APPARITIONS OF RED HORSES:
NARRATIVES OF DESTRUCTION IN BODONGPA
MONASTERIES IN CENTRAL TIBET

JILL SUDBURY

INTRODUCTION

Within the discourse of the Tibetan pro-independence movement, the widespread destruction of monastic institutions has become emblematic of the Chinese presence in Tibet.¹ To the Chinese state, these ‘feudal’ institutions epitomised the ‘old’ Tibet and thus incurred the administration’s ire, attitudes which reached a brutal climax during the Cultural Revolution of 1966–76.² Despite the historic significance of this period, there has been noticeably little written about the violence that overwhelmed Tibet during these years. In part this reflects the extreme discomfiture that this era evokes amongst Tibetans. Although they generally assert that the destruction was wrought by ‘the Chinese’, what is almost never referred to is that much was carried out by Tibetans themselves, albeit under varying degrees of coercion.³ However, whilst the traumas of this period are rarely spoken of, they are certainly not forgotten, especially as the protagonists and their families are often still living within the same communities. Patrick French (2003: 200) quotes a Tibetan who, as a young Red Guard in 1966, had been involved in the desecration of the Jokhang temple, one of the most important shrines in the Tibetan Buddhist world: “It was the Chinese

¹ The official website for the Tibetan government-in-exile states that by 1976, out of a total of 6,259 monasteries and nunneries that had existed in Tibet in 1959, only about eight remained unscathed (www.tibet.com/WhitePaper/white7.html).
² The Cultural Revolution is generally seen as having ceased in 1976, with the death of Mao and the arrests of the Gang of Four, although Mao himself had declared it to be over by 1969.
³ Why Tibetans turned on their own monasteries remains a most complex and painful question. For a thought-provoking perspective from a Chinese historian with an interest in Tibet see Wang Lixiong (2002) and Tsering Shakya’s response (2002).
who killed the sheep, but we were the ones who skinned and gutted it.”

The failure of the Lhasa Uprising in March 1959 and the subsequent flight into exile of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama marked a watershed in Sino-Tibetan relations. 4 This paper examines the legacies of this period from the perspective of those living around a handful of surviving monasteries belonging to the small Bodongpa tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. Whilst I was conducting fieldwork in Tibet on the revival of this tradition, it was necessary to discuss the monastery’s circumstances before 1959 and its subsequent destruction. It quickly became clear to me that the way in which the monastery had been destroyed continued to have serious ramifications for the course of its reconstruction, which in all cases was still taking place. In the often deeply painful and awkward conversations that I had with the monks, a notable narrative structure emerged. This drew heavily on a Buddhist model of order and karmic consequence to not only describe past events, but also to express the complex emotions that many still felt for those within their own communities who had been involved in these acts of destruction.

THE TARGETING OF MONASTERIES

On 23 March 1959 the red flag of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) was hoisted above the Potala, signalling the end of the Lhasa Uprising. To the incoming communist ideologues, the monastic institutions were one of the three ‘evils’ of the ‘old’ society and thus a target of the nascent regime’s attention. 5 They were also singled out for being at the heart of rebellions that had been costly to the regime’s advance, particularly the Khampa revolt in eastern Tibet, which was finally suppressed in 1957–58, 6 and the Lhasa Uprising.

---

4 See Tsering Shakya (1999: 237–75) for a comprehensive account of the rapidly changing events of this time.
5 The other two ‘evils’ were the aristocratic estate-holders and the Tibetan Government (Shakya 1999: 248).
6 This had resulted in large numbers of Khampa refugees flooding into Central Tibet. Thousands took refuge in Lhasa, where they received considerable support from the monasteries there. These would later be severely punished by the PLA for providing assistance (Tsering Shakya 1999: 155, 253). At the Bodongpa monastery of Pelmo Choeding, far to the west, older members of the community recalled that