

Article REVIEW

Carole McGranahan. "Tibet's Cold War: The CIA and the Chushi Gangdrug Resistance, 1956-1974." *Journal of Cold War Studies* 8.3 (Summer 2006): 102-130. doi: 10.1162/jcws.2006.8.3.102. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1162/jcws.2006.8.3.102> .

Review by Tom Grunfeld, Empire State College, State University of New York (SUNY)
Published by H-Diplo on 27 July 2007

Carole McGranahan's "The CIA and the Chushi Gangdrug Resistance, 1956-1974" goes over much familiar ground in the seemingly always fascinating, and much-written about, Tibetan resistance to Chinese rule; especially the role of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in the insurrection.

Immediately after establishing the People's Republic of China (PRC) in October 1949, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) set itself the task of "liberating" Tibet and Taiwan; i.e. the reincorporation of these territories into the newly established Chinese state. Since 1913 Tibet had been a *de facto* independent nation.

Given the military superiority of the Chinese army, the insularity of the Tibetan polity, and the indifference of the rest of the world, this task was easily accomplished. While the task of ending Tibet's *de facto* independence was indeed relatively easy, ruling Tibet would prove to be another matter all together.

Mao Zedong and the CCP realized from the beginning that Tibet was *sui generis*. As the CCP was extending its rule over the breadth of what had been Qing Dynasty China it decided that when it came to Tibet - and only in Tibet - there was a need to have a treaty to formalize the process of reincorporation; a tacit acknowledgment that Tibet was significantly different from the rest of China and could not possibly have been a "vital part" of that country over the centuries, as Beijing would claim in later years.

A more important recognition of Tibet's uniqueness was the communist authorities' decision to postpone revolutionary changes (land reform, class struggle, etc.) in Tibet -- at least in the area they designated as "Tibet." Later to become known as the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR), this area corresponded roughly with the extent of the Dalai Lama's secular rule. The areas of ethnic Tibetan inhabitation outside this zone (an area of almost equal land size and Tibetan population) were deemed to be within the zone designated to undergo the revolutionary changes which were then unfolding across the Chinese nation.

As Jian Chen (62-63) indicates in the same volume of *JCWS*,¹ Mao and the Chinese leadership had decided that bringing about any major changes to an entrenched and stable Tibetan society could very likely create hostility towards Chinese rule and, perhaps, spark a rebellion. McGranahan refers to this as "...a policy of relative generosity and tolerance..." (109) The curious thing about this is why they didn't apply that thinking towards the Tibetan societies outside the boundaries of political Tibet which, for all intents and purposes, were culturally identical to life within the boundaries of the TAR.

The Chinese leadership's fear of possible rebellion by Tibetans if their society was dramatically altered proved to be accurate enough in 1956 when the Chinese began to impose revolutionary changes upon the Tibetans in Kham (eastern Tibet to the Tibetans, the province of Xikang to the Chinese). While Tibetans inside the TAR saw little change to their lives and therefore, for the most part, acquiesced to Chinese rule, Tibetans outside the TAR felt, quite rightly, that their traditional lives were under threat and a revolt against Chinese rule ensued. The Chinese responded harshly which further alienated the Tibetans and a war between Tibetans and Chinese broke out in eastern Tibet, eventually making its way westward into the TAR. While this is not the topic of her article, McGranahan goes into some detail about this war in her doctoral dissertation.¹ The military aspect of this conflict was to last until 1974. The CIA became engaged sometime around 1956 and ended their participation in the late 1960s as far as we currently know. Washington's monetary subsidies to the Dalai Lama personally continued, apparently, beyond this date, to, at least 1974.

This is the larger story that McGranahan tells. It is a story that has come out in dribs and drabs since the early 1970s, although George Patterson was writing about the revolt against Chinese rule from the 1950s with barely a mention of the CIA. It was in the early 1970s that David Wise, Steve Weissman, T.D. Allman, and Chris Mullin began the revelations of CIA participation in the Tibetan revolt.²

For the Tibetans in exile the participation of the CIA in their struggle has been a difficult story to tell. Even though the uprising was completely indigenous, there was, nevertheless, fear that knowledge of CIA involvement would give the impression that the rebellion had originated and was being controlled by the CIA and the U.S. government.

¹ [Ed. Note] Chen Jian, "The Tibetan Rebellion of 1959 and China's Changing Relations with India and the Soviet Union," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 8.3 (Summer 2006): 54-101. doi:10.1162/jcws.2006.8.3.54. <http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1162/jcws.2006.8.3.54> .

¹ "Arrested Histories: Between Empire and Exile in 20th Century Tibet," (Ph.D., The University of Michigan, 2001).

² David Wise, *The Politics of Lying: Government Deception, Secrecy and Power* NY: Vintage Books, 1973); Steve Weissman, "Last Tangle in Tibet," *Pacific Research and World Empire Telegram* 4:5 (July-August 1973): 1-18; T.D. Allman, "Cold Wind of Change," *Guardian* (London), 19 December 1973, 11; T.D. Allman, "A Half-Forgotten Conflict," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 11 February 1974, 27; Chris Mullin, "The CIA-Tibetan Conspiracy," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 5 September 1975, 30-34.

For much of the 1970s and into the 1980s CIA participation was denied by the exile community.

In 1961 the Dalai Lama was quoted as saying “the only weapons the rebels possess are those they’ve managed to capture from the Chinese...”³ In 1975 when the Dalai Lama was asked about the CIA, he replied:

some points are not convenient for us to comment upon. This kind of report is extremely dangerous because it implies that the resistance in Tibet was initiated by some outsiders. This is not so. ..”⁴

The first semi-official acknowledgment from the Tibetan exiles came with John Avedon’s book, *In Exile from the Land of Snows. The First Full Account of the Dalai Lama and Tibet since the Chinese Conquest*.⁵

An additional problem was the inability to square the mythic view of Tibet as a Shangri-la of non-violence and perpetual harmony and peace with that of a people engaged in a guerrilla war. This contradiction presented a problem for the Dalai Lama as well. Having consistently preached non-violence he, at the same time, also heralded the guerrillas to the point of bestowing awards upon them.⁶

One consequence of this ambiguity is that the men who gave up their lives for the cause have not been properly acknowledged. “Histories of the Tibetan resistance,” McGranahan points out, “have not yet been secured a place within state-sanctioned national history in exile.” (127).

Taken largely from her 2001 dissertation⁷ McGranahan re-tells this story here and, quite rightly I believe, reminds us that all the histories to date have interpreted these events “...solely through a Cold War lens.” (103) McGranahan’s important addition is to look at little deeper and focus “...instead on the resistance movement itself and the individuals who constituted it.” (104) This she has done - skillfully - through extensive interviews and

³ “The Red Terror in Tibet. Interview with the Dalai Lama,” *US News & World Report*, 24 April 1961, 79.

⁴ Chris Mullin, “We Tibetans Have Nothing to Hide” *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 5 September 1975, 33.

⁵ NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984.

⁶ For example, see the Dalai Lama’s letter reproduced in Gompo Tashi Andrugstang, *Four Rivers, Six Ranges. Reminiscences of the Resistance Movement in Tibet* (Dharamsala, India: Information and Publicity Office of H.H. the Dalai Lama, 1973, opposite 106).

⁷ McGranahan, “Arrested Histories,” especially 338-350.

recently published Tibetan language materials to a far greater extent than anyone before her.

The major problem for historians has always been the paucity of sources. The CIA has continued to prevent the declassification of most of the materials on the Tibet operation. The Chinese have declassified even less; nothing at all, as far as I am aware of. That leaves interviews with the participants. The earliest revelations of the CIA's role in 1973 were primarily from interviews with Tibetan participants.⁸ One important history of the CIA's activities is based almost exclusively on interviews with participants⁹ while the most scholarly and, to date most comprehensive, history of the CIA in Tibet¹⁰ uses shockingly few CIA documents and depends heavily on the diplomatic record, interviews and the author's personal experiences as a CIA officer assigned to the Tibetan operation.¹¹

There is even a documentary film about the resistance which includes many interviews with both Tibetan and CIA participants.¹²

While McGranahan does go over some very familiar ground she is not simply rehashing material already in print. Rather she has provided an important supplement and new dimension to this story. McGranahan is not a historian but an anthropologist and as such she brings "...culture into [the] analyses of political and military history." (106) Her goal is to examine the resistance army, the Chushi Gangdrug, "...as interpreted by three groups - the resistance itself, the Tibetan government-in-exile, and agents of the U.S. government." (108).

McGranahan is the first scholar that I am aware of who tries to analyze the resistance by examining the internal dynamics, especially the regional aspects. To be sure some of the earliest writings of the resistance by George Patterson and Michel Peissel¹³ highlighted the

⁸ Mullin, "The CIA-Tibetan Conspiracy."

⁹ Kenneth Conboy and James Morrison, *The CIA's Secret War in Tibet* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2002).

¹⁰ John Kenneth Knaus, *Orphans of the Cold War. America and the Tibetan Struggle* (NY: PublicAffairs, 1999).

¹¹ For a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of these histories see, A. Tom Grunfeld, "God We Had Fun," *Critical Asian Studies*, 35:1 (2003): 113-138.

¹² "The Shadow Circus. The CIA in Tibet," A White Crane Films Production for BBC Television, 1998. Written by Tenzin Sonam. Produced and Directed by Ritu Sarin and Tenzing Sonam.

¹³ Patterson was the first, and for many years the only, chronicler of the Tibetan revolt. As far as I can tell, apart from a host of articles, Patterson has written some dozen or more books (4 in the 1950s and 4 in the 1960s), almost all on Tibet from: George N. Patterson, *Tibetan Journey* (London: Faber and Faber, 1954) to George N. Patterson, *Patterson of Tibet: Death Throes of a Nation*, San Diego, CA: ProMotion Press, 1998). Michel Peissel, *The Secret War in Tibet* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1972).

historic regional differences and animosities between eastern and central Tibetans, and, indeed, strongly championed the Khampas against the Dalai Lama's government, but nevertheless, did not use that information to analyze the internal dynamics of the resistance movement. Of course they were writing at a time when the rebellion was on-going.

Reiterating Patterson and Peissel, McGranahan emphasizes how critically important it was that "...although the resistance army was a pan-Tibetan unit, it was dominated by Khampa Tibetans." This brought into play a centuries old animosity between central Tibetans - and the administration of the Dalai Lama in central Tibet - and their compatriots in eastern Tibet who have historically enjoyed a considerable amount of autonomy from the government in Lhasa. Mutual mistrust also has deep historical roots. The resistance army, she continues, was "...organized in ways that reflected the sociopolitical frameworks of eastern Tibet rather than the aristocratic and monastic hierarchies of central Tibet." (116) Because the genesis of this revolt was from the grassroots and indigenous to eastern Tibet, the rebels saw themselves as equal to the Dalai Lama's administration in India and the U.S. government. Their partners decidedly did not see it that way at all.

The Dalai Lama's representative was his older brother Gyalo Thondup. A man of considerable experience and intrigue about whom there are as many unsavory rumors as verifiable certainties. It was Gyalo Thondup who felt he was in charge of the resistance as the Dalai Lama's brother and as the major liaison between the CIA and the Tibetans. And the Americans thought so as well.

And when it came to the Americans, McGranahan notes, "...a series of misunderstandings marred the relationship." For one thing, the Americans had little or no appreciation for the "...importance of regional alliances and identities within the Tibetan community." And, perhaps more importantly, they were "...mainly interested in preventing the spread of Communism rather than providing serious and committed aid to Tibet." (114) She further argues that these problems and the little information that Americans had about Tibet "...impaired the U.S. government's ability to administer and advise the resistance...[and] complicated the internal dynamics and organization of the resistance." (114)

For example, she points out that these shortcomings led the CIA to "veto soldiers' suggestions to organize operations around native-place and regional alliances...[Instead, the rebels] were sent against their wishes into an area of Tibet in which they did not have local support," leading to their quick defeat by the Chinese army. (115).

Another problem stemmed from differing goals. The Tibetans were fighting Chinese, regardless of their political affiliations, while the Americans were fighting communists.

America's Chinese allies, the Guomindang government in Taiwan, agreed with Beijing that Tibet was historically a part of China compelling Washington to accept the same proposition.

By focusing our attention on the individuals who rose in resistance to the Chinese and reflecting the movement through their perspective, McGranahan's article has contributed considerable new insights that allow for a far more thorough understanding of this rebellion and its sad and tragic demise. Future historians will have to take her work into consideration.

But McGranahan neglects to mention another internal problem. While official U.S. policy was not to help the Tibetans regain their independence, the officers in the field, advertently or inadvertently, led the Tibetans to believe otherwise. The CIA officers who worked directly with the Tibetans "fell in love" with their charges and came to believe in their cause thereby creating disillusionment when the rebels realized the limits of U.S. support.¹⁴ To this day some Tibetans still harbor a grudge at being betrayed by the Americans. "Almost fifty years later both the Dalai Lama and his brother told me," recalls former CIA officer Ken Knaus, "they felt the United States had used Tibet as a pawn in the cold war and they resented it."¹⁵

McGranahan also argues that U.S. officials knew little about Tibet. To some extent that was true. Yet, a few years before CIA involvement, the Pentagon published a pamphlet on the history and culture of Tibet meant to educate U.S. military forces. To what end we don't know as the Pentagon claims all the documents about the pamphlet, including the author's name and the reasons for its publication, were routinely destroyed. The pamphlet is a fair and knowledgeable description of Tibet for the time and a demonstration that when it wanted to the U.S. government had the wherewithal to teach itself something about Tibet.¹⁶

There are some historical miscues. She discusses the capture of 1,600 Chinese government documents during a raid by Tibetan guerrillas in October 1961. These documents divulged serious internal problems in the PRC at a time, McGranahan contends, when "China presented itself as a perfectly functioning state, one that was militarily secure, with a population that was flourishing." (119) While Chinese propaganda did indeed paint such a picture, in fact refugees pouring out of southern China into Hong Kong had alerted the world that the situation in China during the Great

¹⁴ See interviews in "The Shadow Circus: The CIA and Tibet," and Grunfeld, "God We Had Fun."

¹⁵ Knaus, 40.

¹⁶ "Armed Forces Talk. 348: Tibet-Roof of the World" Armed Forces Information and Education Division, OSD, Oct. 1950, US Government Printing Office. On the front page it says: "This talk is distributed for the use of commanding officers in informing their personnel."

leap Forward was far from “perfect.” The major significance of the captured documents had less to do with what they told us about domestic events in China and more about their demonstration of the “evidence of effectiveness” of the rebels at a time when serious doubts about continued funding were being raised.¹⁷

McGranahan also claims that “Tibet had an important role in U.S. Cold War strategy in Asia as both a counter to Communist China and a facilitator of U.S. relations with Pakistan and India.” (112) This, in my opinion, elevates Tibet to a geopolitical level it never attained. It was, as the Dalai Lama and his brother referred to it in the quote above, merely a “pawn.” McGranahan relies on S. Mahmud Ali’s, *Cold War in the High Himalayas: The USA, China and South Asia in the 1950s* for this mischaracterization. However, Ali’s arguments have been questioned, by this author among others, as being inadequately documented.¹⁸

All in all Carole McGranahan’s contributions have to be taken seriously as they provide important new insights into the Tibetan rebellion and the CIA’s efforts to aid them. Future scholars will ignore it at their peril.

A. Tom Grunfeld is SUNY Distinguished Teaching Professor at Empire State College/SUNY. He is a historian who specializes in the Modern History of East Asia, especially that of China and Tibet. He has published widely on East Asian history including *The Making of Modern Tibet* (2nd Edition, 1996).

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, H-Diplo, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the H-Diplo Editors at h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu.

Commissioned for H-Diplo by Thomas Maddux, California State University, Northridge

¹⁷ Knaus, 250.

¹⁸ New York: St . Martin’s Press, 1999. For critiques, see A. Tom Grunfeld, *Asian Affairs* 31:3 (October 2000): 330-331, and John W. Garver, “Review Essay: India, China the United States and Tibet, and the Origins of the 1962 War,” *India Review*, 3:2 (April 2004): 171-182.