

ACCTIL 14A1 Tibetan Literature
Week 6:

**Women in Tibetan
Literature**

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
- III. Female figures in literature: *dakinis*, nuns, and Orgyan Chokyi
- IV. Alternate ‘careers’ for Tibetan women?

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

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- Information about these women found described in certain historical documents: *Annals*, the *Geneology*, the *Chronicle*, all of which were discovered recently from the Dunhuang cave site.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

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.

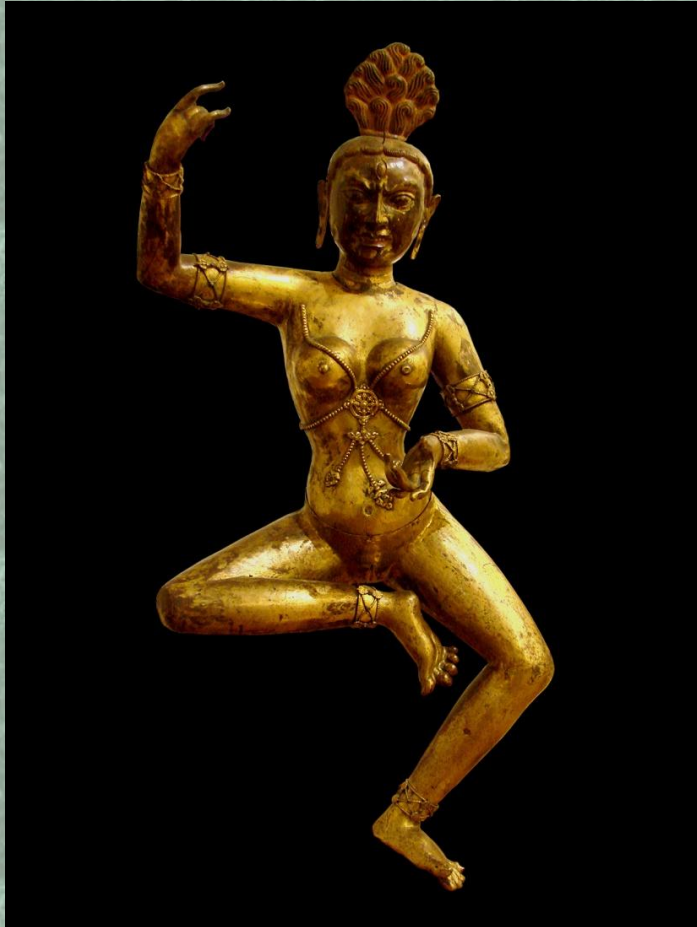
Bless me to gain independence
Within self-awareness, the
spontaneously present three kayas.

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.

Nangsa Obum



Nangsa Obum

- Nangsa Obum's story inspires numerous dramatic retellings of her life in Tibet: her story becomes the basis for 7 or 8 different dramas!
- See *Himalayan Hermitess* p. 59-61 for dramatic interpretation of her life!

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.

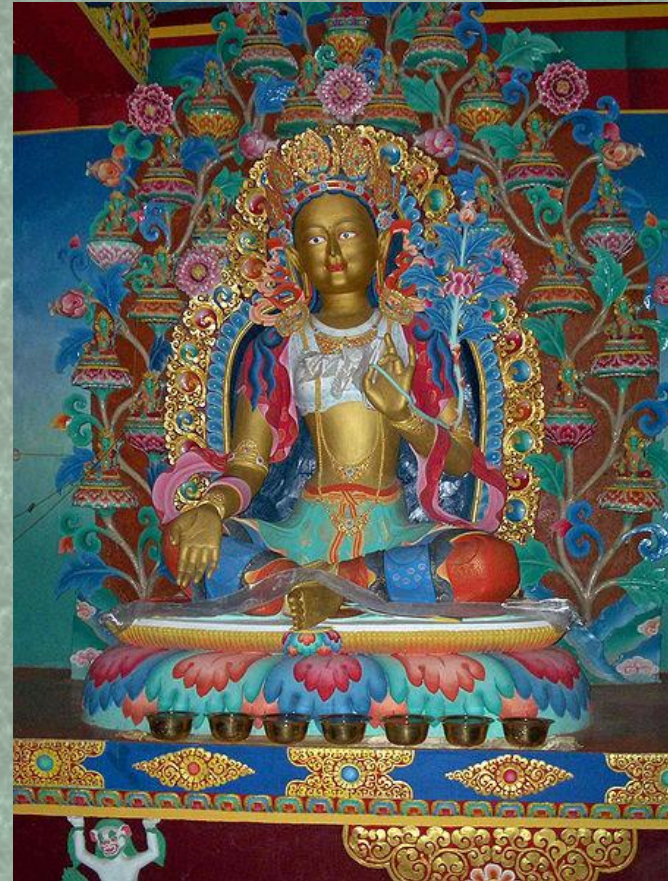
If 84,000 strands of fiber
Were the good Dharma of the sutras and tantras—how happy I
would be.

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

White Tara



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



For a common White Tara Sadhana practice practiced today (in English translation), see: http://www.fpmt-osel.org/meditate/white_tara.htm

Fast-forward to the 17th-18th century:

What roles did women occupy in Tibetan Buddhist culture?

- *Nuns*
- *Patrons of various Buddhist activities: including writing, publishing, temples, ritual activity, etc.*
- *Temple keepers*
- *Hermits (meditators)*

Orgyan Chokyi

- Studied primarily under Orgyan Tenzin, a popular teacher in Dolpo area of Mustang (modern-day Himalayas in Nepal)
- Influenced by both Nyingma and Kagyu Buddhist traditions
- Patronized the writings of **Tenzin Repa**, another Buddhist master (and hermit!) in the Dolpo region who himself supported and gave instruction to groups of female meditators.

Women as patrons

- Though women were clearly involved in contemplative practices in Dolpo and nearby Himalayan regions, we do not see them being recognized at this time as great teachers, leaders of lineages, leaders at monasteries, etc. Instead we see them listed as patrons for various Buddhist activity.
- Recall that royal patronage by noblewomen, is documented in Tibet as far back as the Yarlung dynasty (7th-8th century).
- Patronizing varied from extensive (e.g. 16 Indian coins by the Queen of Mustang) to modest (e.g. 1 Indian coin by Orgyan Chokyi to Tenzin Repa's *Life* and 5 coins to his *Oral Instructions*). Livestock, grain and other agricultural products were commonly donated by women as well.

The Life of Orgyan Chokyi

- Earliest dateable Tibetan women's autobiography
- Contains over 125 distinct references to **suffering**, depression, lamentation and pain; nearly 40 references to tears and weeping
- *Joy in freedom of solitude? (169-173)*

‘Suffering’ (Tib: *dukngal*) in Tibetan Buddhism

Gampopa’s *Jewel Ornament of Realization*

Three types of suffering

- **Suffering of conditioned existence:** (Pali: *sankhara-dukkha*; Skt: *samskara-duhkha*;
The fact that suffering is pervasive; it exists everywhere. The deepest most subtle level of suffering)
- **Suffering of change:** (Pali: *viparinama-dukkha*; Skt: *vipariṇāma-duhkha*;
Suffering arising from the anxiety or stress of trying to hold onto what is desirable; the frustration of not getting what you want.
- **Suffering of suffering:** (Pali: *dukkha-dukkha*; Skt: *duhkha-duhkhata*;
Pain, suffering of ordinary activities; suffering from ageing, illness and dying, etc.

Suffering in Orgyan Chokyi's Autobiography

What forms of suffering do we see described?

Can you point to examples of the three types of suffering in this autobiography?

Women, Men, Suffering

Suffering Society (p. 96 in HH)

Examples from text: 157-61, 166,

Suffering Sexual Difference (p. 98 in HH)

Examples from text: 131, 133, 142-3, 149,

Themes of Suffering in Orgyan's Chokyi's Autobiography

- Suffering of women
- Suffering of animals
- Suffering from death
 - Impermanance!
- Suffering due to frustrations inreligious life: difficulties in meditation practice, lack of opportunities for retreat, social obligations, obligation to patrons, etc.

Orgyan Chokyi's work as '*Namthar*' (Tibetan biography)

*What is unique about the the descriptions 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?

What distinguishes this piece from some of the male autobiographies and biographies we've read and discussed?

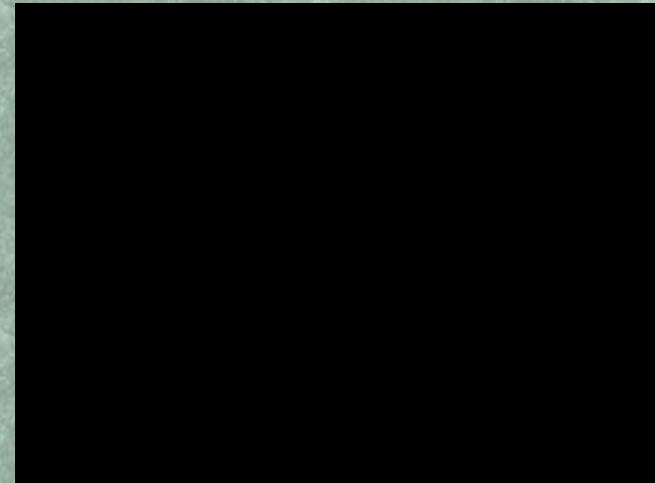
Nuns, *dakinis*, and the Dharma

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?

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



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

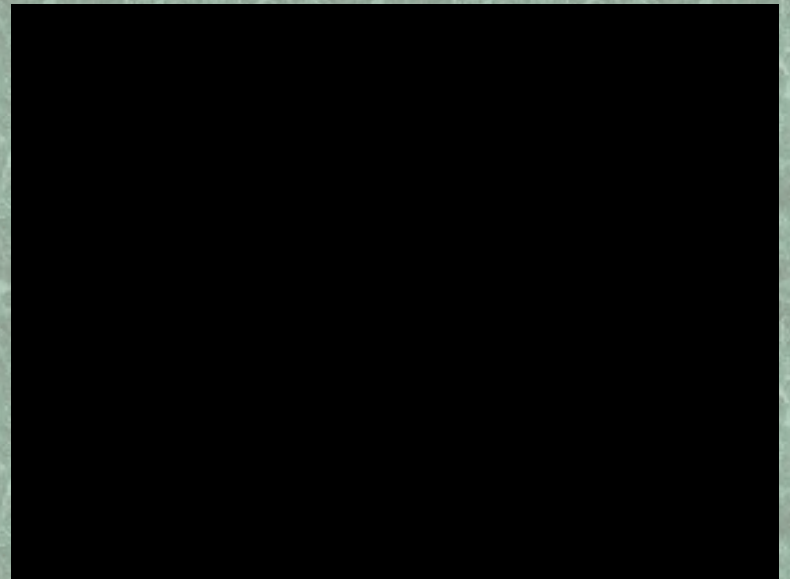
Alternate 'careers' for women in modern Tibet?

- **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 has become a popular vocation for women

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...*



Tibetan Women in Performing Arts Today?

From Yarki 2012