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Enlightenment in Tibet's First *Khenmo* Program

Jue Liang and Andrew S. Taylor

University of Virginia

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Tilling the Fields of Merit: The Institutionalization of Feminine Enlightenment in Tibet's First *Khenmo* Program¹

Jue Liang and Andrew S. Taylor²

Abstract

This article documents the history and social effects of the *khenmo* (*mkhan mo*) program at Larung Gar (*Bla rung sgar*), the first institution in Tibet to systematically grant nuns advanced Buddhist degrees. We argue that Jigme Phuntsok (*Jigs med phun tshogs*, 1933-2004), Larung's

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² Department of Religious Studies, University of Virginia. Email: jl4nf@virginia.edu (Jue Liang); ast9qs@virginia.edu (Andrew Taylor).

founder, started the program in hopes of challenging the public perception of women as incapable of advanced learning. Legitimizing nuns as a field of merit for donors represented an important step in his larger project of changing the status of nuns and women in Tibetan society more generally. We begin with a brief history of Larung, demonstrating how Jigme Phuntsok's singular vision of gender equality in Buddhist education and practice led to the arrival of thousands of nuns to his small encampment. We proceed to give an overview of the khenmo program, including its curriculum and degree requirements. We conclude with an examination of the social effects of the khenmo movement, exploring how the presence of educated nuns is changing both women's self-understandings of their own practice and lay attitudes toward women's religious capacities.

Introduction

Of the few Tibetan women whose names have been bequeathed to posterity, the vast majority were Buddhists who practiced beyond the confines of monastic strictures, thriving as Tantric masters, consorts, mothers, prophetesses, *tertöns* (*gter ston*), lineage holders, and even *ḍākinīs*, but rarely as celibate monastics, and even more rarely as scholastic commentators.³ This dearth is particularly notable in Tibet, where intel-

³ While there are a handful of canonical sources by and about Buddhist nuns in the larger Buddhist world—for example, the *Therīgāthā*, an anthology of poems by early Buddhist nuns almost contemporaneous with the Buddha, or the *Biographies of Eminent Nuns* (比丘尼传), a collection of biographies of Chinese Buddhist nuns compiled in the sixth century—the number of celebrated Buddhist nuns in pre-twentieth century Tibet

lectual history has been defined through the writings of elite philosopher-monks, where political history often coincides with the histories of the monasteries in which these luminaries were educated, and where economic wealth was largely concentrated in these same institutions. Education—unlike its brethren intelligence, wisdom, and perspicacity—is defined institutionally, a social conferral rather than a private trait. To receive a terminal philosophical degree in one of these monasteries—a *geshe* degree (*dge bshes*) for the Gelug order, a *khenpo* degree (*mkhan po*) for the Nyingma and Kagyu orders—was also to receive public legitimation, and many of the great philosophers and religious teachers of Tibetan history also served as important political leaders in their capacities as abbots of major monasteries.⁴ The present Dalai Lama continued to study for his *geshe* exams in the late 1950s even though he had already assumed political power and was negotiating the future of his people, worried that he otherwise wouldn't be accepted as a legitimate leader (XIV Dalai Lama 49-50, 164-65).

Women were historically denied the opportunity to receive these degrees, along with the soteriological, political, financial, and social benefits they conferred. As women began to receive terminal degrees in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, it was necessary to coin the neologisms *geshema* and *khenmo* to correctly gender the recipients. Indeed, the very concept of a *khenmo*, with the female nominalizer *mo*, was so unintelligible that one *khenmo* we spoke with said that when her teacher informed her that she was going to begin studying to become a *khenmo* in

can be counted on one hand. For studies on these rare cases, see Havnevik, Vargas-O'Bryan, Schaeffer, and Melnick.

⁴ The term “*khenpo*” has a number of other definitions, including an advanced but non-terminal degree in the Gelug order, a secular scholar at the head of their field, and a preceptor of vows (translating the Sanskrit *upādhyāya*), among others. We use the term in the restricted sense given here.

the late 1980s, she nodded her assent and immediately went to look up “khenmo” in the dictionary: It lacked an entry.

Thirty years later, her home institution of Larung Gar (*Bla rung sgar*)⁵ houses a khenmo program with hundreds of students, largely designed and implemented by over 100 khenmos who have already received their degrees. What was once an anomalous program at Larung is now matched by an even larger khenmo program at nearby Yarchen Gar (*Ya chen sgar*), and nunneries across Khams and Amdo have slowly followed suit with their own local programs. This essay documents the history and social effects of the khenmo program at Larung Gar, the first institution in Tibet to systematically grant nuns advanced Buddhist degrees. We argue that Jigme Phuntsok (*Jigs med phun tshogs*, 1933–2004), Larung’s founder, started the program in hopes of legitimating nuns as fields of merit for donors, and further hoped to change the status of nuns and women in Tibetan society more generally.

Our data has been drawn from a combination of written sources and interviews conducted across six research excursions from 2017–2019, each between two weeks and two months in length. In addition to Larung itself, we also spent significant time at nearby Yarchen Gar and Tashi Nunnery (*Bkra shis dgon*, 扎西寺) in Tagong (*lha sgang*, 塔公), also the homes of sizable khenmo programs, as well as the new resettlement nunneries built by the Chinese government as a part of the effort to downsize Larung Gar. We conducted extensive interviews with the khenmos themselves, as well as the abbots of khenmo-granting institutions (including Larung), current khenmo and khenpo students, ordinary

⁵ Unlike a monastery (*dgon pa*), a *gar* (literally an encampment) does not solely consist of monastics and suggests a less formal and less strategically planned residence. The strategic designation of Larung as a *gar* instead of a monastery is discussed in Germano 62. Though the distinction is an important, even crucial one in some discourses, most locals simply refer to Larung Gar as “Larung Monastery.”

monks and nuns, local laypeople, and pilgrims.⁶ To ensure the anonymity of our subjects, we have not provided names or identifying details in our attributions and citations.

The Life and Charisma of Jigme Phuntsok

The story of the Larung khenmo program begins with an unlikely man in an even more unlikely place. When Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok first decamped to rural Serta County (*gser rta rdzong*, 色达县) in the late 1970s, he chose as remote a location as possible for his institute, and was attended by only six of his closest disciples. At the time of his death in 2004, Larung Gar Buddhist Academy housed well over ten thousand full-time monastics in the teaching season, the majority of whom were women.⁷ The life and charisma of Jigme Phuntsok have received more scholarly attention than has the khenmo program, so we will focus our energies primarily on the institutions Jigme Phuntsok helped build rather than his career and teachings (see Germano and Gayley).⁸ However, it is

⁶ Although many abbots are also khenpos, we use “abbot” specifically to reference those individuals directly responsible for bureaucratic and spiritual maintenance at the highest level of decision-making within an institution. Larung Gar is currently overseen by a committee of five abbots, including Jigme Phuntsok’s niece, Mumé Yeshe Tsomo.

⁷ It is difficult to accurately tally the gender ratio of the monastic population at Larung Gar, as the public census data disagrees significantly from what is witnessed on ground. The estimates our interviewees gave range from 60-70 percent female.

⁸ Germano’s landmark article “Re-membering the Dismembered Body of Tibet,” which introduced Larung Gar to the western academic world, includes a detailed biography of Jigme Phuntsok and an account of the founding of Larung Gar. Germano argues that Jigme Phuntsok deftly drew on a specifically Tibetan network of religious symbols to covertly articulate a Tibetan national identity without drawing the ire of Chinese authorities. Gayley’s “The Ethics of Cultural Survival” offers an analysis of Jigme Phuntsok’s Heart Advice to Tibetans for the 21st Century (*Dus rabs nyer gcig pa’i gangs*

worth outlining two facets of Jigme Phuntsok's public image that were especially salient in growing one of the largest monastic complexes in the world:

First, Jigme Phuntsok was viewed as quintessentially Tibetan at a time when Tibetan identity had been ruptured to the point of discontinuity (Germano). The decade-long devastation wrought by the Cultural Revolution shut down virtually all schools and dismantled the vast majority of monastic institutions. It resulted in incalculable deaths and a significant erasure of Tibetan cultural and religious memory. When Tibetans were again allowed to openly, though not freely, practice Buddhism following the liberalizations of the late 1970s, many felt as if they were starting almost from scratch, as much of the monastic institutional memory had fled into exile with the region's leading intellectuals and religious leaders. Today, many Tibetans refer to this period as a second "dark age," referencing an imperial king who successfully extinguished monastic Buddhism from the Plateau for over a century. Jigme Phuntsok's success in articulating a post-Mao Buddhism that was seen as both existentially relevant and continuous with traditional Tibetan monasticism derives partly from his biography and partly from a careful curation of numerous lineages. Jigme Phuntsok actively associated himself with great Tibetans past, casting himself as the incarnation of *tertöns* like Lerab Lingpa (1856-1926) and the recipient of visions and protection from King Gesar, a warrior-king more important as a symbol of ethnic pride than a historical figure. Perhaps most compellingly for many ordi-

can pa rnams la phul ba'i snying gtam), in which she identifies his primary concerns as cultural preservation and a reimagined Buddhist ethics relevant to the twenty-first century. The authors have sought to elaborate on her insight that Jigme Phuntsok widened "the sphere of Buddhist ethics from governing an individual economy of merit (as the means toward a favorable rebirth) to serving as the cornerstone for social welfare . . ." See Gayley 457.

nary Tibetans, when many of Tibet's intellectuals and religious leaders fled Tibet for exile abroad during the turbulent 1950s and 1960s, Jigme Phuntsok secluded himself in the mountains of Khams to herd goats and sheep with his sister, subjecting himself to the same famines, public humiliations, and other hardships as the many Tibetans who stayed behind.

Second, and most relevantly for this essay, Jigme Phuntsok's monastic orientation at a time when so much religious memory had been lost was inspiring to both monastics in search of authentic Buddhist practices and laypeople seeking genuine fields of merit in which to invest their newly regained spiritual and economic capital. Jigme Phuntsok's insistence that monks and nuns maintain their vows—almost a tautology in some monastic contexts—was a radical act at a time when most monks and nuns had been forcibly disrobed and thrust into lay life for a decade. In its early days, Jigme Phuntsok staked Larung's reputation on a strict admissions process: Anyone who wished to join Larung's monastic community had to have an existing member of the monastery vouch for their character in order to be admitted. As a longtime monastic leader informed us, if the new admit violated the rules of the monastery or his or her monastic vows, the corroborator would be expelled along with the admit. How closely this rigorous policy was adhered to in practice is less important than its publicization. Similarly, Jigme Phuntsok preached all his life for monks and nuns to give up agriculture, herding, and other businesses they had undertaken during the Cultural Revolution so that they could again become fertile fields of merit. He further insisted that monastics remain celibate, as he did himself. There is a story widely circulated in Khams that Jigme Phuntsok was approached on multiple occasions by young *ḍākinīs* who wanted to serve as his consorts. Jigme Phuntsok refused on each occasion, saying that although such Tantric rituals would have enhanced his practice, it would have hurt his standing with laypeople who might misinterpret his actions.

There are any number of ways of gauging Jigme Phuntsok's success in establishing Larung as a fertile field of merit—if its stature as the largest monastic institution on the Tibetan plateau is not already enough—but it is always instructive to look at people's behavior when confronting life's two great inevitabilities. First, money: Larung emerged as one of the best-funded monastic complexes in all of Tibet, largely on the basis of lay donations. Second, death: Although funerary rites are typically performed by monastics from one's local monastery, the public perception of the purity of Larung monastic practice reached such heights that families began sending the bodies of deceased loved ones to Larung from all across Tibet, in hopes that having the last rites performed by Larung monastics would benefit the departed in their rebirth. So many bodies arrived at Larung on a daily basis that the time spent on funerary rituals became the biggest inhibitor to the khenmos' studies. It is no wonder that today a common appellation found haloing Jigme Phuntsok on icons and shrines says his teachings are like “the blissful sun rising in the Snowland as the miserable period of darkness fades (*dus 'khrug gi mun nag dbyings su yal/ bod gangs can la bde ba'i nyi ma shar*).”

Strategic Inclusivity

We have briefly sketched the personal appeal of Jigme Phuntsok as a teacher, but we have yet to demonstrate the mechanisms by which Larung transformed from a small encampment into one of the largest monastic complexes in the world, as well as why it was particularly appealing for nuns. In this section we will explain both by identifying three forms of inclusivity that engendered Larung's trans-local influence.

First, Jigme Phuntsok demonstrated great ideological inclusivity in explicitly branding the institute as ecumenical (*ris med*) rather than Nyingma, even though a significant majority of students are Nyingma

and its monastic curriculum culminates in Dzogchen practices, the pinnacle of Nyingma Tantric teachings. Similarly, local Sakya and Gelug monasteries (sharing a largely similar curriculum) treat Larung as a Nyingma monastery and encourage their students not to spend more than a couple of years there at the most. However, Larung monks and nuns are exposed to commentarial traditions from each of the five Tibetan Buddhist schools (Nyingma, Sakya, Gelug, Kagyu, and Jonang), and teachers allow students to form their own supplementary courses that prioritize texts from their own school—this is especially common with Kagyu teachers and students. Most importantly, branding Larung as an ecumenical institution foregrounds its Tibetan identity in the popular imagination, enhancing its appeal as a pilgrimage site and field of merit.

Second, inclusivity toward Han Chinese practitioners. Jigme Phuntsok didn't sequester the nascent institute from the broader Chinese world, but actively recruited Han practitioners from the mid-1980s, culminating in his public teaching at China's sacred Mount Wutai in 1987, where he discovered perhaps the first terma revealed in a predominantly Han area and published a series of prayers.⁹ It is worth underscoring that this was the same year that Larung was officially consecrated as a Buddhist academy by the Tenth Panchen Lama Chokyi Gyeltsen

⁹ Terma (*gter ma*), often translated as "Treasure," refers to holy items including texts, statues, paintings, medical prescriptions, precious objects, etc., buried by the Buddhist master Padmasambhava or other early Tantric masters who are attributed by Tibetans with introducing Buddhism into Tibet. One predestined to reveal such Treasures is known as a tertön. These items were deemed untimely for practitioners of Padmasambhava's day, and were buried with the intention that later practitioners (often future incarnations of Padmasambhava or his own disciples) would retrieve them at the moment they would be most beneficial. Although there are precedents for discovering Buddhist teachings and sacred objects in India, the practice has often been characterized as distinctly Tibetan. The fact that Jigme Phuntsok uncovered a terma at one of the holiest sites of Chinese Buddhism attests to the scope of his inclusive approach.

(1938-1989), a turning point for the institute. A number of the older Han nuns ordained in the Tibetan tradition we spoke with were either present at this teaching at Mount Wutai or cited it as the inspiration for them to become nuns. Jigme Phuntsok recruited Chinese practitioners in many other ways as well, perhaps most successfully by commissioning some of his students to focus on learning Chinese and teaching in the mainland. Most famous among them is Khenpo Sodargye (1962-), who has published a number of popular Chinese bestsellers and is as popular among Han practitioners as Tibetans. Once Han monastics and disciples arrived, they found institutions tailored to their physical and religious needs, including classes taught in Chinese and an expedited academic program, reflecting the educational gap between incoming Chinese and Tibetan disciples. The popularity of Larung among Han Buddhists and its emergence as a symbol of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, considered by some Han practitioners as a purer form of Buddhism, also gave the institute access to Chinese donors and wealth.

Third, inclusivity toward women. As the majority of Larung's monastic population is comprised of nuns, it is especially important to understand the opportunities Larung provided women such that thousands were willing to forego their local nunneries and travel dozens or even hundreds of miles to practice there. Jigme Phuntsok's personal charisma was of course as much an attraction for the nuns as for the monks. However, in this section, we will explore an additional set of institutional incentives specific to the nuns, namely a perception that Larung was the only institute in Tibet where women were granted the same opportunities in education and practice as men. Just as Jigme Phuntsok positioned himself as a successor of Gesar and a treasure revealer to cement his Tibetan bona fides, he also claimed to be an incarnation of Mahāprajāpatī (*Skye dgu'i bdag mo chen mo*), the Buddha's aunt who advocated for women's admission into the *saṃgha*, and the nuns say that he has championed women's practice in each lifetime since.

To be clear, Jigme Phuntsok didn't traverse the Plateau preaching gender equality. Even if such social and religious equality was his ultimate goal—and many of the present Larung nuns and abbots believe it was, saying that he expressed this privately on multiple occasions—it would have been impossible both socially and politically to advance this discourse in 1980s Tibet. Rather, Jigme Phuntsok created institutions in which women had the same opportunities as men, and the institutions sold themselves. As a khenpo of a nearby encampment, or *gar* (*sgar*), with a khenmo program told us, “A monastery is a place where equality is preached but not practiced; a *gar* is a place where equality is practiced but not preached.” Many of the khenmos stressed this avoidance of feminist rhetoric as well. As one summarized, “When teaching, Jigme Phuntsok and Khenpo Sodargye always said there were many accomplished female practitioners in Tibetan Buddhism—if your practice succeeds, this is equality. We don't need to *talk* about equality.” Another khenmo echoed, “Gender equality is achieved through action, not slogans.” Consequently, in evaluating Jigme Phuntsok's gendered agenda, we have found it more useful to observe the institutions he built and infer his underlying motivations rather than to attempt close readings of his teachings, which rarely reference gender explicitly.

Women were present almost from Larung's inception, and a number of the older nuns can still vividly describe their surprise and happiness at sitting alongside the monks during teachings, rather than behind them, as is common in most monastic complexes. These nuns recall that Jigme Phuntsok would often use gender neutral language in his teachings—more conspicuous in the Tibetan than in English (e.g., using *pho mo* as his default term of address for mixed crowds, using both *byang chub sems dpa'* and *byang chub sems ma* when giving teachings, etc.)—and close by saying that Buddhists of both genders must study hard, an obvious directive to the group not traditionally expected to study hard. This

sentiment manifested institutionally in the founding of Pema Khandro Duling Nunnery (*Padma mkha' 'gro'i 'du gling*) within Larung Gar in 1985.

Jigme Phuntsok also integrated Larung's leadership when he publicly identified his niece Mumé Yeshe Tsomo (1966-) as an incarnation of the renowned leader of Mindroling monastery, Mingyur Paldrön (1699-1769). This recognition was verified by the Dalai Lama during their trip to India in 1988. She was further recognized as a *tertön*, made head of Pema Khandro Duling and Larung itself, and encouraged to teach publicly and give transmissions to monastics and laypeople, men and women alike. We have chosen not to foreground Mumé Yeshe Tsomo in this article for two reasons. First, and most importantly, she is of such importance that a fair treatment would require its own article, one we hope to see in the near future. Second, her status was obtained as a *tulku* rather than as a *khenmo*, a somewhat different religious and social phenomenon, though one also worthy of study. However, it is worth underscoring here that Jigme Phuntsok publicly demonstrated that Larung was a monastic complex where women were capable of leadership at the highest religious and administrative levels.

The Khenmo Program

Well aware that the benefits afforded by a degree are conferred in proportion to the prestige of the granting institution and the skills one is perceived to have acquired over the course of the educational process, Jigme Phuntsok designed a *khenmo* program in which *khenmo* students followed the same curriculum as the *khenpos* and fulfilled the same academic requirements in order to graduate. By subjecting monks and nuns to the same educational process, Jigme Phuntsok directly challenged the popular conception of women as lacking the capacity for higher Bud-

dhist education. In this section, we will give a general overview of the process by which a nun becomes a khenmo at Larung, including the khenmo curriculum.

We will begin with an approximate timeline of the program, though our dates should be employed somewhat provisionally. Nuns began arriving at Larung as early as 1983, if not earlier, and cemented their status institutionally with the founding of Pema Khandro Duling and a large influx of Han nuns following the Mount Wutai teachings in 1987. The nuns began studying “the five great text-traditions” (*gzhung chen lnga*, listed below), as did all the advanced students at Larung, but by the late 1980s some were aware that they were not only studying to benefit their Buddhist practice, but also to become khenmos. Initially a group of four khenpos was charged with teaching the nuns; some khenmo students took over teaching responsibilities for the more introductory classes in the early 1990s. After the first cohort of khenmos graduated, they assumed teaching responsibilities at all levels of the program.

In this nascent stage of the program, the requirements for becoming a khenmo were fluid and somewhat relaxed, as was also true for the monks in the corresponding khenpo program. Today a khenmo/po must pass all of their final exams, write a lengthy thesis, and be approved by a committee of teachers and esteemed monks and nuns. In the 1990s, one needed only to pass a plurality of exams, and when and how one was elevated to khenmo/po status was largely at the teacher’s discretion. Five cohorts of Tibetan khenmos graduated prior to Jigme Phuntsok’s death in 2004, as well as a single cohort of Han khenmos. Though there were nuns being referred to as khenmos in the early 1990s, it is our impression that they acquired the title because they were teaching, in much the same way that an unknowing undergraduate might refer to their graduate teaching assistant as a professor. According to one of the earliest arriving and most senior khenmos, the first cohort gradu-

ated in 1997. These women were the first in Tibetan history to receive terminal philosophical degrees, the first to be institutionally recognized as intellectually capable of rigorous scholasticism, and the first to receive the social power and recognition that such a degree confers.

Three other cohorts of Han khenmos have followed since, and there are new Tibetan khenmos almost yearly. As of 2018, there were just under 200 graduated khenmos associated with Larung—one of the abbots of Larung estimated 104 Tibetan khenmos at Larung Gar, 58 of whom are on leave due to sickness or “other reasons.”¹⁰ The khenmo program, once run by senior monks and khenpos, is today run largely by the khenmos themselves: A majority of the teachers are khenmos rather than khenpos, and a committee of senior khenmos also has a voice in designing the curriculum for the khenmo/po programs of Larung Gar.

There is no set timetable for the completion of the khenmo degree. An average seems to be around twelve to fourteen years, though we also heard as short as eight years. The outside range has a much wider variance; one khenmo student at nearby Yarchen Gar joked that she had been studying for twenty years, but she didn’t have any plans to go anywhere, so twenty more was no problem. Of course, as one khenpo reminded us, it takes ten years to become a khenpo or khenmo but fifty years to become a good one.

¹⁰ The number of Han khenmos is more difficult to determine, as the khenmo/khenpo program for Han monastics takes only six years to complete, and many are able to forego all literacy classes as they enter with undergraduate or graduate degrees already in hand. Moreover, Han monastics are generally more mobile than their Tibetan counterparts and often do not stay at Larung for longer than a decade due to differences in educational background and motivation, as well as difficulties in maintaining their legal status and physical well-being.

The academic semester begins in March and April and runs through July, followed by a short break. In the fall the teachers offer the more profound of their esoteric teachings to incentivize nuns to return and stay during the long Serta winter. In January and February there is a two-month break for the new year, during which time most students return home. The daily schedule for the khenmo students during the semester is roughly as follows:

| | |
|-------------|--|
| 4:00 | Wake up |
| 4:00–8:00 | Meditation, chanting (a source of income for nuns supporting themselves) |
| 8:00–11:00 | Morning classes, either in the large assembly hall with one of the abbots, or with one's primary khenmo or khenpo teacher. |
| 11:00–13:00 | Break. Lunch. Rest. Prepare for afternoon classes. |
| 13:00–15:00 | Afternoon classes, generally with one of the teaching assistants (<i>khrid pa</i>), often a clarification or extension of the morning teachings. |
| 15:00–15:30 | Break |
| 15:30–17:30 | Classes with the teaching assistant. |
| 17:30 | The formal day ends. The rest of the evening is devoted to self-study, homework, and meditation. |
| 23:00 | Lights out, though nuns preparing for their final exams routinely stay up into the early morning to study. |

Classes usually take the form of reading a commentary together with a teacher. The corresponding root text should be memorized on one's own time. Class sizes have fluctuated throughout the program's history. In the early days there were often 80-100 khenmo students per lead teacher, but even though the number of students has increased in recent years, the number of teachers has increased rapidly enough to lower the ratio to about forty per class.

The curriculum is broadly Nyingma in orientation, though students read commentaries from all five schools. Students must complete courses in each of the five great text-traditions: Valid Cognition (*tshad ma, pramāṇa*), Monastic Disciplines (*'dul ba, vinaya*), Abhidharma (*mngon pa, abhidharma*), Middle Way (*dbu ma, madhyamaka*), and Perfection of Wisdom (*phar phyin, prajñāpāramitā*). Each course takes roughly one to two years to complete. Once all five courses are completed, the student begins to study esoteric texts and practices. An overview of the curriculum is provided below.

First, all students at Larung—not just the khenmo students—take a “general knowledge” (*rig gnas*, lit. “fields of learning”) course for between one and two years that gives a general overview of Indian and Tibetan Buddhism and Buddhist practice. Most importantly for many of the arriving nuns, the general knowledge course also teaches literacy and the basic principals of literary Tibetan. Many of the nuns who come to Larung are illiterate; the introductory course includes a literacy exam that a highly educated nun could pass on arrival but for an illiterate nun might require months of preparation. Texts include the *Root Grammar in Thirty Verses* (*Lung du ston pa rtsa ba sum cu pa*) and the *Grammar Guide to Signs* (*Lung du ston pa rtags kyi 'jug pa*). This class also acts as a proving ground for promising students; khenmo students are selected based on their performance in this course.

Exemplary students proceed to complete coursework in each of the five great text-traditions. Students can advance upon completing their exams, but the relevant preparation takes between a year on the short end—usually for the first two courses—and as long as two to five years per course for the final three.

1. Valid Cognition (*tshad ma, pramāṇa*). The most important root text is Dharmakīrti's *Commentary on Valid Cognition* (*Pramāṇa-vārttika, Tshad ma rnam 'grel*), itself a commentary on Dignāga's *Compendium of Validities* (*Pramāṇasamuccaya, Tshad ma kun las btus pa*). Of the Tibetan commentators, Gorampa (*Go rams pa Bsod nams seng ge*) and Mipham (*'Jam mgon 'Ju mi pham Rnam rgyal rgya mtsho*) are the most important.
2. Monastic Disciplines (*'dul ba, vinaya*): Guṇaprabha's *Vinayasūtra* (*'Dul ba mdo rtsa*) is used as the base text and supplemented by Ngari Panchen Pema Wanggyel's (*Mnga' ris Pan chen Padma dbang rgyal*) *Ascertaining the Three Types of Vows* (*Sdom gsum rnam nges*).
3. Abhidharma (*mngon pa, abhidharma*). This focuses on Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośa* (*Mngon pa mdzod*) and numerous Tibetan commentators.
4. Middle Way (*dbu ma, madhyamaka*). This course is the longest of the five. Particularly difficult root texts include Śāntarakṣita's *Ornament on the Middle Way* (*Madhyamakālaṅkāra, Dbu ma rgyan*) and Candrakīrti's *Entering the Middle Way* (*Madhyamakāvātāra, Dbu ma 'jug pa*). Mipham is the most important of the Tibetan commentators, as students sometimes spend a year apiece on his *Beacon of Certainty* (*Nges shes sgron me*), his commentary on Śāntarakṣita, the *Dbu ma rgyan gyi rnam bshad 'jam dbyangs bla ma dgyes pa'i zhal lung*, and his *Light of the Sun: Refutation of Incorrect Views on the Ninth Chapter of the Bodhicaryāvatāra* (*Spyod 'jug sher le brgal lan nyin byed snang ba*).

5. Perfection of Wisdom (*phar phyin, prajñāpāramitā*). The primary root text is the *Abhisamayālaṅkāra* (*'Grel pa don gsal*). Approximately two years apiece are given to commentaries by Sengge Zangpo and Patrul Rinpoche.

If not for the Nyingma bent of the commentaries, the root texts listed above might serve equally well as the foundation of a Gelug curriculum—a fact that had surely occurred to Jigme Phuntsok when he founded the Institute as ecumenical rather than Nyingma.¹¹ However, upon completing coursework in the five text-traditions, the students embark on an esoteric curriculum that is decidedly Nyingma in orientation. In this portion of the program, each student's pace fluctuates according to her own preference and ability, not unlike our own candidacy period in the Ph.D. system. Texts might be added or subtracted according to the teacher's discretion, though Longchenpa's *Dispelling Darkness in the Ten Directions* (*Phyogs bcu mun sel*) and Mipham's accompanying commentary *Essence of Clear Light* (*'Od gsal snying po*) are especially emphasized. The workload of the khenmo students is also increased during this period, as many serve as teaching-assistants and begin teaching supplementary courses themselves. The khenmos report that during this period one might only get three or four hours of sleep a night, a point of commiseration with the Ph.D. candidates authoring this article.

For each text-tradition, the students are expected to prepare for three types of exams:

1. An oral exam (*'chad rgyugs*) consisting largely of recitation that is offered three times a year.

¹¹ Chris Hiebert is currently dissertating on the monastic curriculum created by Zhenpen Thaye, one that remained influential in the design of later Nyingma curricula, including Larung's.

2. A written exam (*yig rgyugs*) offered annually, usually in the eleventh month of the Tibetan calendar.
3. A debate exam (*rgyugs gleng*), in which the khenmo student must debate her instructors in the classical style. This portion of the exam is worth stressing, as debate is more popularly associated with the Gelug school and there are some who believe Larung students are not trained in debate at all.

In addition to the three exams, the khenmo students must write a thesis based on their understanding of the five text-traditions. Unlike the *geshema* degrees in exile, where the pass rate seems to be 100 percent or close to, the pass rate for the khenmo exams hovers around 50 percent. Even for this select half, the process is not yet completed: In a post-exam evaluation, all of one's teachers as well as an advisory board comprised of prestigious khenmos and khenpos within the institute gather to assess not only the student's scholarship, but also their practice, virtue, and, most importantly, whether or not they have successfully kept their vows while at Larung. In a recent year, around 200 nuns successfully passed the final exams, but only fifty were chosen to become khenmos. This selectivity seems to be in keeping with Jigme Phuntsok's intention that the khenmos and khenpos embody the institute's monastic ideals as much as the scholastic ones, such that they are viewed as fruitful fields of merit.

Khenmos in the Public Imagination

We believe, both on the basis of interviews to this effect and on the structure of the khenmo program, that the Larung khenmo curriculum was not an ad hoc institution developed according to the needs of the moment, but part of a larger project by Jigme Phuntsok and others at Larung to challenge the public perception of women as lacking the disci-

pline and intellectual capacity requisite for advanced study and practice. We would like to call attention to a few areas where the khenmos have been deployed publicly to help affect this paradigm shift.

First, the khenmos often represent Larung in an official capacity, teaching to mixed audiences of laypeople. This happens throughout the year, both when laypeople come to Larung specifically to receive teachings and when khenmos travel to other locales. When traveling, the khenmos are allowed to accept offerings for Larung Gar or institutions therein (e.g., the publishing house or the nunnery) but are not allowed to receive personal payment for their teachings, further reflecting the abbots's concern with the public perception of the Institute's monastic purity. Khenmos are allowed to teach to mixed audiences of laypeople. Most notably, the khenmos teach an audience of tens of thousands at Larung's largest annual gathering, the Festival of the Blissful Realms (*bde chen zhing grub*, 极乐法会). Of the four large festivals offered annually at Larung, this is the only one that is open to and targets a lay Tibetan audience. The Festival of Bliss is concerned with two intensely practical subjects for laypeople: ethical teachings for everyday life (e.g., becoming a vegetarian, not knife-fighting) and achieving rebirth in the Pure Lands. Not coincidentally, this is also the teaching at which the khenmos are featured most prominently, giving teachings and leading prayers. This practice began when Jigme Phuntsok invited Mumé Yeshe Tsono to teach, but in the late 1990s the khenmos too began teaching and have continued ever since.¹² The khenmos are not only afforded respect within Larung, but are being deployed as representatives of the monastery to laypeople, clearly indicating a social agenda.

¹² In 2018 and 2019 the prayer festival was cancelled by the government; its future status is uncertain.

Second, the khenmos and other high-ranking nuns run Āryatārē, the publishing arm of Larung, annually producing dozens of books and publications, as well as other multimedia materials. Even a simple catalogue of the publishing house's recent offerings is too long to provide here, but they include everything from textbooks for the monastics to works of Tibetan and Buddhist scholarship to introductory surveys for a popular audience. One nun is compiling a dictionary of archaic Tibetan terms (*brda rnying*). She has already completed 2,288 pages and paper and digital editions of her dictionary will soon be available. A recent project includes digitizing and transcribing all of Jigme Phuntsok's extant teachings. The publishing house doesn't merely execute orders from the abbots; though founded by Mumé Yeshe Tsomo, the current editorial board largely dictates their own agenda and carries it out meticulously.

Perhaps the most impressive of Āryatārē's projects is their *Great Treasury of Ḍākinī Teachings* (*Mkha' 'gro'i chos mdzod chen mo*, hereafter *Great Treasury*), a fifty-three-volume collection of works by and about important Buddhist women, spanning from Mahāprajāpatī to Mumé Yeshe Tsomo.¹³ The texts are scholastically rigorous, as the editorial team has scoured male writings to glean as much information on the women at the periphery of the stories as possible that they might be recentered, a process familiar to all feminist historians.¹⁴ In a society where all of the pre-1900

¹³ We are looking forward to Sarah Jacoby and Padma 'tsho's introduction of the Treasury and a translation of its preface in the forthcoming *Voices from Larung Gar* (Shambhala Publications).

¹⁴ For example, the editors collected all the stories about Buddhist women from the *Vinaya* and the *sūtras*, where they are rarely foregrounded, compiling them into two individual collections entitled *Collected Stories of the Female Monastics of the Vinaya-piṭaka* (*'dul ba'i sde snod las btus pa'i dge sbyong ma sogs kyi nram thar skor*) and *Collected Stories of the Female Bodhisattvas of the Sūtra-piṭaka* (*mdo sde'i ste snod las btus pa'i byang chub sems ma'i nram thar skor*). These two collections comprise the first five volumes of the Treasury.

writings explicitly about or by Tibetan women would hardly fill a few volumes, this fifty-three-volume overview of women's lives and practice makes it the preeminent Tibetan-language reference material on the subject. When asked about the origins of the project, one of the nuns in charge of the publishing house told us that there were two primary motivations. First, there are many works about men but too few about women. Second, because these works are so few, they are in danger of being lost if steps are not taken now to collect them. One of the abbots of the institute added a third reason: "One defining feature of Larung is that it houses more female monastics than male—1,500 monks and 3,500 nuns. The administration also prioritizes (重视) women's education and practice over men's." The extent to which this latter assertion is true in practice is less important in this context than its ability to provide a theoretical justification for allowing the nuns to act autonomously.

Third, khenmos are not only serving as editors, but also beginning to author commentaries and other works themselves. Though a few khenmos have written books, including one on public health and a well-received volume of poetry, we'd like to close this section with the exemplary case of Khenmo Yonten (*Mkhan mo yon tan*), a khenmo who has authored an eight-volume commentary (*'grel pa*) on the five text-traditions that gives an overview of the entire Larung khenmo/po curriculum, published as volumes forty-two to fifty of the *Great Treasury*.¹⁵ (This accomplishment has already been widely circulated on WeChat, and so the authors feel comfortable identifying her here.) She claims that the volumes began as her lecture notes and that she only formatted them as a book at the request of her students. Her excessive modesty aside, they are widely

¹⁵ Chelsea Hall presented on Khenmo Yonten and her commentaries in a paper, "Khenmo Yönten's Quiet Commentaries: Publishing Female-Authored Buddhist Texts at Serta Larung Gar," at the 2017 American Academy of Religion conference on the panel "Voices from Larung Gar."

circulated among both the khenmo and khenpo students at Larung, particularly the volume on Abhidharma, which is anecdotally the most difficult course in the curriculum. As we have seen in the curriculum above, commentators are the hermeneutic gatekeepers in the Tibetan monastic tradition. Khenmo Yonten is likely the first Tibetan female commentator to receive a wide reading in a tradition in which commentaries are of paramount importance in establishing institutional authority and legitimizing knowledge transmission.¹⁶

It remains to be seen if Khenmo Yonten's story is a one-off success or a model for future intellectuals, but in our opinion her story captures the essence of Jigme Phuntsok's vision, in which a nun gained her status on the basis of an institutional program, used that status to further the teachings of the Buddha, and did so with such lucidity that her teachings have been adopted by women and men alike solely because of their utility, all the while without calling attention to the gendered dimension of her story.

The Social Effects of the Khenmo Movement

Although the full ramifications of the existence of the khenmos on changing conceptions of women's religious capacities would require a longer study, we would like to briefly address how the khenmo program has changed both the khenmos' understanding of their own practice and lay attitudes toward nuns.

¹⁶Joe Wilson argues that, unlike in India and China, Tantra became the most important body of Buddhist literature in Tibet. Since many Tantras are deliberately obscure and require a commentary to be practiced, commentaries took on an outsized importance in Tibet. See Wilson.

Though the khenmos' opinions on gender and Buddhism are as diverse as one would expect from any group of intellectuals, we have noticed significant ideological differences between the nuns at institutions with khenmo programs and nuns at traditional nunneries. Namely, even though most continue to employ a binary system of gender in which the female body is nominally inferior, the khenmos nevertheless assert the possibility of both female enlightenment and the equal spiritual capacities of women and men. Indeed, every khenmo we spoke with took it as a given that women could become enlightened in their present bodies, though they were aware of the counterarguments. The most common hermeneutical strategy deployed in defense of this position was to move the anti-woman rhetoric and doctrines of previous Buddhist masters from ultimate to conventional reality. As one khenmo summarized when we queried her on the patriarchal bent of Buddhist history, "It is difficult to decide which sentences are conventionally true and which are ultimately true. Also, India in the Buddha's time was a patriarchal society and he needed to teach in accordance with that society's conventions. Even though this was not in total agreement with the Buddhist view, he didn't need to oppose it." A similar dialectic holds that the gendered statements apply to Theravāda practice but have been superseded by Mahāyāna conceptions of emptiness in which all identities are relativized.

It is important to clarify that the khenmos understand gender very differently than Western feminists who analyze the concept in primarily socio-political terms. For one thing, the khenmos' Buddhist identities always supersede their gendered ones. For example, the point of the above quotation is not that the Buddha was wrong not to champion women's rights in India 2,500 years ago, but rather that this was the appropriate teaching in that time and place to further the chief goal of dispelling suffering. In another example, when discussing the possibility of

full ordination for nuns in the Tibetan tradition, an endeavor recently undertaken by the Seventeenth Karmapa in exile (Gyatso),¹⁷ most of the khenmos were cautiously supportive, but quick to clarify that the transmission lineage needed to be pure or other monks and laypeople wouldn't respect it, a logic that prioritizes social effect and public reception over progressive rhetoric, one very much in keeping with Jigme Phuntsok's.

Moreover, with a few notable exceptions, the vast majority of khenmos we spoke with understood gender in biological and karmic terms rather than as a social or discursive category *à la* Butler and other deconstructionists, and believed there were certain tendencies intrinsic to women that would hinder one's practice irrespective of cultural or educational context. As one khenmo explained, "For example, women like to talk about others behind their backs, they have a narrower mind-set and hold grudges. In the fight for gender equality, we have to admit these natural tendencies (*goms gshis*, 天性)." However, these deficiencies were usually interpreted as challenges to be overcome through practice rather than as a fixed ontological condition. Jigme Phuntsok often closed his teachings by reminding the nuns that in the past Tibetan women were not allowed to study, and that the khenmos needed to seize the opportunity accordingly. Many khenmos argued that previously women had internalized their own inferiority, and that it was women's own lack of courage that had kept them in an inferior position throughout history. Jigme Phuntsok's summons for women to be courageous were often in-

¹⁷ In addition to historically being denied access to Buddhist education, Tibetan nuns are also disadvantaged with respect to their ordination status. The tradition of full ordination for nuns is not present in Tibet and has only recently been reinstated by the Seventeenth Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje (O rgyan 'phrin las rdo rje, 1985-). At Larung, nuns only receive the novice (Skt. *śramaṇerikā*, Tib. *dge tshul ma*) vows. For an anthology of recent discussion on the full ordination of Buddhist nuns, see Mohr and Jampa Tsedroen.

terpreted in this light. One khenmo summarized his attitude by saying, “Knowledge is your left hand, courage is your right.” Similarly, a number of khenmos relativized their supposed gendered inferiority, arguing that even though men and women are born with different minds and dispositions, study and practice can change both, resulting in equality in both conventional and enlightened terms. As one nun put it, “Before coming to Larung, I didn’t know anything, but studying for many years changed my mind (*sems*) and thoughts (*bsam blo*).” She elaborated that after growing up in a nomad family where women were subservient to men, she now thought the two genders were equal.

It is not only the khenmos’ understanding of gender that has shifted as a result of the program, but lay conceptions as well. It is worth reiterating that for most of Tibetan history, being a monk and being a nun were not parallel occupations (Gutschow is especially eloquent on this point). As the old Tibetan adage goes, one still in circulation today, “If you want to serve, make your son a monk; if you want a servant, make your daughter a nun.” Because women were generally understood to lack the capacities requisite for advanced teachings, and those very teachings were partially what rendered monks fruitful fields of merit, donating to the nunnery was a bad investment when the neighboring monastery was a far greater multiplier of merit, and nunneries were usually dependent on the local monastery for their finances.

Jigme Phuntsok insisted that nuns not serve the monks or do menial chores, but instead study and practice with the same intensity of the monks. Besides serving as a public declaration supporting the capacities of women, this also fundamentally challenges the ways in which nunneries have traditionally been conceived and structured. Suggesting that nuns should be fully sponsored such that they can dedicate their day entirely to study is simultaneously a call for donors to view the karmic fields of women as equally fruitful as those of men. In this endeavor,

Jigme Phuntsok has largely been successful in Larung and other areas where khenmo programs have begun. Many of the khenmos we spoke with said that although they were only occasionally reminded of their higher status within the monastery—most notably when teaching and when the junior monks and nuns would stand whenever they entered a room—they felt it most acutely when returning to their hometowns, where their achievements had been publicized. One khenmo student amusingly recounts that when she became a nun in high-school, her classmates asked her, “You’re not ugly, you’re not bad at school—why become a nun?” She adds, “Now they respect me and encourage me.” Indeed, a number of laypeople, particularly in areas where the reputation of monks was in decline, said that in the past if you needed a ritual performed you would request a monk, and only accept a nun when there wasn’t a monk available, but that increasingly they no longer cared. Some even expressed a preference for nuns because they knew they would actually perform the chants and rituals they were being paid for. Though Tibetan and Buddhist biases against women are deeper than any single program could change in a few decades, it does seem that Jigme Phuntsok has succeeded in reimagining at least the possibilities of women’s practice in areas where such programs exist. A number of the older nuns and abbots recall that this was Jigme Phuntsok’s goal from the very first. One khenmo, when asked the intentionally open-ended question, “Why did Jigme Phuntsok start the khenmo program?” immediately responded by saying he wanted to create an environment in which women were equal with men because if laypeople saw this, they would change their attitudes toward women.

The Future of Khenmo Programs in Khams

Jigme Phuntsok hoped the successful implementation of khenmo programs would change the popular perception of women's practice in areas in which these programs existed. We see in the accounts above that many khenmos believe such a change has indeed occurred. The extent and rapidity of this paradigm shift will of course depend on how long the relevant institutions endure and how deeply they are integrated into the social life of their local communities.

There are reasons for both optimism and pessimism in this regard. The number of Tibetan monastics at Larung Gar has been officially capped at 3,500 nuns and 1,500 monks and similar quotas have also been implemented at Yarchen Gar. Nuns from Yunnan, Sichuan, Gansu, and Qinghai are usually allowed to remain as nuns but are resettled closer to their home regions, in new nunneries in Garze, Golok, Ngaba, Yushu, and Chamdo. (The situation is different for nuns from the Tibetan Autonomous Region.) The resettled nuns are not allowed to return to Larung, even for visits. Though teachers from Larung are allowed to come to the resettlement nunneries, the locations were often chosen for their remoteness and are inconvenient for external teachers.

The aforementioned monastic quota represents one of the biggest challenges facing the Larung and Yarchen khenmo programs. However, the reach of khenmo programs has extended beyond Larung and Larung-affiliated institutions. The khenmo program at Tashi Nunnery, for instance, was founded by the nunnery's abbot, and not at the behest of the Larung leadership. We have heard of similar programs springing up across Khams and Amdo. Though these programs are still in their nascent stages and more closely resemble the Larung khenmo program in the early 1990s than in the present day, they betoken a future in which a nun might be able to secure a higher education at her own local

nunnery instead of traveling to Larung or one of its sister institutions at great personal risk.

Furthermore, the researchers also see an opportunity in the Larung relocations. The relocations have inadvertently expanded the program's scope and geographical influence by dispersing it. Though nuns left Larung involuntarily and would return instantly if circumstances permitted, it is difficult to ignore the reactions of local laypeople at the new resettlement sites. When we said we were going to interview nuns at the resettlement nunneries, local merchants, restaurant owners, and drivers would begin to sing their praises, saying they had never seen learned nuns like them before, and gave us significant help in arranging these interviews.

In some respects, the nuns going forth to build robust institutions from scratch is a tragic but fitting fulfillment of Jigme Phuntsok's vision. Larung as an institution embodies the modern paradoxes of the Tibetan religious milieu in which Jigme Phuntsok lived, toiled, and ultimately thrived: bulldozers sitting alongside enormous cranes, five-star restaurants for dignitaries built atop ramshackle huts, Han millionaires attending public teachings alongside Tibetan pilgrims. For Tibetan monastics, this is a time of destruction, but it is also a time of change and negotiation for those who can skillfully read the religious landscape and adapt accordingly. Largely following their own religious and intellectual track, it was nuns inside of Tibet who became the first women to receive terminal degrees in Tibetan Buddhist history and are today reimagining what it means to practice as a Buddhist woman. Rather than as a dark age, we might describe the Tibetan present as a harrowing time and a time of harrowing, one in which some fields of merit have fallen into neglect and lie fallow for decades, but also one in which new seeds are being sown and new fields tilled.

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