

2014

Female Activism: Reevaluating Traditional Buddhist Patriarchy in Chinese Occupied Tibet

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Murphy, Mikaela, "Female Activism: Reevaluating Traditional Buddhist Patriarchy in Chinese Occupied Tibet" (2014). *Undergraduate Research Awards*. 19.

<https://digitalcommons.hollins.edu/researchawards/19>

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Upon receiving the assignment to write a research paper on an issue surrounding the role of women in Buddhism for Professor Schumm's Women in Buddhism class, I was attracted to the idea of writing a paper related to the Chinese occupation of Tibet. As an international studies major with a concentration in East Asia, my academic interests guided me toward a topic that focused on China. I was able to synthesize my interests and the requirements of the assignment in my final paper entitled "Female Activism: Reevaluating Traditional Buddhist Patriarchy in Chinese Occupied Tibet." Focusing on the role of female Tibetan Buddhists in nonviolent resistance, the paper highlights the success of these women in drawing greater international attention to the atrocities committed by the Chinese government against the Tibetan people.

The nature of the assignment and subject area for which I was writing required me to conduct research based largely on text sources from books and academic journals. The personal narratives about life as a female Buddhist activist in Chinese occupied Tibet, found in many of the texts I gathered, played a surprising role in constructing an in-depth understanding of the conditions under which female Buddhists endeavor to regain Tibetan autonomy. When planning my research, I did not expect that personal accounts of the torture and abuse Tibetan political prisoners suffer in Chinese-administered prisons would be so central to the development of my paper. Although details of these accounts do not appear to have a large presence in the content of the paper itself, the emotions that they elicited within me as I conducted my research influenced the final product significantly. The anger, fear, and compassion of the women giving the personal accounts revealed the suffering behind the erasure of an entire nation—it was the rawness of these accounts that helped clarify my perspective of the ongoing Tibetan-Chinese conflict.

Writing this paper as a first year, I was confronted with the challenge of learning to effectively use the library's databases, and the utter confusion that using WorldCat and the Interlibrary Loan (ILL) system can induce. This problem was easily resolved by asking a particularly helpful librarian about how to use the search functions of the various databases available, thus giving me access to more than enough information to write my paper. It was because of the staff at the library and the first year seminar library information sessions that I could proficiently use the library databases relevant to my topic, find books, and search Google Scholar, the use of which was once a great test of my patience and sanity. Although as with any paper the scope of my argument shifted somewhat as I began to more thoroughly research the topic chosen, over the course of writing "Female Activism," I learned that sometimes, a paper needs more than just an arguable thesis and logical structure: It also needs a sense of humanity, which is too often lost in academic writing.

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Female Activism: Reevaluating Traditional Buddhist Patriarchy in Chinese Occupied Tibet

Women have been active in Buddhism since shortly after its founding by Siddhartha Gautama, and though they have faced oppression in many societies, Buddhist women are now at the forefront of both local and global movements striving for social justice. In keeping with the basic tenants of Buddhism of seeking truth and understanding, social activism has become an essential point around which Buddhists have been united. Women especially are increasingly finding empowerment through activism in the traditionally patriarchal societies of South, Central, and East Asia. As Asia has been ravaged by conflict in the 20th Century, contemporary Buddhist women continue to further developed Engaged Buddhism in response to the destabilizing effects of war and poverty, combining the canonical study of the religion with social activism. Engaged Buddhism seeks to alleviate the suffering of the physical world as “the guiding aspiration turns from inner peace to world peace” (Bodhi, 3). The Chinese occupation of Tibet established the country as an epicenter for the implementation of Engaged Buddhism.

The 1950 invasion and subsequent occupation of Tibet by Communist Chinese forces has resulted in brazen abuses of human rights against Tibetans, creating a large diaspora community of displaced peoples in surrounding Himalayan and countries, and resulting in degradation of Tibet’s natural environment. Tibetan women have enacted Engaged Buddhism to peacefully combat the large Chinese presence in their homeland. In this paper, I argue that the nonviolent actions of Tibetan women in opposition to the

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Chinese occupation of their native country serve to increase international awareness of the present situation in modern Tibet by examining Buddhist nonviolent engagement, the role of Tibetan women in organizing activist movements, and current methods of protest utilized by Tibetan women.

Literature Review

Modern Tibetan movements for liberation have, in accordance with the precepts of Engaged Buddhism, been peaceful. This is in part because of the nonviolent nature of Buddhism, but is also a conscious decision Tibetans continue to make in the face of great national strife. However, even before Chinese invasion, Tibet has not always enjoyed an entirely peaceful existence. In his article “The Rhetoric of War in Tibet: Toward a Just Buddhist War Theory,” Derek F. Maher examines justifications provided by the Fifth Dalai Lama for past wars, and particularly highlights a conflict involving the Mongolian leader and military commander, Gushri Khan. A man Maher cites as vital to the enthronement of the Fifth Dalai Lama, Gushri was a leader of the Khanate that enabled the Fifth Dalai Lama to garner political control of Tibet (Maher, 185).

Seemingly irrelevant to the modern functions of Tibetan women in contemporary resistance movements, Maher’s analysis of the Fifth Dalai Lama’s use of Buddhist rhetoric in his own historiography provides an interesting juxtaposition to the current doctrine of complete nonviolence adopted by Tibetan activists today. As easily as Tibetans could adopt similar tactics for justifying violence as the Fifth Dalai Lama did, and as justifiable as the Tibetan’s right to defend their homeland and autonomy is, Tibetan Buddhists under the Fourteenth Dalai Lama have chosen a path of nonviolence. Robert A. F. Thurman contrasts the leniency of violence under the Fifth Dalai Lama with

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the greater vision of peace the Buddhist worldview embraces. Citing the example of Shakyamuni Buddha, Thurman contextualizes the type of peace established under his leadership for a Western audience, stating that Shakyamuni was successful in creating a military-like organization of laypeople and monastics to wage peace (Thurman, 84). Similar organization of Buddhist protestors are utilized in present day resistance movements in Tibet and other countries where Engaged Buddhism presents a strong social influence.

Even outside of Tibet, women have profoundly impacted the nature of Tibetan resistance to Chinese occupation. *Feminism, Nationalism, and Exiled Tibetan Women* by Alex Butler is an important work that focuses on the experiences of Tibetan women in exile with specific reference to the Tibetan Women's Association (TWA) as an organization that provides leadership within the Diaspora community (Butler, 2). The TWA has also been instrumental in harnessing nationalist sentiments amongst exiled Tibetans (Butler, 7), thus helping to invigorate the Tibetan liberation movement within the country by drawing to it greater international attention amongst non-Tibetans. When compared to the work of Carol Devine in *Determination: Tibetan Women and the Struggle for an Independent Tibet*, which details the experiences of women living under occupation, it is made clear that the external Diaspora community and the internal residential community of Buddhist Tibetan women are equally essential to deescalating Chinese violence in Tibet while working toward the ultimate goal of liberation.

Devine provides a comprehensive account of the issues Tibetan women face under occupation, and describes the active role of Buddhist women in protest movements by providing personal accounts from Buddhist Tibetan women of their

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struggles under Chinese rule. In conjunction with Devine's own research, these accounts serve to underline her argument that women have been essential to the wider movement for Tibetan independence. Serenity Young's work "Women Changing Tibet, Activism Changing Women" provides a similar analysis of women's involvement in the Tibetan movement for independence, making the two works excellent companions for my own research and in the wider field of scholarship on female involvement and leadership in Tibetan protests movement. All of these individual works serve to describe some part of Engaged Buddhist social doctrine, but together they form a valuable composition of works expounding the role of women in the Tibetan experience of Engaged Buddhism.

Methods

The purpose of this paper is to seek an answer to the initial research question postured, which examines the efficacy of the nonviolent precepts of Engaged Buddhism enacted by Tibetan women in protest of Chinese occupation. Because of the nature and scope of this paper, research was conducted following standard methods for research at the undergraduate level in the humanities, focusing on the acquisition of relevant text sources. To decide if a research question was viable and an arguable thesis could be derived from it, preliminary research using academic databases and common search engines was conducted. If enough information was not available, the research question was re-written until the final question above was established. In beginning my research, I knew that books would be the most heavily used source type; books available on the subject of female political activism in Tibet are copious and diverse. Articles from academic journals for Religious Studies and modern Asian Studies were also utilized, and

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were useful in exploring the particulars of Buddhist nonviolence and women's involvement in Tibetan protests. The combination of books providing background information on the women of occupied Tibet and sources that examined the topic through a narrower lens mapped a clear landscape of the topic, which then allowed for the creation of an arguable thesis statement to answer the research question and to serve as the backbone of the paper.

Findings

Within and outside Tibet, women have been instrumental in developing and implementing nonviolent protest strategies against Chinese occupation. The reasons for this are multilayered and, like the entire state of political upheaval in Tibet, are complicated. Based on the works of other authors, I will provide sufficient evidence to suggest that the women of Tibet have effectively thrust Tibetan suffering at the hands of Chinese oppressors onto the consciousness of the international community.

Unlike in Western religions, Buddhism is not a tradition represented in the ritual of weekly attendance at religious services. It is instead simultaneously a philosophy and theology woven into the very fabric of Himalayan life, and has served to shape the identities of women in the region (Tsomo, 170). Karma Lekshe Tsomo argues that the foundation Buddhism provides to Himalayan women, including those of Tibetan descent, the ability to fully realize their religious and societal potential, something that has not been allowed in decades past because of strongly patriarchal tendencies within Himalayan societies (Aziz, 82). However, it has been necessary for Tibetan women to step into roles of leadership within the larger protest against Chinese occupation for several reasons. In the earlier decades of occupation, monks lead protests, but this did not

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prove to be a sustainable model of organization. Highly patriarchal, the Chinese projected their own views of social order onto the Tibetan people, and so saw men as the organizational forces behind resistance to occupation. In April of 1958, thousands of men were forcibly removed from Lhasa, leading to massive female-lead uprisings that firmly inculcated women into the leadership of Tibetan resistance movements, a function some had already been involved with previously, but never to the degree that the April protests allowed for (Devine, 20). The removal of men resulted in a leadership vacuum that needed to be filled, and this vacuum was only made more severe with the Fourteenth Dalai Lama's exile to India when it became clear that he could not safely remain in his occupied Tibet without fear of massive Chinese reprisal (Devine, 20).

It has typically been monastics that take on positions of leadership within Tibetan resistance movements because of their detachment from the responsibilities that normal lay practitioners of Buddhism might have, including family obligations. The latter is especially true for women; it is understood that political activism is dangerous, and nuns, who do not have children to care for in most cases, are willing to put themselves at greater risk of persecution. The persecution of political prisoners is severe, and nuns make up a significant portion of the known political prisoners who face death and worse yet, torture, while in captivity (Young, 232). Many more activists have disappeared since undertaking the cause of Tibetan liberation. Serenity Young and others go on to explain the brutality of the torture nuns and lay female activists are subjected to in Chinese-run prisons, including accounts of rape, neglect, and prolonged periods of interrogation using physically and emotionally damaging tactics (Young, 233). Chinese forces are

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indiscriminate in their arrests, imprisoning young girls and old women, exposing them to the horrors of Chinese political prisons, and torturing them for information (Ma, 9).

Despite the violence Tibetans women and nuns face under Chinese occupation, Tibetans have consciously made the decision to maintain a resistance movement that utilized tactics of nonviolence, thus refusing to contribute to the suffering already caused by Chinese occupation. The intersection of Buddhism and politics is not isolated to Tibet, and Engaged Buddhism has been used in other nations such as Myanmar, Thailand, and Cambodia to peaceably combat instability from the grassroots level (King, Queen).

Although Tibet does have a history of violence under Mongolian influence during the reign of the Fourth Dalai Lama (Maher, 189), modern Tibetans are careful to avoid any forms non-peaceful protest and militancy that might cause a greater backlash from the Chinese government, reducing any additional potential suffering for Tibetans.

Recently, Tibetan women have begun to partake in more extreme forms of protest outside of public demonstrations and circumambulation of holy sites. Out of desperation and weariness from long-term occupation and abuse, Tibetan women are turning to self-immolation as an extreme form of protest, previously a form of protest that only men had partaken in. The first woman publicly self-immolated on October 17, 2011 as a statement against occupation, and since then other women have followed suit (Riviera, 70). Self-immolation is what Gloria S. Riviera calls in the title of her article “the Ultimate Protest,” and the engagement of women in this activity indicates an important but disturbing shift in the nature of Tibetan peaceful protest.

Through Engaged Buddhism, the exiled community of Tibetan women, and the exiled leadership of the Dalai Lama, Tibetans have approached resistance as a way to

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draw foreign attention to the hardships of occupation. The Fourteenth Dalai Lama has set an example to Tibetans in his handling of the Chinese occupation, and has curtailed violent uprising on several occasions when out of desperation, groups of Tibetans formed militant groups to combat Chinese occupying forces (Cabezon, 298). The Dalai Lama has set forth a number of treatise calling for the cessation of Chinese violence and abandonment of programs that have been detrimental to the Tibetan way of life, including the destruction of Tibet's natural environment, forced resettlement of Tibetans and filling the unoccupied homes and land with ethnic Han Chinese, and the forced sterilization of Tibetan women and abortion of fetuses (Ma, 9). The Dalai Lama's most famous of these treatises is The Five Point Peace Plan, which aims to achieve the following:

1. Transformation of the whole of Tibet into a zone of peace.
2. Abandonment of China's population transfer policy that threatens the very existence of the Tibetans as a people.
3. Respect for the Tibetan people's fundamental human rights and democratic freedoms.
4. Restoration and protection of Tibet's natural environment and the abandonment of China's use of Tibet for the production of nuclear weapons and dumping of nuclear wastes.
5. Commencement of earnest negotiations on the future of Tibet and of relations between the Tibetan and Chinese peoples (qtd. in Cabezon, 298).

It is the steadfast commitment to present and future peace, the organization and sacrifices of Tibetan women, and the reactionary violence of the Chinese that has helped to draw widespread international support for the Tibetan cause, aided by the greater Tibetan Diaspora community.

Analysis

Based on my findings, enough evidence exists to suggest that women have been essential in the creation of active, Buddhist-centered protest groups, and in mobilizing

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these groups to draw attention to the Tibetan cause. But how effective have Tibetan women been in drawing international attention to their collective national strife? Starting in the late 20th century, the attention of the international community has clearly refocused to include consideration of the heinous crimes committed by the Chinese against the Tibetans. The fairly recent creation of such organizations at the New York-based Students for a Free Tibet (founded in 1994) is proof that Tibetans have been burned into the consciousness of individuals and multinational organizations outside of the Himalayas (Students for a Free Tibet). The commitment to peaceful resistance has only heightened international awareness.

What Tibetans, but primarily Buddhist Tibetan women, have done in electing to partake in peaceful civil disobedience against the Chinese government is transform themselves into victims in their own land, thus creating a narrative of the peaceful Tibetan people in the minds of foreign NGOs, governments, and citizens. The image of Tibetans as peaceful people struggling for survival is not entirely inaccurate, but does draw support from the natural inclination amongst people to protect people from those perceived aggressors— in this case, the Chinese government. When combined with extant notions amongst Westerners of the evils of communist governments carried over from the Cold War, the very real victimization of Tibetans panders to the “us vs. them” psychology that still subtly persists in societies that have traditionally been the most outspoken about the sordid human rights record of the People’s Republic of China. To that end, it may be argued that the activism of Tibetan women in peaceful protest movements against Chinese occupation has largely been effective in drawing international attention to the Tibetan plight.

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But the fact remains that drawing international attention is simply not enough to alleviate the massive suffering and damage that has been done to Tibet since the 1950s, and though organizations like Free Tibet have seen some success in alerting the general public to the atrocious treatment of political prisoners in Tibet, support for the cause outside of Central Asia has fizzled in recent years. Conjecturally, waning support is the result of the Dalai Lama's own hesitance to coerce China into serious negotiations by using military force, seemingly the only way possible to draw China into open dialogues about the future of Tibet, if not as an autonomous state then as a collective of the Tibetan people under limited and fair Chinese rule. To those outside of Tibet, and even to the Dalai Lama himself, it is increasingly clear that peaceful protest has been largely ineffective in liberating Tibet and improving the situation for domestic and refugee Tibetans. Though Tibetan women are right to seek social justice through the practice of peaceful Engaged Buddhism, little has been achieved in terms of swaying the Chinese from violence, nor in inciting Western governments to take any actions against the Chinese for their violations of human rights in Tibet, leaving the landscape inhabitable and the strong women behind the protest movements caught in an endless and bloody struggle.

Conclusion

Though the current picture of women as Engaged Buddhists in Tibet is grim, there is reason to hope for the future of Tibet and the Tibetan people. Because of the work Tibetan women have carried out to bring awareness to the hardships of life under occupation, greater knowledge of the situation in Tibet is now prevalent outside of Central Asia. The increased global awareness of Chinese misdeeds in Tibet is a step

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toward correcting the wrongs that have been committed against the Tibetan people regardless of the limited efficacy of peaceful protests in achieving full Tibetan liberation. In addition to this, women have cemented their positions as leaders in Tibetan society; it is highly unlikely that once conflict in the region subsides, Buddhist women, particularly nuns, will readjust to and accept their subservient positions to men, making women's involvement as leaders of the Tibetan independence movement another promising example of the advancement of women in Buddhism.

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