

SALC 25200 Intro to Tibetan Literature
Week 7:

**Women in Tibetan
Literature**

Update on Final Projects and Presentation week

- ***Reminder: 2-para summary for Final project due Friday May 16th (11:59pm). Email instructor with questions!***
 - Graduating seniors must present Thursday May 29th, submit final projects by 11:59pm Thursday June 5th; Remaining students will present Tuesday June 3rd, must submit final projects by Thursday June 12th (11:59pm).
 - Presentations should be approximately 15-20 minutes in length (no more than 25 minutes). Can include written, oral/aural, visual, audio-visual, or performative components. Methods of presenting and mediums for presenting are up to the discretion of the presenter. Presentation should, however, engage in the themes of the final project. This is your opportunity for feedback from everyone!!
- Submission of drafts for final project/paper encouraged! (with 48 hours notice allowed for feedback)
- Optional *Milarepa* viewing beginning Tuesday June 3rd after final presentation?

Changes to Syllabus and Course Requirements

Changes to policy for Piazza postings:

- Every week, each student is expected to reply either to one of the discussion questions posted on Piazza or reply to fellow students' responses for a combined total of two posts per week.
- Postings can be made either before or after class discussion.. Students who alternatively choose to post their own discussion questions will earn extra credit (*1/2 pt added to the final paper grade per question per week*).

Changes to readings for Week 8:

Check piazza for updated syllabus!

Outline of Lecture

- I. Androcentrism and Misogyny in Tibet
- II. Women in Tibet, a brief history:
 - A. Women of power/ influence during the Imperial Period (7th-9th centuries CE)
 - B. “Spiritually Accomplished” women from the 11th-12th centuries
 - i. Machig Labdron, Vajrayogini and *gcod* practices
 - ii. Machig Zhama
 - iii. Nangsa Obum
- III. Female figures in literature: *dakinis*, nuns, and Orgyan Chokyi

I. Androcentrism and Misogyny in Tibet

- Linguistically, *skye dman* (“low birth”)--the most common term for “woman,” used since at least the 11th century– derives from a notion found in Buddhist ideology
- Misogyny also found in medical traditions (*rgyud bzhi*, *Ayurveda*): 32 extra illnesses only women have
- These views, in turn are not uncommonly invoked by Tibetan Buddhist authors.

So where do we see women in Tibetan history?

A. Tibetan Women of power/influence during the Imperial Period (7th-9th centuries CE)

B. “Spiritually Accomplished” women from the 11th-12th centuries

- i. Machig Labdron, Vajrayogini and *gcod* practices
- ii. Machig Zhama
- iii. Nangsa Obum

C. Alternate ‘careers’ for women in Tibet (next class!)

A. Tibetan Women of power/influence during the Imperial Period (7th-9th centuries CE)

- Only a few known from this period, all of which were noble. and most of which were related to King Songtsen Gampo
- Information about these women found described in certain historical documents: *Annals*, the *Geneology*, the *Chronicle*, all of which were discovered recently from the Dunhuang cave site.
- Imperial inscriptions and Bell inscriptions mention female patrons
- Titles documented for women during this time are telling: ***trichen*** (“throne holder”), ***mangmoje*** (“soverign lady of many”), and even ***tsenmo*** (queen, female form of *tsenpo*)

Empress Trimalo

- Considered to be the de facto regent of the Tibetan empire; the consort of Emperor Manglon Mangtsen (7th century)
- Records of her political involvement exist
- After the Emperor Tridusong (her son) died in 704 CE, she was de facto regent until her grandson (Tride Tsugtsen) came “of age” in 712 (age 8), but was politically active for a period spanning 30+ years.

See Helga Uebch, “Ladies of the Tibetan Empire (7th-9th Centuries CE)” in *Women in Tibet: Past and Present* (29-48)

B. “Spiritually Accomplished” women from the 11th-12th centuries

Exact numbers of accomplished female Buddhists difficult to ascertain because of predomination of male monastic institutions as responsible for record keeping.

Three women of note in particular during this time period:

Machig Labdron

Machig Zhama

Nangsa Obum

See Martin, Dan. 2006. “The Woman Illusion? Research into the Lives of Spiritually Accomplished Women Leaders of the 11th and 12th Centuries.” In *Women in Tibet: Past and Present*

Machig Labdron (dates uncertain)

- 11th century disciple of Phadampa Sangye, famous for establishing the 'Cho' ("cutting") lineage, which became popular in Nyingma, Bonpo, and Dzogchen traditions in particular.
- Believed to be the emanation (*tulku*) of the great yogini, Yeshe Tsogyal, consort to Padmasambhava. among others.
- As a child and young woman, Machig made a living as a liturgy reader. Patrons would hire her to read the 'The Perfection of Wisdom', a Mahayana Sutra, in their homes as a form of blessing and to gain merit. Machig was known to be a fast reader and so was in much demand as this meant that she could complete the entire text quickly and her patrons would have to pay for fewer meals for her while she read.
- Her biography tells us that she left home to try to avoid traditional marriage. Later married Indian Indian Pandita Topa Draya, a Buddhist practitioner. Her second son became one of her main successors.

Why is Machig Labdron so important?

- Machig's *gcod* lineage/practice continues to the present day
- There remain today incarnations/emenations of Machig today in both Tibet and the West. Possibly the longest known continuous female lineage in Tibetan Buddhism

What is *gcod*?

- ‘Cho’ (*gcod*), “cutting” is a kind of spiritually sophisticated ‘exorcism’ of the inner and outer demons that hinder the attainment of knowledge and enlightenment
- Historically, ‘Cho’ was a marginal and peripheral *sadhana*, practiced outside traditional Tibetan Buddhist and Indian Tantric institutions.
- The Third Karmapa (1284–1339) was a very important systematizer of Chod teachings (including those of Machig Labdron) and significantly assisted in their promulgation within the literary and practice lineages of Kagyupa, Nyingmapa and particularly Dzogchen
- Machig’s *gcod* is alternatively called *Mahamudra gcod*.

Vajrayogini and gcod

Vajrayoginī is a key figure in the advanced Tibetan Buddhist practice of Chöd, where she appears in her Kālikā (Tibetan: Khros ma nag mo) or Vajravārāhī (Tibetan: rDo rje phag mo) forms. The practices of Tröma Nagmo (The Extremely Wrathful Black Mother) associated with the Dakini Troma Nagmo (the black form of Vajrayogini), were also propagated by great Machig Labdron





Iconographically, Machig Labdrön is often depicted with the attributes of a [dakini](#), a representation of enlightened female energy.

Machig Labdron, the Tibetan Yogini

Painting, 19th century

Medium: Pigments on cloth

Current location

Rubin Museum of Art (RMA)

Machik Labdrön's *Prayer to All Lineages*

English translation

I supplicate the father lineage of method.

I supplicate the mother lineage of wisdom.

I supplicate the non-dual lineage of meaning.

I supplicate the lineage of fortunate ones with experience.

I supplicate the Chöd lineage of siddhas.

I supplicate the symbolic lineage of the dakinis.

I supplicate the lineage of powerful dharma protectors.

Bless me so that I may develop disgust
For deluded appearances and worldly activities.

Bless me so that I may stop cherishing
This illusory body of the four elements.

Bless me to develop the ability to
experience the single flavor

Of discordant conditions, sickness,
demons and obstacles.

Bless me to know the inherent nature
Of all that appears, the miraculous
display of my mind.

Bless me to gain independence
Within self-awareness, the
spontaneously present three kayas.

Generally, may I and sentient beings
of the six realms,

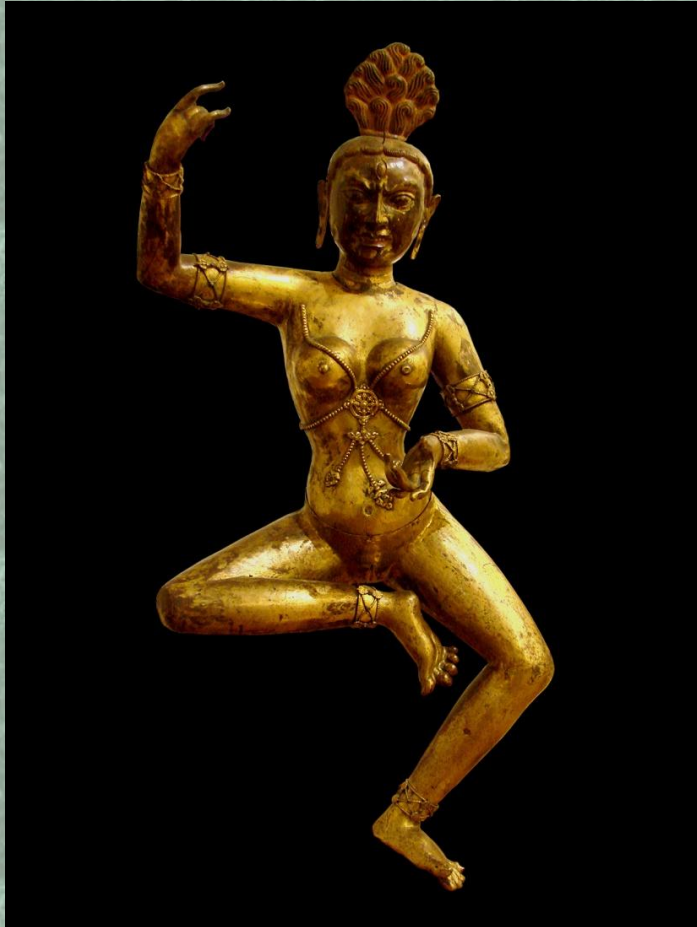
Having abandoned the cause, the
stain of dualism,

Attain unsurpassable enlightenment.

Machig Zhama (1062-1149)

- Famous for *Lamdre* (lam 'bras, “path and result”) teachings, which were and remain popular within Sakya lineages.
- married at age 14; pretended to be insane to escape her marriage!
- Age 16-21 she was a consort of the Ma translator Gewe Lodro (1044-89)
- She (later) also studied with Phadampa Sangye, among others.

III. Female figures in literature: *dakinis*, nuns, and Orgyan Chokyi



Dancing dakini, Tibet, c. 18th century



Jetsün Khandro Rinpoché.

Recap of Lecture

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Outline for today's class

I. Finish up/recap Tuesday's topics:

- A. “Spiritually Accomplished” women from the 11th-12th centuries
 - i. Machig Labdron, Vajrayogini and *gcod* practices
 - ii. Machig Zhama
 - iii. Nangsa Obum

II. The cult of Tara in Tibet – a female Bodhisattva

III. Women as authors of Literature - Orgyan Chokyi's autobiography

IV. If they aren't writing, what are they doing? – alternate 'careers' for women in Tibet

Nangsa Obum



Recall the *Weaving Song* from Week 5!!!

A Weaving Song by Nangsa Obum

Homage to the master, the personal deities, and the muses.
May you look with compassion upon us women without religion.

Listen here, you girls my age.
Listen with your ears to Nangsa the revenant.

This girl's weaving tools will serve as examples,
As I sing a song to turn your thoughts to Dharma.

If this four-footed structure dragged on the ground
Were a thatched hut for one—what a joy it would be.

If this four-corned seat spread out below,
Were a small meditation pillow—what a joy it would be.

If I, the revenant Nangsa Öbum,
Were a contemplative—what a joy it would be.

If you, happy servant women gathered here,
Were bringing provisions for a retreat—what a joy it would be.

...

...

If this bag full of discarded ends
Were samsara discarded—what a joy it would be.

If these matching joints now joined
Were bliss and emptiness united—how happy I would be.

.....

If the take-up reel that rolls the finished cloth
Were the two accumulations of wisdom and merit complete—how
happy I would be.

...

If working the loom fiber back and forth
Were exchanging self for others—what a joy it would be.

If 84,000 strands of fiber
Were the good Dharma of the sutras and tantras—how happy I
would be.

If this white cloth, supple and long,
Were this girl's good motivation—what a joy it would be.

What is a *dakini* in literature? What role(s) does the *dakini* play in the transmission and interpretation of the dharma for Jigme Lingpa?

What features become associated with 'feminine' through the *dakini* figure? How does this differ from the features of a celibate nun?

Can a *dakini* be an empowering figure for women?

The Cult of Tara

"Then, from the monkey Bodhisattva, an incarnation of Avalokitesvara, and the rock ogress, an incarnation of Tara, there sprang the Tibetan people."

-- *Red Annals* (written by monk Kunga Dorje in 1346).

Compare this to the account we read previously from the Clear Mirror (written by Sakyapa Sönam Gyaltsen: 1312-1375)



Fig. 1. White Tara. From a wood-block print by Roger Williams.

Atisha's role in the cult of Tara

- *Recall from week 4:* Atisha was one of the four major Buddhist figures of the “Late Spread” period (11th-14th century): Indian Buddhist philosopher who was invited to Tibet.
- Described in later biographical accounts as a devotee of Tara:
"Atisha's life was filled with visions of the goddess; when he was young, she induced him to leave behind thoughts of royal power and seek a teacher in another country. It was the goddess who persuaded him to go to Tibet, in spite of his advanced age: "And when Atisha asked Tara, she prophesied: 'If you go, your life will be shortened; but you will advance the teachings and benefit many beings, and chief among them a certain devotee.' And so he agreed."
- Atisha translated several hymns, rituals texts, etc. related to Tara and additionally composed some devotional liturgy.
- The Gelukpa sect, which considers itself the heirs to Atisha's Kadampa sect, in particular revere Tara

Suffering and Gender in Orgyan Chokyi

*What is unique about the rhetoric of the body
Orgyan Chokyi uses in her autobiography?*

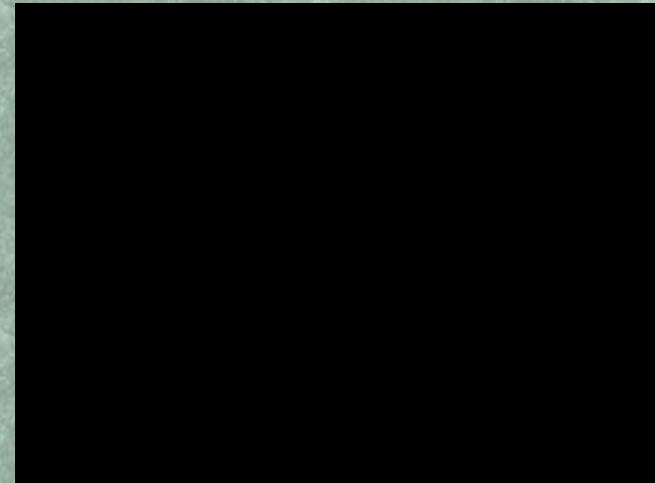
*What can we learn about the status of women and
female nuns through her autobiography?*

*What does her autobiography tell us about Orgyan
Chokyi's understanding of the relationship
between gender and suffering?*

Themes in Orgyan's Chokyi's Autobiography

- Suffering of women
- Suffering of animals
- Suffering from death
 - Impermanance!
- What in particular struck you about her autobiography?
- What distinguishes it from some of the male autobiographies and biographies we've read and discussed?

If they aren't writing, what are they doing?



Circumambulation (korra) around the Boudhanath stupa in Kathmandu, Nepal

Alternate 'careers' for Tibetan women?

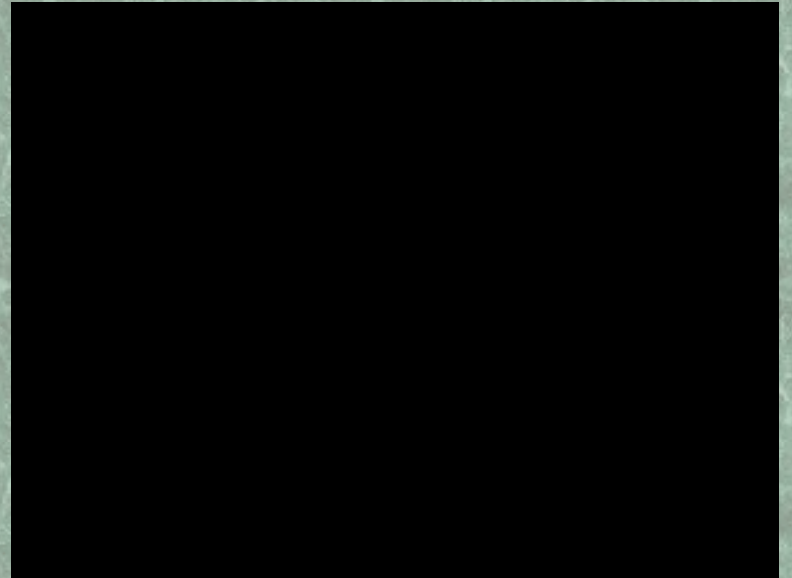
- **Female Oracles:** the majority of oracles recorded in modern history of Tibet are female (though high-ranking 'important' oracles tend to be male).
- **Female physicians:** although academic institutions administered by the Tibetan government were set up for males (including that of the traditional medicine institution 'Men-tsi-khang'), female physicians were quite prominent in pre-1959 Tibet. Educational opportunities for medicine expanded in exile and in post-1959 Tibet.
- **Performing arts:** especially in the modern period, performing arts a popular vocation for women

Female Oracle in Sabhu, Leh, Ladakh

Performing arts in Tibet

- “separate expressive spheres” for men and women in traditional Tibetan performing arts: body language, costume, behavior, assertiveness
(cf Ellen Koskoff 1989:10)
- ‘Street’ songs performed by low-literate, often regardless of gender.
- Being a performer was not a mark of status; depending on it for livelihood was!
- Social status dependent not on occupation, but whether it was the primary means of earning money.
- If performance was a side occupation, then (regardless of level of proficiency), they would have a very different social status thus in this respect women’s status was the same as men’s.
- “livelihood from roaming” (*sa-zhing-med-pa*) versus “livelihood from one’s own fields” (*sa-zhing-yod-pa*)

*Compare the following 2013 monastic **cham** to a 2009 performance of traditional song by TIPPA...*



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