

REVIEW: CHU MIG DGU SGRIL

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Phur bu tshe ring ཕུར་བུ་ཤེ་རིང་།. 2014. *Chu mig dgu sgril རྒྱ་མིག་དྲུག་སྟོལ་ལྷོ་ལྷོ།* [The Nine-eyed Sling]. Zi ling ཟེ་ལིང་།: Mtsho ngon mi rigs dpe skrun khang མཚོ་སྔན་མི་རིགས་དཔེ་སྐྱུང་ཁང་། [Mtsho ngon Nationalities Press]. 283pp. ISBN 978-7-5420-2399-5 (paperback 32RMB).

Phur bu tshe ring is from Gzhis ka rtse District, the Tibet Autonomous Region, which is where the British invasion of Tibet, led by Francis Younghusband (1863-1942), took place. He enjoyed listening to stories in his childhood, including accounts of the invasion. The British invasion cost several thousand, mostly Tibetan, lives, and is an important event in recent Tibetan history. The author claims preserving such history is the primary motivation for writing this novel, which is set in a remote agro-pastoral community.

The State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film, and Television of the People's Republic of China initiated a project related to original art and literature. The novel under review was one of seventy-seven selected works out of 1,237 applications from throughout China. Ranking twentieth among those accepted, it was the only work selected from Qinghai Province (Xinhua 2015). This interest was not unprecedented, i.e., Barnett (2012) writes:

A film, a television series, four plays and an opera have been produced in China since 1997 dramatising the invasion of Tibet by the British in 1903-04. These works were part of an official effort to enhance patriotic spirit among Chinese and Tibetan people through historical example... (195).

The novel under review begins with a couple, Tshul khrims and

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Skyid skyid, concerned about the marriage of their younger son, Rdor rje rig 'dzin. Through matchmaking, Rdor rje rig 'dzin marries Sgrol ma, the beautiful daughter of a farmer. The description of the wedding is detail-oriented, indicating the author's understanding of cultural aspects of the place where he grew up and heard tales of heroic deeds, allowing him to paint the novel with realistic features.

A year after the marriage, Sgrol ma gives birth to a son. The new couple love each other, and their old parents are satisfied with life, enjoying a pleasant life in a beautiful landscape with seasonal agricultural work.

However, news of a British invasion interrupts this dream-like happiness. The Tibetan government drafts young men to create a defense force. Rdor rje rig 'dzin and his friend, Lhun grub, join the force, leaving their wives and young children behind. They then witness the confrontation between ill-equipped Tibetan troops and uniformed modern troops equipped with Maxim guns, heavy artillery, and high-powered rifles.

Negotiation between the two sides fails. The British insist on marching further into Tibetan territory where Tibetan troops ambush the British troops in a forested valley. Rdor rje rig 'dzin and Lhun grub experience hand-to-hand combat. The British forces then take revenge by indiscriminately killing noncombatants.

Amid these hostilities, Rdor rje rig 'dzin and Lhun grub are ordered to disguise themselves as farmers, ascertain the British position, and report their findings. Before returning, they attack the British camp under the cover of night, kill a few soldiers with swords, and then disappear into the darkness.

The Tibetan delegation and British Expedition attempt to negotiate, but there is no successful outcome. The British lure the Tibetans into negotiating and then clandestinely prepare to fire on them. Fighting breaks out and a massacre ensues from the hot muzzles of Maxim guns, resulting in the catastrophic bloodshed of several hundred Tibetan soldiers, including Lhun grub.

Rdor rje rig 'dzin transports his friend's corpse back to his village. Lhun grub's young widow endures the heartbreak that

accompanies her hopeless life and fatherless son. Sgrol ma worries about her husband meeting the same fate. As expected, Rdor rje rig 'dzin is summoned to return to his troops. Before leaving, he kisses his child.

As their casualties mount, the Tibetan leaders mobilize all able-bodied men to help, but this merely slows down the unstoppable British forces. Each advance the British make is at the expense of the poorly-equipped farmer-soldiers.

The British troops seize the last stronghold in Rgyal rtse County where Tibetan soldiers continue resisting from the fortified castle at the top of a rocky hill near the county town. The British army launch an offensive complete with heavy shelling, but all attempts to take the castle fail, owing to the determined, furious defense of the Tibetan soldiers.

Eventually, the Tibetan fighters run out of supplies and ammunition, and must resort to hand-to-hand combat in a hopeless struggle. Many jump off a cliff to avoid capture. Some successfully escape. What happened to the main character? Did his family reunite? Did the nine-eyed sling protect him? Our curiosity keeps us reading to find answers.

Chu mig dgu sgril, the title of this novel, also suggests a sling that features a pattern of nine eyes that is believed to function as a protective amulet. This adds suspense to the main character's fate, given the obvious result when antiquated muzzleloaders and swords encounter Maxim guns and modern rifles.

More than a century has passed since the British invasion of Tibet. The author, though an adult, did not have the benefit of hearing the living memories of those who witnessed the invasion. This presents challenges to composing a novel based on historical facts. The author spent four years on this project. He might have reviewed historical documents drawn from dusty shelves and/or oral narratives in an attempt to restore a true history. Luo (2015), an editor for Mtsho ngon Nationalities Press, states that place names, dates of major events, and the names of important figures involved in this narrative match the historical record.

However, this novel lacks a detailed historical background. What explains the British invasion? The answer is complex, involving geopolitical issues between the British and Russian empires, pertinent events, and treaties. However, the novel simplifies all this convolution into a basic contrast between good and bad, righteous and criminal, brutal invaders and valiant defenders. The British forces are portrayed as vicious, greedy, dishonest, and malicious rapists, looters, thieves, and destroyers of Buddhism.¹ This is in stark contrast to the Tibetans.

The British troops are described using various derogatory adjectives, in sharp contrast to the commendatory terms used to describe Tibetans. This is reminiscent of revolutionary novels and films in China that describe the ruling class of pre-1950s Tibetan government officials. Ironically, this novel portrays Tibetan political and military leaders as willing to sacrifice their lives bravely and patriotically for their homeland.

The British Expedition included Indian and Nepalese soldiers (McKay 2012), however, the author's depictions of British soldiers with features suggest there were only Caucasians. This might mislead readers about the makeup of the British troops.

Rdor rje rig 'dzin and his comrades' personalities are so indistinguishable that they seem to be the same person with different names. They all display righteous courage with a clear demarcation between love and hate. The author could have better characterized the protagonists. Complex human characteristics would have complemented the novel and made it more realistic. Human nature is more than black and white.

The novel vividly portrays how the protagonist is involved in an unbalanced conflict between the British expeditionary troops and locals. The writing is standard, written Tibetan with minimal dialectal influence. Sentences are so well-crafted, succinct, and clear that the novel is a worthy template for young writers wishing to emulate excellent literary Tibetan.

Undoubtedly, the author is passionate about his fellow

¹ See photos taken by Captain William Hayman in 1903 during the British invasion of Tibet at <http://goo.gl/QQtC75> (accessed 25 October 2016).

Tibetans defending their homeland. To what extent is objectivity required when writing historical fiction? The author's answer seems to be a summoning of a patriotic vision rather than a more mundane narration.

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NON-ENGLISH TERMS

chu mig dgu sgril ལུ་མིག་དགུ་སྒྲིལ།

gzhis ka rtse གཙམ་ཀ་རཏེ།

lhun grub ལུན་གུབ།

mtsho sngon mi rigs dpe skrun khang མཚོ་སྔོན་མི་རིགས་དབེ་རྒྱན་ཁང་།

phur bu tshe ring ཕུར་བུ་ཚེ་རིང་།

rdor rje rig 'dzin རྡོ་རྗེ་རིག་འཛིན།

rgyal rtse རྒྱལ་རཏེ།

sgrol ma སྒྲོལ་མ།

skyid skyid སྐྱིད་སྐྱིད།

tshul khrims ལྷུ་ལ་ཁྲིམས།

zi ling ཟི་ལིང་།