

The Female Renunciant in Exile: (Re-)Invention, Translation, Empowerment¹

Abstract

Through a focus on the Tibetan Nuns Project (TNP) founded in 1987, my paper argues that exile in India necessitated a translation of “Tibetan culture” for patrons and potential sponsors of the putative “Tibetan cause” in Europe and North America, which in turn led to pedagogical and curricular innovations in Tibetan nunneries. This has led to a re-imagination of the role of the female monastic within Tibetan nationalist culture: from a relatively marginal position (*vis-à-vis* monks), nuns now occupy a prominent place as ambassadors for the Tibetan cause. Mass migration led to innovations, inventions, and improvisations within Tibetan society in exile regarding the role of women in general, and religious women in particular. Through an analysis of the TNP, this paper asks how migration has occasioned a *rethinking* among Tibetans about gender relations within their society, and the ways in which a three-generation long stay in India has contributed to this rethinking. A second related enquiry is about the *translation* of western feminism in Tibetan Buddhist contexts, both through the initiatives of TNP office bearers such as Elizabeth Napper and Phillipa Russell, as well as through TNP’s participation in the worldwide rethinking of women’s roles in the Buddhist *sangha*. Finally, I explore what *empowerment* means in movements for gender-equality within TNP nunneries, and ask if these are based on a misreading of these non-Western monastic traditions in Judeo-Christian terms. I make a case for approaching Tibetan exile in India beyond the prism of forced dislocation and loss, and argue that exile became an opportunity for Tibetan Buddhist nuns to reconfigure their position in Tibetan society.

Introduction

¹ I employ Nirmala S. Salgado’s definition of the term *female renunciant* to refer to women and girls “who have

Until recently in the history of the world, women have not been given the same opportunities to study as men. By the grace of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and the efforts of the Tibetan Nuns Project, among others, it is now possible for Tibetan nuns to engage in a complete traditional Buddhist study program. Efforts are also being made for the nuns to obtain the highest ordination.²

This paper draws inspiration from two experiences of mass migration that were narrated to me by people who made the tough choice of relocating out of the fear of religious persecution. The first instance is of the Partition of India, which took all four of my grandparents from Sargodha to Delhi; the second, the movement of 80,000 Tibetans into India in 1959.³ I grew up hearing my grandparents' stories of the lost home, sweeter mangoes, longer monsoons, and friends left behind. I was introduced to Tibetan exile when I won a fellowship in 2004 to spend a month at Dolma Ling Nunnery and Institute of Dialectics (hereafter Dolma Ling), located in Sidhpur near the north Indian hill station of Dharamsala, the seat of the Central Tibetan Administration (the Tibetan government in exile).⁴ However, while my grandparents remembered Sargodha from the comfortable vantage point of citizenship in a new homeland, the Tibetan nuns at Dolma Ling had been rendered stateless by their movement into India.

According to the demographic survey conducted by the Central Tibetan Administration in 2010, there are 128,014 Tibetans living in exile worldwide, out of which 94,203 are in India.⁵ In settlements spread over northern, eastern and southern regions of India, Tibetans have established places for monastic learning, museums and archives, a parliament and an administrative complex. A putative "Tibetan culture" is an important anchoring point (and export) for the Tibetan government-in-exile. It has founded several institutions to preserve

² Philippa Russell, and Dolma Tsering, *Dolma Ling Institute and Nunnery. Educating for the Future*, DVD, Dharamsala: Dolma Ling Films Department and Faux Reel Films, 2009.

³ His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet, "Birth to Exile," dalailama.com, <http://www.dalailama.com/biography/from-birth-to-exile> (accessed May 8, 2014).

⁴ The scholarship was jointly conferred by the Foundation for Universal Responsibility of His Holiness the Dalai Lama (FURHHDL) and the Society for Promotion of Indian Classical Music and Culture Amongst Youth (SPIC MACAY) under the latter's Gurukul program.

different facets of Tibetan culture such as Tibetan Institute for Performing Arts (1959), Tibet House (1965), the Central Institute for Higher Tibetan Studies (1967), and the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives (1971, with the museum opening to public in 1974), the Tibetan Nuns Project or TNP (1987), and the Norbulingka Institute (1995).

Mass migration led to innovations, inventions, and improvisations within Tibetan society in exile regarding the role of women in general, and religious women in particular. Through an analysis of the TNP, this paper asks how migration has occasioned a *rethinking* among Tibetans about gender relations within their society, and the ways in which a three-generation long stay in India has contributed to this rethinking. A second related enquiry is about the *translation* of western feminism in Tibetan Buddhist contexts, both through the initiatives of TNP office bearers such as Elizabeth Napper and Phillipa Russell, as well as through TNP's participation in the worldwide rethinking of women's roles in the Buddhist sangha.⁶ Finally, I explore what *empowerment* means in movements for gender-equality within TNP nunneries, and ask if these are based on a misreading of these non-Western monastic traditions in Judeo-Christian terms. I make a case for approaching Tibetan exile in India beyond the prism of forced dislocation and loss, and argue that exile became an opportunity for Tibetan Buddhist nuns to reconfigure their position in Tibetan society. While nuns are by no means at the center of the "Tibetan cause," variously understood as politico-legal, humanitarian, and nationalistic,⁷ their plight within the

⁵ Central Tibetan Administration, "Tibet in Exile," tibet.net, <http://tibet.net/about-cta/tibet-in-exile> (accessed May 8, 2014).

⁶ I understand here that "Western feminism" remains an under-theorized conceptual category. I thank Bishnupriya Ghosh and Juned Shaikh at the recently concluded conference on "Feminist Interventions: On Gender and South Asia" at the University of California at Santa Cruz for the suggestion to nuance this theorization with literature on religious Hindu women's response to liberal feminism. I hope to incorporate these insights in revised versions of this paper.

⁷ The phrases "Tibet question" and "Tibetan cause" are used loosely and synonymously in this paper. For a synoptic understanding on different iterations of the "Tibet question," see Barry Sautman and June Teufel Dreyer, eds, *Contemporary Tibet: Politics, Development and Society in a Disputed Region*, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2006.

Tibetan monastic tradition and their relatively poor conditions of living have interested scholars, women's- and human-rights advocates, particularly in Europe and North America (the TNP also has an office in Seattle). The first section of this paper provides a review of scholarly writing on the TNP, Tibetan exile, and female monastic traditions in general. The second section is centered on the narratives about the genesis of the TNP, and its three recent initiatives viz. the Jang Gonchoe debating festival, the Geshe-ma (equivalent of PhD) degree, and the demand for Gelong-ma or full ordination of nuns. This section references the primary sources from the TNP's own documentaries, blog-posts, newsletters, fund-raising literature, as well as interviews and other writings by its office bearers.

I

My work on Tibetan Buddhist nuns living in exile in India presented me with the question of how best to frame the enquiry, and within which field of study to situate it. Admittedly, there are studies about Buddhist nuns, female religious practitioners, Tibetan Buddhist nuns, Tibetans in exile, Tibetan religious institutions in India, and Tibetan women within Tibet and the diaspora. While each of these sub-fields have their own set of questions, some of which inform my work, none of them specifically takes as its subject Tibetan Buddhist nuns who live in exile in India. This project, therefore, is placed within several intersecting circles, and my attempt here is to focus on three debates that most directly inform my research question; again, organized around the subtitle: invention, translation, empowerment.

The first cluster of texts I examine here discuss the innovations, inventions, and improvisations within Tibetan society in exile about the role of women within it in general and the role of religious women in particular. They comment on the ways mass migration, and the subsequent contact with other cultures (Indian and western), has occasioned a rethinking among

Tibetans about the gender-biases within their society, and the ways in which a three-generation long stay in India has contributed to this rethinking. However, they do not sufficiently account for the political context within which this rethinking is made possible, and the asymmetrical nature of this contact with other cultures. The second cluster of texts, though not specifically centered on Tibetan women, addresses this asymmetry. These works talk about the translation of western feminism in non-western contexts, and comment on the epistemological violence following from its application to Third World women. TNP documentaries and fund-raising literature mention the influence of western women on the Project, and phrase the initiatives of the Project as a movement towards greater gender equality. This tendency finds its loudest criticism in the third cluster of texts I examine: these authors question the meaning of *empowerment* within movements for gender-equality in non-Western religious traditions, and argue that they are based on a misreading of these traditions in Judeo-Christian terms. Again, while some of them do not specifically address Tibetan nuns, they apply the interventions made by the previous group of scholars from secular to devotional contexts, while simultaneously remaining alert to the limitations of such application.

Much writing on Tibetan exile comes out of a study of settlements in India, and sympathizes with and extols the initiatives of the exile government. The corpus is further limited by the largely uniform context of its production in Western universities by non-Tibetan academics. Hanna Havnevik is arguably the best known scholar of Tibetan female monastic tradition. Over a large corpus of work, Havnevik has dwelled on several aspects of the lives of Tibetan women, both laywomen and nuns. In *Tibetan Buddhist Nuns*, she provides detailed profiles of some Tibetan nunneries and argues that “the exile situation has brought along with it

some changes for nuns as compared to their traditional life in Tibet.”⁸ Like McKenna LeClear mentioned below, Havnevik sees most of these as positive changes: admission of nuns from all Buddhist sects, “innovations made in exile” to the organization of the nunnery such as the office of the abbess and the appointment of four head nuns, and a “less strict general discipline for nuns in exile.”⁹ In an article tellingly entitled “Bhikshunis and Breaking Barriers: The Changing Status of Women in Monastic Life,” LeClear lists similar innovations within the Tibetan Nuns Project. LeClear is a sociology student at the University of Tulsa, and her piece was written after a study-abroad program for which she stayed at Dolma Ling Nunnery in Dharamsala over the course of one spring. Her article includes interviews with nuns and administrative staff, and accepts the latter’s self-representation of the TNP largely uncritically.¹⁰ LeClear talks about three initiatives of the TNP in particular: the “invented traditions” of philosophical debate in nunneries (reminiscent of Hobsbawm and Ranger’s terms, although she does not directly cite them), the introduction of Geshe-ma degree (equivalent of the doctoral degree), and the advocacy around Gelong-ma (full ordination of nuns), each of which are highlighted as initiatives that bring nuns at par with monks in the TNP’s own literature (documentaries, website, newsletters and brochures). Sonia MacPherson’s PhD dissertation *A Path of Learning: Indo-Tibetan Buddhism as Education* also frames the conversations around “traditions of invention and education” in Tibetan nunneries in India in the context of globalization, “inter-civilizational dialogue” and “freedom in modernity/ies”.¹¹ Michaela Pichler’s dissertation *Change and Continuity Within the Tibetan Community in Exile in India: Social Reform and the Nuns of Geden Choeling* shares

⁸ Hanna Havnevik, *Tibetan Buddhist Nuns: History, Cultural Norms and Social Reality*, London: Norwegian University Press, 1989.

⁹ Havnevik, 125-26.

¹⁰ McKenna LeClear, "Bhikshunis and Breaking Barriers: The Changing Status of Women in Monastic Life," (2013). *Independent Study Project Collection*, Paper 1565, http://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection/1565, (accessed on March 3, 2014), 6, 7, 18.

MacPherson's thematic concerns.¹² Taken together, these works seem to validate the charge of asymmetrical knowledge production outlined in my discussion of "translation" in the second section. They work within the tradition/ modernity binary, and think of the latter as a "cure" for or evolution from the former.

Furthermore, analyzing another aspect of translation in a chapter entitled "Shangri-la in Exile: Representations of Tibetan Identity and Transnational Culture," Toni Huber exposes the stereotypes employed to describe Tibetan culture in popular and academic writing: "Tibetans are an essentially peaceful people, who never developed an army of their own," "Environmentalism is an innate aspect of Tibetan culture," and "Women in traditional Tibet enjoyed a higher degree of equality than in other Asian societies."¹³ Huber argues that these notions of Tibet are "unprecedented and distinctly modern" and should be "understood as the products of complex translational politics of identity." He points out that the "reinvention" of this "modern, liberal Shangri-la image" has its precedents in the discourse of liberal and social protest movements of environmentalism, pacifism, human rights and feminism in the industrialized West.¹⁴ Tibetans have now appropriated the Western "myth of Tibet" that had hitherto objectified them as the Other.¹⁵

Judy Tobler's analysis of nunneries in North India sees the nuns are "doubly exiled" from their national home Tibet, and from their spiritual and religious home of institutional Buddhist monastic life. While this theorization of double exile does not factor the specific experience of nuns as women, Tobler does note that exile presents the female renunciant with an opportunity to

¹¹ Sonia MacPherson, *A path of learning: Indo-Tibetan Buddhism as Education*, PhD diss, University of British Columbia, 1985, 37-38, 52, 44-48.

¹² Michaela Pichler, *Change and continuity within the Tibetan community in Exile in India: Social reform and the Nuns of Geden Choeling*. Ph.D. diss., California Institute of Integral Studies, 2000, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/304650308?accountid=14678> (accessed March 3, 2014).

¹³ Huber, 357.

¹⁴ Huber, 358.

“claim ownership of sacred space,” and effect a change in their identity which had remained “reified and static in the patriarchal and andro-centric history of Buddhism.”¹⁶ Havnevik also talks about the role of western nuns and western Buddhist women “bringing with them western feminist ideas” which exposed the “inconsistency in the traditional Tibetan culture between the ideological portrayal of women and the actual position of Buddhist nuns.”¹⁷ She argues that “some innovations created by western nuns have generated newly accepted ways of behaving for nuns in the Tibetan traditions” and “made some of the problems visible.”¹⁸ The latter for her has been “a motivating factor for socio-cultural change” and a testimony to the “nuns in the Tibetan tradition [becoming] *actors* in their own right.”¹⁹ Julia Meredith Hess’s *Immigrant Ambassadors* similarly argues that forced migration led to a modernization of Tibetan society: “for many Tibetans, immigration to the United States is viewed as a way to escape what are seen as conservative Tibetan views about social position, labor and gender roles.”²⁰

The common assumption in the final group of texts, which are internally diverse in the causes and manifestations of “translation” of Tibetan nuns’ concerns in a language which is readily accessible to a secular liberal western audience, is that translation is a necessary step both towards understanding Buddhist nuns in exile, and in articulating these concerns for wider purchase. Janet Gyatso and other contributors to the debate around full ordination in the edited volume *Dignity and Discipline: Reviving Full Ordination for Buddhist Nuns* try to “construe the

¹⁵ Huber, 359.

¹⁶ Judy Tobler, “Tibetan Buddhist Nuns in Exile: Creating A Sacred Space to be at Home,” *Journal for the Study of Religion*: 19.1 (2006): 59-60.

¹⁷ Havnevik, 190.

¹⁸ Havnevik, 193-94.

¹⁹ Havnevik, 205, added emphasis.

²⁰ Julia Meredith Hess, *Immigrant Ambassadors: Citizenship and Belonging in the Tibetan Diaspora*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009, 174-75.

largest horizon of the female ordination question in terms of our global society.”²¹ Gyatso is a professor at Harvard Divinity School and co-chair of the Buddhist section of the American Academy of Religion; she believes that “to look at the *bhikshuni* (full ordination) question from a global perspective shifts the focus in the conversation to human society as a whole, and the role of Buddhism therein.”²²

Nirmala S. Salgado’s *Buddhist Nuns and Gendered Practice* asks how the subject of the female renunciant is conceptualized in contemporary scholarly and activist discourse, and argues that “assumptions about cross-cultural comparisons are embedded in the nomenclature that is intrinsic to a certain way of theorizing religion.”²³ For her, the conceptual vocabulary of Christianity, secularism, modernity and the Latin idiom are integral to the translation and interpretation of religion in colonial and postcolonial discourses as well as in the academy. Shayne Clarke’s recently published *Family Matters in Indian Buddhist Monasticisms* also seeks to correct mistaken notions about the meaning and role of monastic men and women in Indian society. Clarke argues that since the nineteenth century, “scholarly understandings of terms such as ‘monk’ and ‘monasticism’ appear to have been shaped by medieval Benedictine notions of the monastic ideal” that have no place for monks who maintain ties with their families and nuns who get pregnant.²⁴ Salgado contends that renunciant narratives, that is the “everyday [life] of Buddhist nuns,” can be misinterpreted within the western theoretical framework, which posits a “curative project” by treating the position of women within Buddhist monastic orders as a *problem* that liberal

²¹ Janet Gyatso, “Introduction,” in Thea Mohr, and JampaTsedroen, eds., *Dignity and Discipline: Reviving Full Ordination for Buddhist Nuns*, Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2010, 2.

²² Gyatso, 2.

²³ Salgado, 3.

²⁴ Clarke, Shayne. *Family Matters in Indian Buddhist Monasticisms*. Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2014. 2-3.

feminism can *solve* by affirming gender equality or equal rights.²⁵ Salgado believes that “the question of *empowerment*—with its associations with such notions as agency, autonomy, and independence—remains central to secular feminist senses of politics.”²⁶ She provides a persuasive critique of the debate around full ordination of nuns by foregrounding Sinhala-speaking Sri Lankan Buddhist nuns who do not speak a globalised idiom, and finds that many nuns understood full ordination in the context of “cultivation of moral or disciplinary practices (*sila*) and renunciation,” whereas conventional debates around full ordination constructed them as “indigent subjects” in “need of economic, political and other forms of betterment.”²⁷ She contends, therefore, that *Bhikkhuni Upasampada* (full ordination of nuns) is not a movement because that would imply agency, responsibility and intentionality on the part of the nuns. The nuns’ selfhood is gendered in different ways, and conventional articulations of “women’s issues” and “feminism” are not immediately relevant for them.²⁸ Her contention that the gendered identity of nuns should not be conflated with their everyday gendered practice is well taken.

Kamala Visweswaran’s article on “Gendered States: Rethinking Culture as Site of South Asian Human Rights Work” critiques “gender essentialism” that attempts to “understand women’s condition as a universal one.”²⁹ She argues that “discourse on women’s human rights forces a separation of women’s rights from community rights” and “reinstates gender as the primary determinant of women’s identity.”³⁰ Visweswaran references Chandra Mohanty’s influential essay “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses” which

²⁵ Salgado, 2, 4.

²⁶ Salgado, 5.

²⁷ Salgado, 8.

²⁸ Salgado, 8-9.

²⁹ Kamala Visweswaran, *Un/Common Cultures: Racism and the Rearticulation of Cultural Difference*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2010, 190.

³⁰ Visweswaran, 211.

has pointed to the limitations of the “possibility of coalitions among (usually white) western feminists and working-class and feminist women of color around the world.”³¹ Mohanty cautioned against the assumption that all women share “a priority of issues” around which they should organize.³² This critique speaks to Clarke and Salgado’s objections with the vocabulary of debates around greater gender equality leading to Buddhist nuns’ empowerment. Thus, on the one hand are writers such as Tobler who argue that Tibetan Buddhist nuns in India are “female subjects” and are no longer the “feminine other to a prevailing androcentric norm of humanness,”³³ while on the other are those who allege that the terms of gender equality and female subject-hood are constructed out of secular and western experiences of patriarchy (with universalizing tendencies) and cannot be easily applied to non-western monastic women. Importantly, Tobler bases her understanding of female subjectivity largely on French feminist Luce Irigaray’s work. Salgado references the work of theorists of “cultural translation vis-à-vis religion” such as Ananda Abeysekara’s “The Un-translatability of Religion, the Un-Translatability of Life”, Talal Asad’s *Genealogies*, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak”, which argues, among other things, that the non-speaking of the subaltern has to do with our failure to hear her.

Finally, as C. Michelle Kleisath’ points out, “Tibet is the central ground upon which countless stakeholders continue to struggle over issues of power, representation and identity.”³⁴ Her analysis of English-language scholarship on Tibet reveals “uneven racialization of non-white people as compared to white people.”³⁵ Outlining two kinds of erasure in the field of Tibetan

³¹ Chandra Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” *Feminist Review*: 30 (1988), 62.

³² Mohanty, 62.

³³ Tobler, 59.

³⁴ C. Michelle Kleisath. “Start Saying ‘White,’ Stop Saying ‘Western’: Transforming the Dominant Vocabulary of Tibet Studies,” *Transforming Anthropology* 21.1 (2013): 16.

³⁵ Kleisath, 18.

studies, she argues that the word “Western” and the “invisibility that characterizes white racial identity ... encourages listeners to imagine ‘the West’ as a homogenous entity epitomized by white heteromascularity,” because “when all ‘Westerners’ are tacitly assumed to be white men, the ideas, opinions, experiences, and scholarship of People of Color and Indigenous People in the West, especially women, are marginalized.”³⁶ Secondly, the white scholar, identified without racial and gender markers, is valued in this scholarship as impartial and objective, whereas a “Tibetan researcher” or a “Han scholar” would, respectively, be considered “emotional” or “biased.”³⁷

The challenge of reading secondary literature with intersecting but dissimilar concerns is that authors are not often in conversation with each other. It is also hard to see how these concerns evolve over time, because each text frames its concerns differently. The most challenging, however, is the question of the works’ diverse methodologies and disciplinary affiliations. While scholars of religion focus on close reading of scriptural injunctions, ethnographic accounts such as Salgado’s privilege personal interviews, and historical writings such as Havnevik and Gyatso’s base their findings on published primary sources such as government and institutional records. Therefore, a question about the influence of mass migration and exile in India on the self-perception of Tibetan Buddhist nuns is informed by sources that do not always sit happily together.

II

The Tibetan Nuns Project is a relatively recent initiative of the exile government, founded in 1987 by Rinchen Khando Choegyal, formerly the Minister of Education in the Central Tibetan

³⁶ Kleisath, 20.

³⁷ Kleisath, 21-22.

Administration, and the present Dalai Lama's sister-in-law. TNP supports eight nunneries in India and Nepal, and its headquarters are in Dolma Ling Nunnery near Dharamsala. In addition to providing financial assistance and educational opportunities for Tibetan Buddhist nuns, the Project is invested in initiatives stressing a greater participation of nuns in the Buddhist sangha, and operates under the joint auspices of the Tibetan Women's Association and the Religious Department. TNP nunneries have also opened their doors to nuns from India (particularly Kinnaur, Ladakh and Spiti Valley) and countries in Europe and North America, many of whom came there as a result of the international visibility of Tibetan Buddhism.³⁸ The TNP in India is both the catalyst for and the result of this worldwide interest.

Before my introduction to Dolma Ling, I had thought of nuns, quite literally, as “renunciants” or women who had chosen to renounce their former affiliations to inhabit a space and a life where their individual identities did not matter. These could be sectarian affiliations, identification with gender-based characteristics, economic status, and national identity. However, I soon realized that the nuns in Dolma Ling constantly performed their exile identity, and a putative Tibetan-ness was central to their experience of being renunciants. One visible performance of the process of preserving and commemorating the Tibetan exile identity was the recitation of the National Anthem in the Dolma Ling morning assembly. The National Anthem was first used as such by the Tibetan government only in condition of exile; it was presented to His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso (hereafter the Dalai Lama) in 1960, a year after he escaped into India on March 30, 1959, and was written by his tutor Trijang

³⁸ In an interaction with the alumni of the Gurukul program, Choegyial shared that since migration from Tibet into India has decreased in the past decade, nunneries have begun admitting non-Tibetans in increasing numbers. (Rinchen Khando Choegyial, Interaction with Gurukul Alumni, Dharamsala, June 6, 2013.)

Rinpoche.³⁹ However, within the assembly, this recitation was constructed as a legacy of the old Tibet that continued in exile. The nuns put badges and stickers of the Tibetan flag on their bags, mugs and walls; insisted that they were in exile only to be able to keep their religious vows, and to save the monastic tradition from extinction. Therefore, not only were the facts of being Tibetan and being refugees important loci of identity for the nuns at Dolma Ling, but some rituals that were celebrated as having been continued from pre-1959 Tibet had in fact been *invented* or *adapted* to service the performance of this identity.

In a recent blog-post emailed to its supporters to raise funds for “helping nuns become teachers and leaders,” TNP described the background of nunneries in Tibet in the following terms:

In an attempt to eliminate Buddhism in Tibet, more than 6000 nunneries and monasteries were destroyed between 1959 and 1980. Monks and nuns in great numbers were imprisoned, tortured, and forced to give up the ordained way of life. Teaching, study, and prayer were strictly prohibited, and religious texts and objects were demolished...

Before the Chinese takeover in 1959, there were at least 818 nunneries and nearly 28,000 nuns living in Tibet. *Traditional education in the nunneries* included reading, writing, and lessons in ancient scriptures...

Most nuns newly arrived in India were denied basic educational opportunities in Tibet, including education in their own Tibetan language and Tibetan Buddhist religious heritage. The majority of the nuns arrived in India illiterate and unable to write their own names.

Thanks in part to consistent effort from the Tibetan Nuns Project, *for the first time in Tibetan history*, nuns are now receiving educational opportunities previously available only to monks.⁴⁰

As my emphases in the above quotation point out, TNP stresses the continuity of the female monastic tradition from an old Tibet into exile, while simultaneously emphasizing how it is breaking away from this tradition by providing opportunities to nuns at par with

³⁹ National Anthems Info, “Tibetan National Anthem,” [nationalanthems.info](http://www.nationalanthems.info), <http://www.nationalanthems.info/tib.htm> (accessed May 8, 2014).

monks. Elsewhere, the blog-post mentions another instance of transcending the tradition-modernity binary: TNP seeks to “prepare nuns for positions of leadership and moral authority in a culture that is going through a very challenging transition, it is essential to *combine traditional religious studies with aspects of a modern education.*”⁴¹ The narrative in TNP literature about the Project’s origins bears further reflection here. Predictably, it originates in the Dalai Lama’s encouragement and initiative. Choegyial, the founding director of TNP, recounts that he prompted her “do something for the nuns” during one of the first meetings of the Tibetan Women’s Association, and admits that “without His Holiness’s consent, without his permission, no matter how many people would have noticed it, nothing would have happened.”⁴² Foremost on both their minds was the plight of the 40 to 60 nuns who had arrived into India from Tibet, and “had no place to go”; many of them felt compelled to disrobe because they feared they might not be able to keep their religious vows in exile.⁴³ The project which began in the 1980s took off after a meeting of the International Tibet Support Group where Choegyial made an unscheduled presentation on the plight of recently arrived Tibetan nuns and secured initial funding for the TNP.⁴⁴ Elizabeth Napper, who had recently finished her PhD program in Buddhist studies at the University of Virginia, was among the participants, and has been associated with the Project since its inception; she is currently its co-director. Philippa Russell, an Englishwoman who had been working with the Tibetan community for several years by this time along with her writer-husband Jeremy Russell, also joined the Project at this incipient stage; she is currently the Architectural Supervisor of TNP. Subsequently, Lobsang Dechen, a Tibetan Buddhist nun who was then teaching at the Tibetan

⁴⁰ Tibetan Nuns Project. “The role of teachers in empowering Tibetan Buddhist nuns,” *Tibetan Nuns Project* (blog), May 9, 2014, <http://tnp.org/news>, added emphases.

⁴¹ “The role of teachers in empowering Tibetan Buddhist nuns,” added emphases.

⁴² Rinchen Khando Choegyial, *Tibetan Nuns Project: Educating for the Future*, DVD, Dharamsala: Dolma Ling Films Department and Faux Reel Films, 2009.

⁴³ *Tibetan Nuns Project: Educating for the Future.*

⁴⁴ *Tibetan Nuns Project: Educating for the Future.*

Children's Village School in Dharamsala, was persuaded by Choegyal's argument that "the nuns project should be handled by nuns" to join the TNP.⁴⁵ Against the visual backdrop of monks from Namgyal monastery during a debating session, Dechen points out that she had wanted to go to dialectic school, but there were none during her student days. By her own admission, she agreed to join the TNP to provide other nuns the opportunity that she did not get.⁴⁶ As the TNP's second co-director, Dechen talks about the importance of debating to Buddhist study; Dolma Ling is among the few Tibetan Buddhist nunneries that has integrated this dialectical method of study into the curriculum.⁴⁷ Like Choegyal, Dechen traces the origin of this new opportunity to the Dalai Lama: "During the Tibetan Women's Association's fourth working committee meeting in Dharamsala in October, 1992, His Holiness the Dalai Lama said, 'In our society, we have as a legacy from the past the notion that nuns engage in ritual only and do not study Buddhist texts. This should be changed.'"⁴⁸ Thus, different iterations of TNP's originary narrative share three assumptions: the cause of Tibetan nuns is framed as both urgent and expedient towards the larger Tibetan cause; the Dalai Lama's approval legitimizes the need for TNP's work; and while international collaboration is cited as an enabling condition, self-sufficiency is the Project's ultimate goal. All three assumptions, I contend, are made possible by the experiences of mass migration and exile.

Firstly, TNP places its work within the larger "Free Tibet" movement: "The Tibetans in exile have so many windows to see into the cause of Tibet. And I think Tibetan Nuns Project is one of them."⁴⁹ Thus, the success of the nuns in preserving the female monastic tradition in exile is believed to contribute to the preservation of Tibetan culture: "When you say with the hope of

⁴⁵ *Tibetan Nuns Project: Educating for the Future.*

⁴⁶ *Tibetan Nuns Project: Educating for the Future.*

⁴⁷ *Tibetan Nuns Project: Educating for the Future.*

getting into free Tibet one day, how do you go? ... I don't expect any of us to be taking back gold and silver. But at least let us take back our culture and identity."⁵⁰ Furthermore, TNP ordinary narratives as well as its continuing appeals to the international community also caution the audience that time is running out, and the world must step up soon to save this tradition from complete erasure, thereby highlighting the urgency of the Project's initiatives. In their annual address to sponsors, the directors of TNP repeated that the situation in Tibet was "truly dire" for the nuns, that "*inflation and rising food prices in India [were] stressing all of the nunneries,*" and "sponsorship dollars were only meeting about 2/3rd of the daily needs of the nuns."⁵¹

Secondly, the Dalai Lama is internationally the most visible face of the "Tibet cause," and arguably the biggest pull for these "sponsorship dollars." Even as many within the Tibetan exile community disagree with his allegedly soft position on China,⁵² most initiatives of the exile government cite him as an inspiration and legitimizing authority; the TNP is no different. However, what makes this particular citation of his authority noteworthy is the fact that the Dalai Lama simultaneously embodies tradition and change vis-à-vis the female monastic tradition. He has pleaded helplessness in response to the question of full ordination for nuns, and admitted his vulnerability to accusations by "feminists in the West" who might say "The Dalai Lama is the authority but he doesn't help the nuns."⁵³ The Dalai Lama has insisted that the final decision on

⁴⁸ Lobsang Dechen, "Systematic Education in Dolma Ling Leading to Gender Equality," *Journal of Religious Culture* 27, no. 7 (1999).

⁴⁹ Rinchen Khando Choegyal, *Tibetan Nuns Project: Educating for the Future*.

⁵⁰ Rinchen Khando Choegyal, *Tibetan Nuns Project: Educating for the Future*.

⁵¹ "Annual Appeal from the Directors," Tibetan Nuns Project, <http://tnp.org/aboutus/annual-appeal-from-the-directors> (accessed May 9, 2014), emphases in the original.

⁵² For different articulations of disagreement with the Dalai Lama's position, see Edward Lazar, ed., *Tibet: The Issue is Independence*, Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1994.

⁵³ Dalai Lama, interview by Michaela Doepke, "Interview with the Dalai Lama about the Full Ordination of Women," January 2011, Tibetan Buddhism in the West, http://info-buddhism.com/Interview_Dalai_Lama_about_the_Full_Ordination_of_Women.html (accessed May 9, 2014).

matters of *vinaya* (law) has and should continue to rest with a *sangha* (a group of monks), but many continue to pursue him to grant Gelong-ma ordination to Tibetan Buddhist nuns.⁵⁴

Thirdly, these narratives claim that the genesis of TNP was possible because of worldwide interest in and support for the Tibetan cause. This places TNP within the context of international NGOs and charity organizations; donations to the TNP are tax-deductible in the United States and Canada. The stress on gender-equality, a rights-based approach to selfhood and identity, the presence of a North American and a British woman among the office bearers, and their references to what the west can learn from Tibetan nuns (some of which are mentioned below) are intelligible within this context. Though the connection may not be self-evident, the focus on transitioning from the current leadership to an organization that is completely run by the nuns themselves is also a result of TNP's placement within the global network of NGOs, many of which list "self-sufficiency" among their topmost goals. Dolma Ling recently initiated several "income-generating enterprises that raise funds for ... nuns and provide them with experience in basic organizational skills."⁵⁵ These include a small grocery shop managed by and servicing the nuns, a tailoring section in which wall hangings, bags, prayer flags and other merchandise is made, and a handicraft store where these items are sold. Napper is excited about these initiatives for the "skills that come along, the organizational abilities that come along, the confidence that comes along, and then the enthusiasm that people have for it because it's new and it's fresh..."⁵⁶ These initiatives, therefore, (re)produce the female monastic as an economic individual, whose skills and labor are channeled into outlets that do not necessarily arise from her devotional practice.

54 Dalai Lama, "Statement of His Holiness the Dalai Lama on Bhikshuni Ordination in the Tibetan Tradition," International Congress on Buddhist Women's Role in the Sangha, Bhikshuni Vinaya and Ordination Lineages, <http://www.congress-on-buddhist-women.org/142.0.html> (accessed May 9, 2014).

⁵⁵ Dolma Ling Institute and Nunnery. *Educating for the Future*.

(Re)Invention

Another consequence of this channeling is the TNP's celebration of the exiled community's interaction with the outside world and the need to make this contact available to the nuns. In the film *Dolma Ling Nunnery: Educating for the Future* produced by Nunnery's media center, the narrator points out that "a phone booth and internet café [in Dolma Ling] provide the nuns with access to the world."⁵⁷ Immediately after images of the internet café with nuns working on computers, we hear the loud mooing of a cow, accompanied by the visual of a nun bathing and feeding the cows. The narrator points out that "an important responsibility at Dolma Ling is taking care of our thirteen happy healthy cows so they produce the wholesome milk that is used in the kitchen."⁵⁸ Therefore, Dolma Ling is not only a space equipped with modern amenities, but is simultaneously attentive to the environment, the putative other of a modern lifestyle.

In another film entitled *Tibetan Nuns Project*, also subtitled *Educating for the Future*, the narrator points out the uniqueness of TNP: "These group of nuns that we are dealing with now are the first nuns who are doing this. This is quite difficult because all their teachers are monks, and they have no role models. Plus, they have been working with the general attitude of the society that women can't do the same things that men can do." Furthermore, as male institutions were firmly entrenched, the monks organized themselves in exile around their former monastic affiliations, but the nuns "came from disparate backgrounds" and did not have "strong roots". The *Tibetan Nuns Project* film also stresses the importance of a modern curriculum for the nunneries: "[T]hey [nunneries] do not have these very strong traditions [like they have] in

⁵⁶ *Tibetan Nuns Project: Educating for the Future*.

⁵⁷ *Dolma Ling Institute and Nunnery. Educating for the Future*.

particular monasteries, in a sense you have more freedom to add more subjects, do different things, work with something and find whether it works or suits the nuns or not, so they have more in terms of English and modern curricula subjects.”⁵⁹ Furthermore, the traditional Tibetan curriculum has been reinvented and made “non-sectarian” with assistance from Sakya College near Dehradun and the Nyigma Institute in Bylakuppe, and Dolma Ling now has philosophy teachers from three of the four sects of Tibetan Buddhism.⁶⁰ This also contributes to the reconfiguration of an old divided Tibet into the imagined unity of the new Tibet; exile flattens out sectarian divisions, and the migrants re-imagine themselves as just Tibetan.

TNP has also introduced the month-long debating Jang Gonchoe for nuns, and is currently raising money for its endowment fund. The event was named after Jang, the region in Tibet west of Lhasa where the month long inter- monastery debate originated, and the Tibetan winter season Gonchoe.⁶¹ The downloadable pamphlet for the endowment fund celebrates the momentous occasion:

On September 20, 1995, *an historic event* took place in the development of the nuns. The first inter-nunnery debate, modeled on the Jang Gonchoe debate of the great monastic institutions of Tibet, was held in Dharamsala... For the first time in the history of Tibet, nuns debated in front of His Holiness the Dalai Lama for almost two hours... This is a unique opportunity to *build capacity and equality* for the nuns, to help ensure that a centuries-old tradition *continues and expands* to include the nuns, and to foster the dharma for future generations.⁶²

Sherab Sangmo, a nun at DolmaLing, points out that while monks learned both philosophy and debate in Tibet, these subjects were made available to nuns only in exile: “I feel we have to work harder than monks... and improve our debate.”⁶³ However, even as TNP

⁵⁸ *Dolma Ling Institute and Nunnery. Educating for the Future.*

⁵⁹ Philippa Russell. *Tibetan Nuns Project: Educating for the Future.*

⁶⁰ *Dolma Ling Institute and Nunnery. Educating for the Future.*

⁶¹ “The Launch of the Jang Gonchoe Endowment Fund,” Tibetan Nuns Project, <http://tnp.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Jang-Gonchoe-Endowment-Fund-Case-for-Support.pdf> (accessed May 9, 2014), 1.

⁶² “The Launch of the Jang Gonchoe Endowment Fund,” 1-3.

⁶³ Sherab Sangmo, *Tibetan Nuns Project: Educating for the Future.*

reinvents certain monastic practices, it is careful to adhere to the overarching image of Tibetan Buddhism as an egalitarian religion that did not willfully exclude women⁶⁴:

“They[the nuns] have definitely been excluded but I have never found an answer to why they were excluded. May be things would have been different if they had taken initiative in Tibet.”⁶⁵ As the quotation above states eloquently, this reinvention is not a break, but a continuation and expansion of previous traditions.

*Translation*⁶⁶

The Dalai Lama’s recommendation in April 2011 to the Institute for Buddhist Dialectical Studies in Dharamsala to confer the degree of “Geshe-ma” to the German-born nun Venerable Kelsang Wangmo, formerly Kerstin Brunnenbaum, was hailed as an important victory for the TNP. Venerable Wangmo became the first-ever Geshe-ma in the history of Tibetan Buddhism, and paved way for 27 other nuns who began their exams for the degree in 2013. While names are inherently untranslatable, leading Brunnenbaum to change hers completely, the degree itself is translated in TNP literature as “the equivalent of a PhD degree.” Five nunneries participated in the first-ever Geshe-ma exams held in Dharamsala, and the occasion, like the Jang Gonchoe, was claimed to be historic.⁶⁷ Many visuals that comprise the collage of images in the film *Geshema Degree to Tibetan Nuns* show the nuns engaged in animated debates with monks; the latter, as teachers and senior scholars, adjudicated the process. The film highlights the rigorous multi-

⁶⁴ I will return to this point and the constituent elements of this image of Tibet in the next section on secondary sources.

⁶⁵ Rinchen Khando Choegy, , *Tibetan Nuns Project: Educating for the Future*.

⁶⁶ I employ translation here in the widest sense of making a set of concepts intelligible in a vocabulary that did not originate from the culture that produced them. These acts of translation facilitate communication across cultures, and are the enable ideas to reach wider audiences. However, the burden of translation often falls asymmetrically; in this case, it is the Tibetan exiles who are indulged in translating their cultural practices for a western audience in order to gain financial and humanitarian support for the Tibetan cause.

stage selection of the first batch of students, asserting its parity with the highest academic degrees in the west. This initiative is also meant to facilitate nuns' entry into the teaching profession, which is one of the stated aims of the TNP; "Geshe" is often used as a term of address for a philosophical or religious guru.

In a complimentary act of translation, the *inji* (literally English) or foreign women who run the TNP describe it in terms of its worldwide significance. Russell points out that the project services the whole world through nurturing Tibetan nuns: "A balanced sangha will generate peace and harmony in the world... In the west, nuns and monks are falling away because they find it too difficult to function within that world. We here have a situation where people, because of the Tibetan society which considers monks and nuns to be very important is still able to do it."⁶⁸ Napper sells the Project to her audience in the West in similar terms: "It's one of the great benefits of stepping out of western life... investing time and effort in something like this is to really put things back in perspective. The importance of educating women is... this is half the population... and it's to the advantage of all the population if that half is educated, and has skills, and can function."⁶⁹ Against the visual backdrop of skyscrapers transitioning into a bejeweled American flag, Napper points out that "one thing in the West is [that] we get so wrapped up in how busy our lives are and also our systems, whatever their faults, work kind of so efficiently, we don't think about systems, they are in place, we slide into them."⁷⁰ It is evident that TNP initiatives have to be described in terms of how they are advantageous for the whole (read Western) world; their value for Tibetan nuns is not enough to garner international support. The gender-imbalance in Tibetan society is likewise denied its specificity and described through

⁶⁷ "Geshema Degree to Tibetan Nuns," Tibetan Nuns Project, <http://tnp.org/jangganchoe> (accessed May 9, 2014).

⁶⁸ Philippa Russell. *Tibetan Nuns Project: Educating for the Future*.

⁶⁹ Philippa Russell. *Tibetan Nuns Project: Educating for the Future*.

⁷⁰ Elizabeth Napper. *Tibetan Nuns Project: Educating for the Future*.

universalized gender stereotypes: “I think it’s human nature that women will happily step back. Women are more peaceful, they are home-makers, their whole psyche and biology is tuned toward creating harmony, to keeping a family together... Where[as] a man’s psyche and psychology is towards defending and that might mean attacking as well... and to holding power. It’s certainly not particular to the Tibetan community.”⁷¹ Therefore, while these acts of translation place the female renunciant in exile within a wide network of empathy and material support, what is lost is the specificity of her experience, and the opportunity for her struggles to be understood on their own terms.

Empowerment

From the religious point of view, there is no reason to object to or create obstacles to women’s rights because we believe that every sentient being has the potential to become enlightened. The deity Arya Tara (Jetsun Dolma) generated the mind of Bodhicitta, and through engaging in the Bodhisattva practices eventually achieved enlightenment, all in dependence on a female body...

However, in nunneries in the past, a great deal of emphasis was placed on the memorization of prayers and ritual ceremonies. The mastering of Buddhist philosophical topics was very rarely undertaken by nuns. Therefore, very few nuns became qualified teachers which perpetuated the nuns dependence on monks as teachers.⁷²

The movement from dependence to empowerment is the final goal of the TNP. It is most vociferously articulated in the debates around full ordination (or *Gelong-ma* ordination/*Bhikshuni Upsampada*). Sherab Sangmo is mindful of both sides of the debate and articulates her desire with caution: “I will want to become a *Gelong-ma* if I get the opportunity. The reason why nuns cannot have *Gelong-ma* ordination is because the lineage was broken sometime after Buddha gave the original ordination. Whether the *Gelong-ma* ordination is possible or whether

⁷¹ Philippa Russell. *Tibetan Nuns Project: Educating for the Future*.

⁷² Dechen, 27.

the lineage was broken is still being researched.”⁷³ Choegyal is similarly guarded: “We are not demanding full ordination at any cost, [we are not saying] by hook or crook it has to be made available to us. We are saying: Please, you famous scholars, think about it. Read about it and then tell us with reason whether it is possible or not.”⁷⁴ Lobsang Dechen’s account about a long history of “women’s rights” within Tibetan Buddhism quoted at the beginning of this section shares with the latter assertions their emphases on reason, reading and verification through precedence, which are in turn premised on a (western) understanding of Buddhism as a liberal, rational and inherently egalitarian religion.⁷⁵

But what does it mean to be an *empowered* nun? We get one possible definition in TNP’s pamphlet asking for support towards teachers’ salaries: “The Tibetan Nuns Project believes that education is the key to empowerment, and we seek to give nuns the resources to carve out *independent, creative identities* for themselves.” Dechen believes that nuns have to take full responsibility for the TNP, and sees them as rights-bearing individuals: “No one is stopping them. We give them education so they can take responsibility.”⁷⁶ In a similar vein, the English-language teacher at Dolma Ling valorizes the other key component of liberalism—choice: “Once they have completed their education here, they have the option of going outside the community and serving the community. They can live here in the nunnery, serve the nunnery, or be in retreat, so they have that kind of an option... Our goal has been to work to produce this initial group of educated nuns, and then they are the ones who should really go out and do the broader networking.”⁷⁷ The vocabulary used to describe an ideal graduate of the monastic program

⁷³ Sherab Sangmo, *Tibetan Nuns Project: Educating for the Future*.

⁷⁴ Rinchen Khando Choegyal, *Tibetan Nuns Project: Educating for the Future*.

⁷⁵ For more on this idea of “reinvented” and “distinctly modern” Buddhism, see Toni Huber’s “Shangri-la in Exile: Representations of Tibetan Identity and Transnational Culture,” in Thierry Dodin, and Heinz Rather, eds., *Imagining Tibet: Realities, Projections, and Fantasies*, Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2001, 357-372.

⁷⁶ Lobsang Dechen, *Tibetan Nuns Project: Educating for the Future*.

⁷⁷ English-language teacher at Dolma Ling, *Tibetan Nuns Project: Educating for the Future*.

derives very little from the desired outcomes of her religious training, and is informed more by secular liberal humanist assumptions about the makings of a free individual.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the paper has attempted to provide a background to the constructions of Tibetan national identity that cite, sometimes mistakenly, the historical antiquity of national symbols such as the Tibetan National Anthem, the non-violent nature of the freedom struggle and the benign, politically disinterested nature of Tibetan Buddhism. It has also tried to show how the condition of exile, far from being characterized uni-dimensionally as a loss, is particularly catalytic in making possible a re-imagination and re-invention of the female monastic tradition. A recent video thanking sponsors for their support towards TNP projects in 2013 mentions “educating, elevating, empowering, growing, supporting, preserving” as the contributions of these supporters.⁷⁸ I want to end with two sets of images from this video that succinctly capture the double-bind TNP finds itself in. The first is from the opening section on “educating” showing young nuns facing a globe in a classroom, followed by a photograph where they are all pointing at the United States on a hand-drawn world map. The second from the concluding section on “preserving” shows them playing the flute and praying before a butter lamp display.⁷⁹ The images outline, as the paper has attempted to, that mass migration and exile occasioned a Janus-faced outlook for Tibetan nuns: looking forward/ outward for an inspiration to change, and looking behind/ inward for preservation of and sustenance from what was valuable from the past. Ms Choegyal candidly admitted in an interaction with our group: “We deprived women of equal opportunity with men. And we were sent, as a result of the karma of

⁷⁸ “Thank You from the Tibetan Nuns Project- 2013,” Tibetan Nuns Project, <http://tnp.org> (accessed May 9, 2014).

⁷⁹ “Thank You from the Tibetan Nuns Project- 2013.”

past lifetimes, into exile. But look where we ended up? In India, the birthplace of dharma. This exile is an opportunity for us to leave behind a lot of rubbish.”⁸⁰

⁸⁰ Rinchen Khando Choegyal, Interaction with Gurukul Alumni, Dharamsala, June 6, 2013.

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