

Gender in Tibetan Buddhist Societies 17th–20th centuries



4–5 June 2015

Conference of the Franco-German Project

“Social History of Tibetan Societies, 17th to 20th Centuries”

in collaboration with the NWO project

“Buddhism and Social Justice”

Gravensteen, Pieterskerkhof 6, Leiden



THURSDAY 4 JUNE

9h45–10h00

Welcome and Introduction

10h00–10h15

Report on Project Publications and Website

Thursday Morning Session

Chair: Hildegard Diemberger

10h15–10h45

Yael Bentor: *Women on the way to Enlightenment*

10h45–11h15

Tea/Coffee

11h15–11h45

Peter Schwieger: *Buddhist Tantric Practices: A Place Destined for Love?*

11h45–12h15

Hanna Havnevik: *Tantric Consorts and Single Mothers in 19th- and 20th-Century Tibet*

12h15–12h45

Berthe Jansen: *A Threat to Gods and Monks? Women in and around the Monastery in Pre-modern Tibet*

12h45–14h30

Lunch

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Thursday Afternoon Session

Chair: Peter Schwieger

14h30–15h00

Alice Travers: *Witnesses and Actresses of their Time: Tibetan Noblewomen's Role between Discourse and Practice (1895–1951)*

15h00–15h30

Nicola Schneider: *Tibet's First Feminist Movement. The Patriotic Women's Association in Lhasa, 1952–1959*

15h30–16h00

Tea/Coffee

16h00–16h30

Jeannine Bischoff: *A Bond for Life? Marriage Contracts in Pre-1959 Tibet*

16h30–17h00

Charles Ramble: *Does Gender Matter? How Women Fare in Tibetan Documents from Nineteenth-century Nepal.*



FRIDAY 5 JUNE

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Morning Session

Chair: Yael Bentor

10h00–10h15

Fernanda Pirie: *“Men can do anything”*: *Tibetan Gender Myths and the Interpretation of History*

10h15–10h45

Petra Maurer: *Married Women as Adulteresses:
Do they Live in the Wrong Place?*

10h45–11h15

Tea/Coffee

11h15–11h45

Heidi Fjeld: *Gender Models and Gender Practices: Representation of Women in the Early 20th
Century Tibetan Medical History and Some Implications for Gender Analyses*

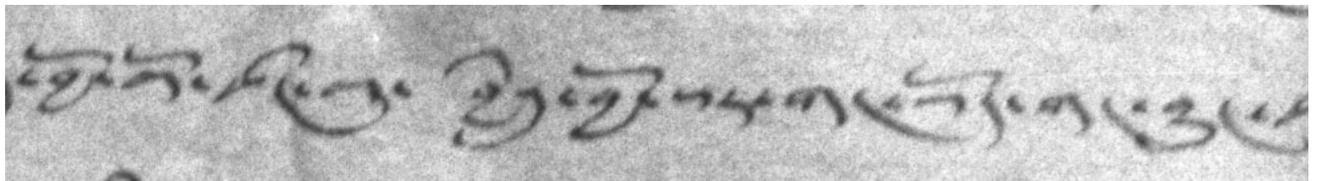
11h45–12h15

Hildegard Diemberger: *Women as Leaders and Patrons: the Exception or the Rule?*

12h15–12h45

Lunch

END



ABSTRACTS

Yael Bentor: *Women on the Way to Enlightenment*

His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, while giving a series of lectures on Tibetan Buddhism in London in 1988, addressed certain issues of concern to an audience that might be largely described as western and modern. One of the topics he discussed was the attitude towards women in Tibetan Buddhism. The Dalai Lama explained (*The World of Tibetan Buddhism* 1995: 113-4) that in the Vinaya, as well as in the so-called Hīnayāna and the Mahāyāna, there is some discrimination against women. However, the Dalai Lama said:

The position of Highest Yoga Tantra is different... [Here], for example, in the *Guhyasamāja Root Tantra*, the possibility of a female practitioner becoming fully enlightened in her lifetime in female form is stated explicitly and unambiguously... Therefore, from the ultimate viewpoint in Buddhism, that of Highest Yoga Tantra, there is no discrimination based on gender.

We might assume that most of the Dalai Lama's audience in London found this position quite agreeable.

On the other hand, most of previous studies of women in Vajrayāna have come to a very different conclusion. Even Miranda Shaw, while writing her book *Passionate Enlightenment* (1994) with the expressed purpose of demonstrating the great significance of women in Vajrayāna, supplied many examples to the contrary. If indeed women were only denigrated and sexually exploited in their practice of Vajrayāna, it would seem to follow that the Dalai Lama, was not presenting the actual position of "Tibetan Buddhism" on this question. One might even suspect that the Dalai Lama adjusted his presentation to accord with the expectations of an audience presumed to be largely feminist in outlook.

In my paper I will present some arguments of Indian and Tibetan writers that address this issue of the position of women in Vajrayāna, and in particular the question of their potentials: Can women attain enlightenment by means of Vajrayāna practices?

Jeannine Bischoff: *A Bond for Life? Marriage Contracts in Pre-1959 Tibet*

In *The People of Tibet* (1928), Charles Bell states that: "Although the Tibetan woman enjoys so great a measure of independence, yet in the choice of her husband, the most important event of her life, she is apt to have little, if any, share". While Bell poses this as a general observation of Tibetan society, the situation becomes even more complicated when we look at marriage patterns among the ordinary people of Central Tibet. For them not only was the family relevant in finding a husband, but they also had to seek approval by the estate lord to whom the marrying parties were personally bound. There is a maximum of four types of legal documents related to marriage between ordinary

people: a request for the marriage; the approval of the estate lord; the contract over the *mi bogs* fee in case the marriage was to involve another estate and, the most interesting type, the marriage contract. Two examples of these contracts will be analysed along with further, though shorter, marriage-related documents. Marriage was, in a way, an economic and political transaction that organized work along the lines of age and gender, as well as being a means of ensuring an adequate labour force to maintain the family business, in this case farming and cattle breeding. All these considerations are incorporated in the marriage contracts available, along with a sense of morality and righteousness that seems to be a standard feature of Tibetan contracts. This presentation seeks to further our knowledge about the legal aspects of marriage among ordinary people in pre-1959 Tibet.

Hildegard Diemberger: *Women as Leaders and Patrons: the Exception or the Rule?*

A few female biographies have recently cast light on the lives of extraordinary women. Often these have been treated as exceptions in a world that was largely male dominated. Looking at newly discovered materials from the 15th and the 16th century I am going to explore women's involvement in wider networks of patronage and political alliances. From a closer scrutiny of historical sources a large number of less famous figures emerge. This raises the question of whether a comparable pattern can be identified in later periods or whether the establishment of the dGa' ldan pho brang represented a radical transformation in relation to women's participation in political and religious life.

Heidi Fjeld: *Gender Models and Gender Practices: Representation of Women in the Early 20th Century Tibetan Medical History and Some Implications for Gender Analyses*

Exploring the roles given to women in Tibetan medical history in the first part of the 20th century, I propose to investigate both Tibetan gender ideologies and the scholarly representations of female Tibetan medical practitioners, suggesting that these models and representations to a certain degree obscure gender practices. I will further argue that gender models might conceal other forms of social classification that have also been significant to women's lives and status.

Although the learning and practice of Tibetan medicine have been closely connected to monastic institutions and hence dominated by men, this knowledge also lived within medical lineages. Most commonly, this transmission passed from father to son and uncle to nephew, but also descended from father to daughter, uncle to niece, and mother to daughter and son. The last three are, however, often described as exceptional. Questioning what this 'exceptional' status of women in Tibetan medical lineages entails, I suggest that an over-emphasis on (patri-)lineages produces a skewed representation of gendered practices. Inspired by studies of Tibetan kinship, I

suggest that the concept of the ‘house’ provides a useful and encompassing tool for analysing the transmission and practice of Tibetan medicine outside lay and monastic institutions, as it draws out the relations between what are termed medical lineages (*sman gyi rgyud*) and medical houses (*sman grong*).

Through examples from Tibetan medical history combined with gendered household relations and gender manipulation practices, I suggest a broader framework founded in social organisation, gender roles (as opposed to gender models) and class as ways to nuance our analyses of gendered practices in Tibetan Buddhist societies.

Hanna Havnevik: “*Tantric Consorts and Single Mothers in 19th- and 20th-Century Tibet*”

We have little detailed information about the situation of women in particular social and economic milieus in pre-modern Tibet. This is because Tibetan women normally did not write about their lives, but also because we have not paid sufficient attention to the traces of women’s lives in different genres of Tibetan texts. Not fully utilized yet as sources of historical data, Tibetan religious biographies give abundant information, not only about Tibetan notions of gender but also about historical women’s reflections and agency in actual religious communities. Although hagiographical narratives often offer descriptions of conflated and idealized female characters, we may also find descriptions of actual women and their everyday lives.

Based on the close reading of the biographies of the Nyingma and Rime masters Thrulshig Kunsang Thongdrol Dorje (1862–1922) and Ani Lochen (1865–1951), this paper discusses the social and economic situations of their mothers, who roamed the Tibetan plateau for decades and brought up their children as single mothers. These women, Tashi Tsomo and Penpa Dronma, did not find satisfaction in household life and left their family and friends in search of religious fulfilment among fellow tantric wanderers. How did they earn a living? How were they treated by their religious companions? How were they regarded in society? And how did they manage to stake out religious careers for themselves and their children? Although this presentation discusses the lives of only two Tibetan women, ethnographic studies of contemporary Tibetan societies show that their social predicaments were not unique.

Berthe Jansen: *A Threat to Gods and Monks? Women in and around the Monastery in Pre-modern Tibet*

Women regularly entered the monastic space in Tibet. Their reasons for doing so varied: these included making social calls, engaging in religious activities, and performing corvee labour. Monastic guidelines (*bca’ yig*) written between the 17th and the 20th centuries often restricted the movement of women within monastic grounds. In this paper I discuss why certain monastic authors

of these texts argued that women—at certain times or in certain specific places—were not to be allowed in. I will further argue that to a lesser extent these rules also demonstrate that women were not always seen as an unwelcome presence and that they were of some significance for the maintenance of the monastery.

Petra Maurer: *Married Women as Adulteresses:
Do they Live in the Wrong Place?*

When we read *Nag-rtsis* texts from the perspective of gender, they reveal certain dimensions that would otherwise remain obscured. In the signs of the zodiac, for example, the *spar kha* or *sa sgo* and *gnam sgo* are categorized as *pho* and *mo*. In *Sa-dpyad*, which is a branch of *Nag-rtsis*, we also find places that are categorized as male, female and neutral. The topography of a place is used to determine its gender; gender then seems to have an especially strong influence on the construction of cemeteries and the burial of the dead, according to the sex of the person buried. Furthermore, the topography of a place obviously has a gendered influence: places with a certain shape are said to influence only the life and character of women; other sites only affect the lives of men. There are places that turn married woman into adulteresses, but there are no sites that will cause a man to be an adulterer. In the paper I would like to present some of the details regarding gender in *nag rtsis* in general and gendered concepts of the land. In examining these aspects, I would like to ask what, if anything, they reveal about the social position of women.

Fernanda Pirie: *“Men can do anything”: Tibetan Gender Myths
and the Interpretation of History.*

Should we believe what Tibetans—or, indeed, any people—say about women? Gender categories, distinctions, and relations are the subject of representations in literature, historical and legal texts, songs, film, or art. But they are also played out on a practical level, in inheritance customs, family structures, economic and labour relations, social rules and restrictions, and interpersonal dynamics. One set of categories and representations may well not map neatly onto another, even within one society or social context. In this presentation I discuss the representation of Amdo women in popular sayings—“men can do anything”—and the favouritism displayed towards boys over girls, which seems blatantly to misrepresent the capacity of women to manage tents and herds without significant help from their menfolk. I also consider the representation of Ladakhi women in songs, tales, and films, which often contrasts markedly from lived experience and the subtle ways in which structural differences in status and wealth are undermined by social practices and personal interactions. These examples suggest that while representations of gender might reflect or influence practice, representations and practices might also run in parallel, each with their own dynamics. I

use these reflections to consider the brief mention of women in the legal texts known as the *zhal lce*, where they are disqualified as oath-takers, on the basis that family loyalty renders their testimony unreliable.

Charles Ramble: *Does Gender Matter? How Women Fare in Tibetan Documents from Nineteenth-century Nepal.*

Most accounts concerning gender relations in the different ethnic groups of Nepal remark on the relative equality that characterises Tibetan-speaking communities. A number of systematic anthropological studies have challenged this image of parity, most notably perhaps Sidney Schuler's *The Women of Baragaon*, based on fieldwork conducted in Southern Mustang in the 1970s. But what do we know about gender relations in the same area in the period before living memory? To answer this question we need to examine the evidence of local archives from this period. The documents are diverse, comprising contracts, wills, dispute settlements, local agreements, tax records, revolving funds, divorces and separations, and the entire archive of a long-defunct nunnery. While accepting that—as in the case of religious works—these documents do not necessarily reflect the unrecorded day-to-day reality, they do enable us to determine what, if any, differences in gender were enshrined in the legal record.

Nicola Schneider: *Tibet's First Feminist Movement. The Patriotic Women's Association in Lhasa, 1952–1959*

Shortly after the Chinese invasion and the signing of the 17-Point Agreement, Tibet saw the foundation of its first women's movement: the Tibetan Patriotic Women's Association (*Bod ljongs rgyal gces bud med tshogs pa*). Initiated by the wives of Chinese generals and composed of a majority of Tibetan women with aristocratic backgrounds, this association ceased to function in March 1959 when the interests of its members began to diverge strongly. This presentation will trace the functioning and activities of Tibet's very first feminist movement while trying to answer the question of why Tibetans have to this day been so ambivalent about women's issues.

Peter Schwieger: *Buddhist Tantric Practices: A Place Destined for Love?*

Why do we need to ask this question here yet again, since it has already been answered by several authors in the context of Hindu and Buddhist Tantrism? And all have answered in the negative. One of the last clear statements was by Janet Gyatso: “there is no talk of love, nor any celebration of the union of sexes” (Gyatso 195).

Last year Sarah Jacoby published a book entitled *Love and Liberation*, a study of the biographical writings of a female Tibetan Tantric practitioner from the first half of the twentieth century. In her study Jacoby broaches in particular the issue of consort relationships in Tibetan religious communities; the question of whether or not love might be involved pervades the whole book. She traces quite a few indications in the biographical writings that suggest that, in the case studied by her, love was indeed involved.

Reflecting on the general statements regarding this issue that have been made by various scholars, as well as on Sarah Jacoby’s book, I noticed that no one had ever made a detailed analysis of the gender-related stereotypes contained in Tibetan Tantric ritual manuals that reflect the normative side of the question to be discussed here. Thus, the aim of this paper is to bring these basic texts into the discussion.

Alice Travers: *Witnesses and Actresses of their Time: Tibetan Noblewomen’s Role between Discourse and Practice (1895-1951)*

If historical sources are particularly scarce regarding Tibetan commoner women—a fact that renders the task of the historian difficult—it is not at all the case for noble women, who have produced a number of autobiographical and biographical writings and appear in other types of sources as well. The role of Tibetan noblewomen is often reduced to the family and intimate space, but this presentation chooses to focus on the question of their role and autonomy—and their limits—in the most crucial spheres of aristocratic identity, that is, lineage transmission and public space. The analysis will be based on two opposite kinds of sources which allow us to explore representations and practices: on the one hand, the life stories of noblewomen as recounted in eight autobiographies and from interviews conducted with 22 of them; and on the other, British archives, a typically “double-mediated” source, from the male and the colonialist point of view. We will see how representations of noblewomen as privileged “spectators” of their time are conveyed by their own discourses in their writings, and how at the same time their role as autonomous actresses in public life surfaces in the sources. This study of Tibetan noblewomen in pre-1951 Central Tibet will allow us to deepen our understanding of two significant elements of the general social history of this period, i.e., the hybridisation of public and private space, and the potentials and limits of social change.