brought to the Gyaritsang castle in Ralong, where Dorje Yudon spoke to them about the divisions the Chinese were trying to forge within the Nyarong community. She told them that if they pledged to support the revolt rather than help the Chinese, she would release them. Each model citizen who promised to work for Nyarong was therefore released.⁶² Meanwhile, Dorje Yudon’s troops arrested or killed all Chinese troops in the area. Upon hearing about these events in Nyarong, the Chinese leaders brought Norzin Lhamo to Dorje Yudon to convince her to cease fire.

The two sisters met twice. At their second meeting, Dorje Yudon devised a plan to rescue Norzin Lhamo and capture forty Chinese soldiers. She received the Chinese troops in the castle with great hospitality. She also arranged for a

⁶² Dorje Yudon implied that all the model citizens agreed to these terms and were thus released; Jamyang Norbu contends that one of her soldiers told him that those who did not comply were thrown into the river (personal communication, 29 June 2006). Issues of class and loyalty are clearly at work on several levels here; Nyarong society was highly hierarchical from the Gyari family on down to the lowest-class families. Across classes, as well as within them, subjectivities were not the same such that some “model citizens” would have honored without issue their bonds of loyalty to the Gyari family, while others might have resented their place in society and appreciated the opportunities offered to them as “model citizens.”

large group of monks to be praying inside the castle, a common sight in wealthy Tibetan homes. During their meeting, the Chinese set up two machine guns, one aimed at the Tibetan chiefs and one aimed at the monks. One monk, under pretense of going to relieve himself, rose from his seat and surprised one of the machine gunners, quickly overpowering him. The other monks followed him and were able to disarm the rest of the soldiers. Dorje Yudon then negotiated the exchange of her captives and their weapons for the twenty-two Nyarong leaders held at Renuk.

Renuk was now the only area in Upper Nyarong that still had a Chinese presence. The Chinese stationed themselves in Drukmo Dzong, the Castle of the Female Dragon, which had formerly been the Gyaritsang family palace. After all of the chieftains were safely released, Dorje Yudon led an attack on the castle. Her fourteen hundred troops did not have sufficient artillery to destroy the thick walls of the castle, so they surrounded it, intending to cut off supplies to the Chinese soldiers inside. Before long, one thousand troops from the 18th Division in Kanze arrived to assist their fellow PLA soldiers. Dorje Yudon's troops killed all but forty-three of these troops and lost twenty-six of their own soldiers in battle.

Dorje Yudon told the Chinese that she would agree to a ceasefire if they would meet two conditions. She first asked that Gyari Nyima and the other Khampa chieftains captive in Dartsendo be released. She next demanded that the Chinese stop their democratic reform program. In time, the Chinese brought Gyari Nyima and six other chieftains to Nyarong under heavy guard. Dorje Yudon and her troops were not allowed close contact with them, and she decided to end negotiations with the Chinese. All the captured chieftains were brought back to Dartsendo.

Four thousand Chinese troops next arrived in Nyarong to fight against Dorje Yudon's troops. The ensuing battle was long and hard. Eventually the Tibetan troops had to retreat because they were so outnumbered. In this battle, however, they were able to capture two hundred Chinese weapons that were greatly superior to the antiquated weapons of the Nyarong troops. By this time, approximately fourteen hundred Chinese troops had been killed in Nyarong. In Dartsendo, the Chinese decided to release Gyari Nyima and the other chieftains. However, after they released them, they publicly announced that the chieftains had "escaped." Categorizing their release as an escape legitimated the next Chinese move: sending out teams of model citizens with instructions to hunt down the chieftains and kill them. The model citizens of Upper Nyarong remained true to their pledge to Dorje Yudon. They pretended to go out in search of Gyari Nyima, but killed another person and claimed that they thought it was Gyari Nyima. As a result, Gyari Nyima was able to return safely to join Dorje Yudon and Norzin Lhamo.

The situation changed drastically with the next battle. Thirty thousand Chinese troops surrounded Nyarong. Dorje Yudon's troops were only one

thousand strong at the time. As they retreated, they split into two groups, one led by Dorje Yudon and Gyari Nyima and one by Gyari Nyima's uncle and brother. The two sides were never to see each other again. The Gyaritsang family salvaged all they could from their home and set off for the mountains with two hundred troops. They joined forces with several other families to increase their numbers to two thousand. They lived like nomads, moving frequently with the Chinese constantly hunting them, often engaging in battle, and always running low on food and other supplies. This continued for months with as many as eighteen battles in one month. After one year had passed, Dorje Yudon's group found themselves surrounded by forty thousand Chinese soldiers. Their last battle against these troops was devastating. Many of the Tibetans were arrested or killed and those remaining were separated in their escape. The Gyaritsang group was reduced to two hundred individuals, including a baby girl who was born soon after this final battle. Four of the Gyaritsang children were with the family in the mountains and two others were staying in a local monastery. Dorje Yudon had one final secret visit with the two children in the monastery before the family left for Lhasa and eventually made their way to India as refugees.

As it was throughout Kham and other areas of Tibet, the Nyarong community was ravaged by both war and democratic reforms at the cost of great loss of life, disruption of every day routines, political order, and religious practice, and the often permanent fragmentation of families. In her telling of the story, Dorje Yudon repeatedly emphasized loyalty across classes, describing the people of Nyarong as a stratified but unified group: together they fought, together they suffered. Her account of this period of her life, entwined with that of her husband, is given to me as much as it is to herself, her family, and imagined past and future interlocutors. Absent from her narration, but surely not from female battlefield experience in Nyarong, is any mention of menstruation or other supposed defilements (of which birth is high on the list). If content, context, and tone of narration are responsive to, but not overdetermined by sociopolitical norms and one's community of addressees, then how is the relation between order and experience narrated in ways that make cultural sense? What narrative absences does dispossession generate?

KNOWING SOMEONE ELSE'S STORY

Despite the various forces contriving against the telling of women's histories or histories of war, Dorje Yudon tells her story as part of a bigger history. She says, "These may have been only minor revolts, but together they were part of larger events." As with the Chushi Gangdrug veterans who tell their stories as part of Tibetan history—albeit gently and respectfully given the arrest of resistance history—she tells her story with culturally generated limits in mind. Of her leadership role, Dorje Yudon claims that circumstances led her to this position, at age twenty-five it was the first time she had to make such decisions, that she

“was not a heroine, but it was something I had to do.” She was not, she states, the only one: “At that time, there were many women involved in similar circumstances and they had to come to the battlefield. I don’t remember their names. There were two or three wives of certain leaders who had to do the same as me—take responsibility for their area. Recently, I heard of a woman who was in the same situation and is still in Kham. Her family name was Changotsang and she married into the Lakhuma family. Her husband was Tsering Wangyal and he died during that time. He was a rebel. She took over and around three or four years ago, I heard that she was still alive. There were others in places like Lithang, Kanze, and Trango as well as in Nyarong. Many were famous but they have all died.”⁶³ Dorje Yudon knew the stories of these famous women only categorically. She knew that they existed, but did not know the details of their stories.

The details of another’s story are often difficult to know. Possession of such details is not always an active endeavor. Bits and pieces of stories, of lives, come to you in different ways and in different speeds. Some mere outlines, fleshed out slowly as stories of a woman in another part of Kham with an experience similar to Dorje Yudon’s made its way to her. First mention from someone in that region, a brief passage, next a longer, but still truncated version of the story, a story that lived and breathed in Dorje Yudon’s mind, as part of a collective history, waiting for the arrival of the next installment of the story, perhaps through a family member of this woman, or even, if possible, through a meeting with the woman herself. Other stories spilled out all at once, overflowing, as someone arrived for the first time, usually from Tibet, with the story of a woman, a relative, a friend unknown in exile, unknown but who existed as a possibility on the list of kindred spirits women like Dorje Yudon keep quietly for themselves.

Dorje Yudon was one of the few who suggested I interview women as part of my overall project on Chushi Gangdrug and eastern Tibet in the 1950s. Most others with whom I spoke—including women—sent me to men. Men were presumed to be the makers and keepers of the history of this period. This is not to say that women do not have or keep histories of war, of their escape from Tibet, or of establishing new lives in exile. I imagine histories narrated by women who did not themselves fight would have a profile resembling those of the late-1940s evacuation of highland Sumatra collected by Mary Steedly, who writes, “The subject matter of women’s stories was endurance, not heroics; they depicted ordinary, daily acts transformed by the startling circumstances of war.”⁶⁴ Narrations by or about Tibetan women who did fight combine the startling with the mundane in reference to both war and women’s participation in it.

⁶³ Interview with Dorje Yudon, New Delhi, 7 Dec. 1997.

⁶⁴ Steedly 2000: 821.

Before she told me her own story, Dorje Yudon first told me that of another woman, her mother-in-law: “Chime Dolma was the mother of Gyari Nyima and she fought bravely against the Kuomintang. They later blew up the Gyaritsang castle as an act of revenge. She met a very violent end—she was shot at with bullets and fought back with only a sword. She was shot in the leg. The Chinese captured her and she was executed.”⁶⁵ In the 1970s, in the context of narrating his own life, a veteran from Nyarong told Chime Dolma’s story to Tibetan intellectual Jamyang Norbu. Norbu turned the story into an English-language book, publishing it first in India in 1979 and in London in 1986.⁶⁶ Another example is Adhe Tapontsang (known as “Ama Adhe,” or Mother Adhe), who tells in her co-authored English-language memoir of how women in Kanze formed an underground group to coordinate actions against the Chinese, primarily to support men who had taken to the mountains in defense.⁶⁷ Her story has been the subject of two English-language books, she has been included in several documentaries, and she has been interviewed numerous times, including by myself. Ama Adhe’s story has come to be the iconic “women’s story” of the 1950s period, paralleling those of protesting nuns in contemporary Tibet. Yet, while individuals in the exile Tibetan community are often aware of books such as Ama Adhe’s, they have not necessarily read them. For histories written in Tibetan, I find rates of familiarity and consumption to be even lower. Writing theoretically endows a history with a new level of importance, but does not necessarily entail a more “known” history in practice.

In the highly illiterate older generation of refugees with whom I worked, different cultural value is assigned to books than to oral knowledge. For this generation, books were long synonymous with scripture and so had inherent value and respect attributed to their form, regardless of content. If books have vicarious value through the precedent of scripture, however, they do not necessarily possess truths that take precedence over oral forms of knowledge. Among Tibetan resistance veterans and their family members, true or recognized histories were not only those found in books. Instead, written or oral, truth was linked to histories that could be socially validated. Specifically, they relied on systems of categorical trust linked to highly circumscribed communities of circulation. Stories of women from Nyarong are told by people from Nyarong, and so on. One Chushi Gangdrug veteran from another part of Kham told me that Dorje Yudon was a “real heroine who fought a lot and fought bravely,” and another asserted that Dorje Yudon was the real leader, that is, she was not just acting in the absence of her husband or senior wife.⁶⁸ However, while a handful of people with connections to Dorje

⁶⁵ Interview with Dorje Yudon, New Delhi, 7 Dec. 1997.

⁶⁶ Norbu 1986 [1979].

⁶⁷ Patt 1993; Tapontsang 1997.

⁶⁸ Jamyang Norbu, personal communication, 29 June 2006.

Yudon know her story, such knowledge and acknowledgement is by no means widespread. Instead, such stories continue to represent a departure from the standard narrative of what happened, or of how things work in general. As such, they both inhabit and generate states of narrative and social dispossession.

GENDERED INSOLENT: WOMEN OF NYARONG AND CHATRENG

Female fighting was not always in the absence of men, nor was it only alongside them. Spheres for women's violence existed both in spite of men's efforts and in response to men's inaction. Throughout Kham, there were women who initiated armed conflict and who acted in defense of their communities and themselves. If Dorje Yudon was an accidental leader, then Chime Dolma was a female leader in male dress. Both women were also members of the Gyaritsang family, Dorje Yudon by marriage and Chime Dolma by birth. As told by Nyarong veteran Aten Dogyalsang to Jamyang Norbu, Chime Dolma was a powerhouse.⁶⁹ Born in the late 1800s, she was fearless and smart, a gun toting, sweet-faced woman who always dressed in men's clothes. Her capabilities and temperament were that of a leader and although a woman, she became the chief of the Gyari family. She was known for her endless feuding with neighboring districts and for her loathing of the Chinese. During the 1930s era of Chinese civil war, she fought against the Communist and the Nationalist Chinese troops that came through Kham. Nyarong Aten recalled that she threatened any Tibetans who were caught aiding the Communist troops. She would, he stated, "constantly harass their detachments with sniping and sudden ambushes. She took her men and went south to Thau and engaged the Communists in a number of skirmishes. They managed to get the upper hand and she was forced to retreat north to Drango where she fought a great battle against the Communists at the local monastery."⁷⁰

The Communists eventually retreated in the mid-1930s and Chime Dolma spent the next four years fighting the Nationalist troops. After every Tibetan victory, however, it was only a matter of time before more Chinese troops would arrive. In 1939, the Nationalist troops grew too large for Chime Dolma and her Nyarong army to defeat. They captured her, burnt down her castle-fort in Upper Nyarong, and brought her in chains to Drukmo Dzong, the Castle of the Female Dragon in Renuk where Dorje Yudon would later battle the Communist troops. She was executed but is remembered as having retained her courage and insolence in the face of death.

At her execution, Chime Dolma is said to have cried out, "Never will I submit to the Chinese ... I die for the freedom of my people and my land.

⁶⁹ Norbu 1986 [1979].

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 52–53.

People of Nyarong, do not forget me.”⁷¹ This dramatic ending to her life is presented in the language of political struggle and cultural identity. Chime Dolma is narrated as an exceptional female, as perhaps a real-life Palden Lhamo, the female protective deity of Tibet, as a woman who garnered both fear and respect, whose actions were designed to protect her people, land, and country, and who chose to dress as a man to accomplish her goals. The “gender trouble” often attributed to drag and cross-dressing both is and is not an element of female transgressions of Tibetan sex-gender systems.⁷² The female (or male or other) body may be a transitional form in Buddhist experience, but a sexed, gendered body is a very real means of grounding lived experience for Tibetan individuals. Embracing masculinity as personal style is thus to launch a critique of cultural norms. A current way to launch such critiques is to narrate the histories that enclose and reinforce such norms.

In exile, some space for gendered critiques is found in non-elite historical narratives. New lay histories exist in both Tibetan and English. Tibetan-language writings include autobiographies and place- and event-based histories, while English-language narratives tend to focus on autobiographies, frequently written by a non-Tibetan co-author.⁷³ Each of the Tibetan-language history books I have collected was written by a man. Unique among them is one by Kargyal Thondup, whose text includes a sustained discussion of female historical figures. In *History of Chatreng (Cha phreng gi lo rgyus)*, he includes a section titled “Famous Women of Chatreng.” The first story he tells is the circa 1900 tale of Zaken Azhema, whose husband was killed by bandits in a place called Demu, about three-days’ journey from Chatreng. Upon hearing this news, Zaken Azhema dressed in men’s clothes, got a gun, and organized a few men to go with her to Demu to confront the bandits. She fought with the bandits for days, killed many men, and stole their belongings. Upon returning to Chatreng, she continued to unleash her fury, this time berating the Chatreng men for their cowardice, and yelling at them to “Drink my piss!”⁷⁴

Once again, female bodily fluids trouble men. Whereas menstrual blood cancels the protective powers of men’s amulets, here reference to women’s urine taunts and emasculates men. While Tibetan gender systems allow for both strong men and women, women are not supposed to be stronger than the men. Transgressing the expected order of things is remarkable, but not necessarily to be remarked upon. That is, transgressions are not to be narrated in ways that might actually effect or recognize change.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Butler 1990.

⁷³ See, for example, Pachen and Donnelly 2000; Tapontsang 1997. On Tibetan writings in English, see MacMillan 2001.

⁷⁴ Kargyal Thondup 1992, 193.

Several years later, around 1906, Chinese troops came to Chatreng during harvest time. In the village of Ngense Gangpa, they arrested many local men while they were working the fields. Using reaping hooks, the women fought against the Chinese, enabling the men to free themselves and join in the fighting. Kargyal Thondup states that two women, Wangmo and Pungkyed, were especially renowned for their fighting.⁷⁵ He also tells a third tale of women fighting on behalf of men, or more accurately, in spite of men, during the immediate post-World War II period. At the time, guns and bullets were readily available in towns along the Burmese and Thai borders. A group from Chatreng including several married couples traveled to the border area to purchase weapons; among the women in the group were Dolma and Lhazum. On their return to Chatreng, they were chased by Jang (Naxi) troops in Yunnan. One night, they found themselves surrounded by soldiers. The Tibetan men fled, leaving behind the women and the newly purchased weapons. For “many days,” the women fought the Jang troops, killing many of them, and confiscating their weapons. After a month’s time, the women finally reached Chatreng with all of the weapons intact (and with perhaps Zaken Azhema’s famous words ringing in their ears).

The final story Kargyal Thondup tells is about Ama Lobsang. She and her daughter traveled to different villages selling wool. In Torma Rong, they met three thieves and fought with them, killing one with a knife and injuring the two others. They brought the injured thieves to the nearest village where the villagers “praised” Ama Lobsang and her daughter. Each of the “famous women” Kargyal Thondup discusses is infamous for transgressing expectations, specifically for inhabiting masculine roles of aggression and violence. Not all female embraces of masculine roles are considered transgressive; for example, women might dress as men to do plowing labor. Others, such as Chime Dolma, might habitually dress as men, and live lives unmarked within their communities as masculine females. While fear of blood and female bodily and sexual power is not part of Kargyal Thondup’s written narrative, I would be surprised if it was not part of the oral narration of these same tales. At the same time that I highlight female transgressions of cultural prohibitions, I also want to acknowledge male transgressions of the same. Taking advantage of the gaps between cultural/religious beliefs and social practice is not solely women’s work.

One bright fall day a Tibetan friend and I were doing our daily *kora* (circumambulation, a form of walking prayer) at the Boudha stupa in Kathmandu. We fell into rhythmic step behind three old men and were close enough to hear their conversation. One of the men was telling the other two that he wanted to come back in his next life as a girl with a beautiful face. His two friends thought this

⁷⁵ Ibid.

was absolutely hilarious, as did my young female friend. Later, we were telling this story to an older and very devout Tibetan male. My female friend explained that if you practice religion well in this life, you will be reincarnated as a male in your next life. Laughing, she said she would be coming back as a woman again. Laughing at her, but serious as well, our male companion said with conviction he would be coming back as a man. To him, the idea that any good man would want to reincarnate as a woman was simply unthinkable. Or was supposed to be unthinkable.

CONCLUSION: GENDER, NARRATION, AND THE DISORDER OF THINGS

What does it mean to be socially recognized as a historical subject? As more women begin to tell their stories, how will the contours of dispossession, that is, the ways women are distanced from their own histories, change? Dorje Yudon, for example, agreed with resistance veterans that women did not fight in the Chushi Gangdrug army (even though her own battlefield efforts were part of the *bstan srung dang blangs dmag* or “Volunteer Army to Defend Religion” that was Chushi Gangdrug’s immediate precursor). She did not use the language of pollution to express this, but instead explained it as due to the fact that Chushi Gangdrug was meant to specifically defend and protect the Dalai Lama. “So,” she said to me, “since it was meant for His Holiness the Dalai Lama’s personal security, it was composed only of men.” The cultural inappropriateness of women protecting the Dalai Lama was so culturally evident it did not need to be explained. Yet, if cultural norms do not need explanation, they do not always close down narration. Narrative dispossession is not an inability to narrate at all, but about the conditions of possibility for one’s narration. Beyond Dharamsala and the world of Tibetan scholars and intellectuals, Dorje Yudon, Chime Dolma, and even the more well known Ama Adhe are not household names. Their stories are known best by people from their home regions in Tibet. In the exile community at large, they are not widely recognized subjects of Tibetan history. Tibetan senses of propriety in exile include not calling attention to oneself in unseemly ways, that is, not bragging or boasting of one’s accomplishments. It is perhaps not surprising then that when these Tibetan women narrate how they “radically stretched” cultural categories they tend to do so in ways that “faithfully reenact” the very categories they challenge.⁷⁶

Thinking about the contradictions involved in “women’s relationships to a hegemonically masculinist social order” involves analyzing “the simultaneous encouragement and undermining of women’s agency.”⁷⁷ The narrating of women’s experiences as exceptional accomplishes this feat by celebrating women warriors, but also by simultaneously placing their stories outside of

⁷⁶ Ortner 2006, 227.

⁷⁷ Ortner 1996, 16, 17.

expected or normative history. This undermining of agency and history is rooted in dominant theories about and practices of gender in Tibetan societies, yet if gender is a specific type of vulnerability, masculine orders are incapable of exhausting the “potentialities of gender.”⁷⁸ These potentialities are exactly what we see in women’s actions on the battlefield and their efforts to narrate histories against the norm. This movement unfolds in increments: the stories quietly told here are but beginnings for narrating and living in a slowly shifting, gendered landscape. In this context, to narrate is to overtly pull disorder into the same analytic frame as order, to begin to unsettle the properties assigned to gender.

Disorder has its own properties though; it is not simply the absence of order. Mary Douglas describes disorder as unlimited and indefinite, as free of the restrictions and patterns of culture. To be free of restrictions and patterns, however, is not necessarily to be free of culture. Instead, disorder is partly constitutive of culture: “We recognize that [disorder] is destructive to existing patterns; also that it has potentiality. It symbolizes both danger and power.”⁷⁹ Disorder, women, and their blood symbolize both danger and power. Yet, the potential in disorder is often difficult to fully activate. For men who seek to reincarnate as beautiful women or women who trouble the battlefield either in person or in imagination, their critiques of Tibetan cultural norms are neither passive nor ineffective, but are realized only in localized, although incremental manners. For every Chushi Gangdrug veteran who claims that there were No Women! None! Not Even One!, there is a woman’s story waiting to challenge the evidence documenting that claim and the cultural logic supporting it. The waiting is engaged, but often disheartened. There is little space in exile for these stories; most women, and many men, keep them close at hand, often not telling them even to their children. Despite my telling of them here, stories of women on the battlefield remain rare, not so much because of how or why women did or did not fight, but because these stories have no ready frameworks onto which they can be narrated. The social absence of the self, that is, the lack of a social space for narrating one’s story, is one way narrative dispossession is experienced. Populated by other stories and possibilities, by fears of hearsay and talk of the weather, narrative absences reveal certain orders and the cultural efforts that sustain or challenge them.

Time and again, I found that stories of female fighters were qualified with comments about how unusual they or the times were. The woman warrior was always an exception to the rule. Dorje Yudon’s situational, accidental leadership is a perfect example of this. Her actions were in the absence of her husband and while she (and her sister and co-wife Norzin Lhamo) might

⁷⁸ D’Cruze and Rao 2004: 498.

⁷⁹ Douglas 1966, 117.

have very well taken on a leadership role in the revolt even had her husband been present, the culturally available frameworks for narrating her story constrain her and our interpretations of it. As a result, the narrating of these stories, a joint project involving women, men, and ethnographers all, highlights and also produces the disordered side of culture. Even to her own ears, Dorje Yudon's story sounded like "hearsay." Events that happened, but that have not been widely codified as such—that is, that inhabit the non-narrative universe of the "non-event"—reveal just how much disorder is a part of the expected order of things.⁸⁰ In the Tibetan context, disorder in the form of female pollution is both mundane and unavoidable and yet highly temporal and even fatal; it is the possibility that cannot be tamed.

A menstrual blood-dipped bullet. A woman leading troops into battle. Curiously absent from all of the conversations I had with men and women was the bringing together of power and pollution, of ways to simultaneously harness the energies of both. How does pollution affect female fighters? What damage might a battalion of menstruating women inflict on unsuspecting opponents?⁸¹ If a counterfactual history might allow us to indulge in envisioning an enticingly effective possible past, then a gendered history will allow us a glimpse of the underside of cultural management of everyday life and of what we might call "the bigger picture." Specifically, bringing gender into Tibetan history—that is, bringing in women's stories, ideas about gender, about the female body and its fluids and functions, and overtly discussing cultural logics about them *as cultural* rather than as natural—will do much to reveal just how much it is that culture organizes what we think we know about the past. Or what we think we know about the present. Or how we explain what happened, whether it is to defend it, challenge it, or tell stories parallel to sanctioned or expected versions. This is not only to open spaces for alternative histories, but to also open them for alternative versions of culture.

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⁸⁰ On the non-event, see McGranahan 2005; and n.d.

⁸¹ Although not mentioned by any of my interlocutors, Tsering Shakya (1999, 345) writes of Nyemo Tinley Choedron, a nun who led an uprising during the Cultural Revolution: "It was said that she could not be overpowered by even fifteen men and that bullets did not harm her." In a recent history of the Nyemo uprising, Melvyn Goldstein, Ben Jiao, and Tanzen Lhundrup (2009) present villagers' testimony of how Ani Tinley Choedron blessed their weapons, led attacks throughout the region, and protected them from bullets. Still needed within this scholarship is a gendered analysis of the nun as political actor.

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