

Women and Wit in Tibetan Buddhist Literature

Sarah H. Jacoby

Abstract This essay explores the vibrancy of Tibetan women's writing and publishing, centering on the woman who is likely the most prolific female writer in Tibetan history, Sera Khandro Dewai Dorjé (1892–1940). Sera Khandro's works preserve sound bites of a distinctive Tibetan cultural and religious early-twentieth-century world, which we can hear through listening to some key passages from her autobiography (ca. 1934) in which she silences her interlocutors with her wit. Sera Khandro's verbal prowess not only demonstrates her spiritual insight and eloquence, but also sheds nuanced light on issues relating to female agency, misogyny, and sexual violence. In so doing, her writing blurs rigid boundaries between traditional and modern genres of Tibetan literature, demonstrating the secular and religious concerns that tie twentieth-century Tibetan writing together.

This essay was first presented as the 7th Annual Aris lecture on Dec.1, 2022, at Wolfson College, Oxford University, England. I'd like to express my thanks to Prof. Ulrike Roesler for the honor of inviting me to present this lecture, and to Dr. Lama Jabb for his very helpful translation editing. For a recorded version of this lecture with slides, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FeIu2FyZ9EM>.

Women and Tibetan Literature

It used to be that a discussion about women in Tibetan-language sources would begin with a lament about the paucity of available sources. Certainly there is still due cause for such lament, since we hear considerably less about women than we do about men as authors and historical actors in the Tibetan cultural sphere. Looking just at the expansive genre of Tibetan biography (རྗམ་ཐུག་), only a very small fraction of the thousand-plus extant works are written by or about female protagonists. Women in Tibet had a much lower literacy rate than men did, varying in relation to their social and monastic status. Educational opportunities for nuns in Tibet did not compare to those for monks, where nuns' education existed at all. And what Tibetan women did manage to write was much less likely to receive enough patronage to make it into print.

Nevertheless, in the twenty-first century Tibetan women's writings are taking center stage, especially in Amdo. In 2005, the esteemed writer and professor Palmo (པལ་མོ་ལོ་ལོ་) edited the first

anthology of contemporary Tibetan women’s poetry called *Zholung* (མོ་ལུང་། *The Milking Toggel*).¹ She has since published further collections featuring many Tibetan women’s poetry and prose, as well as her own writing.² Getting particular acclaim these days is the poetry of Chimay (འཚི་ཟེད།) from Reppong, including her collections *Dawai Milam* (ལྷ་བའི་མི་ལམ། *The Dreams of the Moon*, 2012) and *Chui Langtso* (ཚུའི་ལང་ཚོ། *Lotus*, 2016).³ Chimay is just now coming to be better known in the anglophone world with Lama Jabb’s recent translation of one of her poems into English called “A long (མ་ལོང་། The Ring),” published in the journal *Yesbé*.⁴ Also getting more attention internationally are the short stories written by Tsedrön Kyi (ཚོ་སྐོན་རྒྱེད།) from Bazong county in Amdo, many of which are published in her collections *Kyonang gi Dögar* (སྐྱུ་སྐྱེང་གི་སྐོས་གར། *A Melancholy Drama*, 2005) and *Zhen* (ཞིན། *Remembrance*, 2016).⁵

In India there is also a vibrant scene of Tibetan women writers, such as Min Nangzé (སྐྱིན་སྐྱང་མཛེས།), originally from Golok, who has published *Gangri Semo* (གངས་རིའི་སྐས་མོ། *Princess of the Snow Mountain*, 2006) and *Tsorwai Lu* (ཚོར་བའི་ལུ། *Songs of Emotions*, 2015).⁶ Additionally Nyima Tso (ཉི་མ་འཚོ།), from Amdo, has published Tibetan poetry, prose, and prolific numbers of children’s books, including *Surshik* (སུར་ཞིག་འབྲུག་པ། *Fragment*, 2009), the first collection of women’s short stories published in exile, and *Mitsé Di Drulshu Theng Dangpo* (མི་ཚོ་འདིའི་འགྲུལ་བཞུད་ཐེངས་དང་པོ། *First Journey of this Life*, 2003).⁷ Her beautiful poem “Samtha” (ས་མཐའ། Borderland) has recently been translated into English by Nicole Willock.⁸ Nyima Tso recounts being inspired by the writings of Kelsang Lhamo (སྐལ་བ་བཟང་ལྟ་མོ།), whose works include *Drangsong Tiné kyi Milam Yunchik* (དྲང་སྟོང་བསྐྱེད་གནས་ཀྱི་མི་ལམ་ཡུན་ཅིག་འབྲུག་པ། *Dreaming at the Sage’s Abode: Biographical Sketches of Four Living Tibetan Nuns*, 1999), *Nupchok Nyulwai Gama* (ནུབ་ཕྱོགས་སྐུལ་བའི་དགའ་མ། *A Maiden’s Wandering Westward*), as well as essays in several Tibetan journals.⁹

North America is fortunate to have not only Kelsang Lhamo, but also several Tibetan women writers who write in English, including Tenzin Dickie, Tsering Wangmo Domba, and Tsering Yangzom Lama.¹⁰ Many of these writers were lauded in April, 2022 at a fantastic conference organized by Tashi Dekyid Monet, Erin Burke, and Jue Liang at the University of Virginia called the

1. Dpal mo 2005.

2. Among them are Dpal mo 2006; 2011a; 2011b; 2011c; 2014.

3. 'Chi med 2012; 2016. The latter is part of a six-volume series of works by Tibetan women authors also including Bod gzhug skyid 2016; Tshe sgron skyid 2016; Bde skyid sgröl ma 2016; Tshe sgron skyid 2016; Tshe ring 'tsho 2016.

4. Jabb 2021.

5. Tshe sgron skyid 2005; 2016.

6. Smin snang mdzes 2006; 2015.

7. Nyi ma 'tsho 2003; 2009.

8. Willock 2023.

9. Skal bzang lha mo 1999.

10. Dickie 2017; Dhompa 2002; 2005; 2011; 2016; Lama 2022.

“Tibetan Women Writing Symposium: A Celebration of Tibetan Women’s Literature.”¹¹ Again in October, 2022, we centered writings by and about Tibetan women at the Tibetan translation workshop I co-hosted called “Celebrating Buddhist Women’s Voices in the Tibetan Tradition” at Northwestern University along with Padma ’tsho, Holly Gayley, and Dominique Townsend. This event was part of the Lotsawa Workshop series funded by the Tsadra Foundation, with additional support from Luce/ACLS.¹²

All of this energy and excitement about contemporary Tibetan women writers can give the impression that they have emerged out of the blue, rising up from the dark depths of women’s silence in the Tibetan historical record. Or perhaps that they thrive more fully in the space of the contemporary secular world instead of the strictures of Buddhist tradition. But neither of these points is entirely true. As the recent Lotsawa workshop at Northwestern showcased, alongside the groundswell of publishing by and about secular Tibetan women writers we find parallel publishing projects related to women in Tibetan religious literature, both contemporary and historical. Notable work in this area has come out of Larung Gar in the Serta region of eastern Tibet. In 2011, a group of Larung Gar nuns established an annual journal called *Gangkar Lhamo* (གངས་དཀར་ལྷ་མོ། *Snow Mountain Goddess*) featuring mostly poetry and short essays written by Tibetan nuns, as well as a few laywomen. The writings in *Gangkar Lhamo* cover diverse topics but many emphasize the importance of education for girls, devotional praise for their gurus, as well as reflections on women’s status in Tibetan society.¹³

Also in 2011 a group of nuns from Larung Gar formed the Larung Ārya Tārē Petsok Tsomdrik Khang (ལྷ་རུང་ཨྲུ་རྩ་རེ་འུ་ཆོག་སྤྱོད་ལྷ་མོ་ལྷོ་གྲོ་ལཱ་། Larung Ārya Tārē Book Series Editorial Association) and searched throughout Tibet for works by and about Buddhist women. They did this in their spare time between Buddhist philosophy classes and other ritual duties. When they found works written by women, they were often single manuscript copies, some in states of disrepair. They then had to purchase computers, learn how to type, and manually create digital versions of all the material they collected.¹⁴ In 2017 their efforts resulted in the publication of the largest-ever anthology of Buddhist women’s writings in the Tibetan language, totaling 53 volumes, called the *Khandro Chözö Chenmo* (མཁའ་འགྲོ་ལོ་ཚོ་མཛོད་ཆེན་མོ། *Dākinīs’ Great Dharma Treasury*).¹⁵ Now no one can say that women have never played a major part in Tibetan Buddhist history! The *Dākinīs’ Great*

11. Monet 2022; see also the conference website: <https://uva.theopenscholar.com/writingtibetan/> and the publication of Lama Jabb’s keynote as Jabb 2022.

12. The full audio from this Lotsawa Workshop can be found at <https://conference.tsadra.org/2022/11/08/the-2022-lotsawa-workshop-audios/>. The Northwestern University conference website is <https://sites.northwestern.edu/lotsawa/>. See the conference review article by Joshua Brallier in this issue.

13. Padma ’tsho (Baimacuo) 2021; Padma ’tsho and Jacoby 2020, 10–15.

14. For more on why and how this group of Larung Gar nuns compiled the *Khandro Chözö Chenmo* based on our interviews with them, as well as an overview of the volumes’ contents, see Padma ’tsho and Jacoby 2020; 2021.

15. Bla rung Ar+ya tA re’i dpe tshogs rtsom sgrig khang 2017.

Dharma Treasury is divided into four parts—the first eighteen volumes are about biographies of female Buddhist figures from South Asia, a few from China, and many from Tibet. It begins with material from the *vinaya* and *sūtra piṭaka*, and then moves on to a variety of *ḍākinīs* and protectresses before centering on historical Tibetan women, featuring very well-known figures and texts as well as rare accounts of important but less-well-known Tibetan women. The second section from volumes nineteen to forty-nine contains collected works of Tibetan female masters and their religious teachings. The third section, volume fifty, is a collection of praise texts for female deities and human masters, and the fourth, volumes fifty-one and fifty-two, contain advice for women by an array of famous Buddhist masters. The volumes culminate with a 253-page table of contents.

Sera Khandro’s Prolific Writing

A full eight volumes (31–38) of the *Ḍākinīs’ Great Dharma Treasury* contain works written by Sera Khandro, which is about fifteen percent of the collection, more than any other single author. The magnitude of Sera Khandro’s writing is also apparent in another series called *Gangchen Kyemai Petsok* (གངས་ཅན་སྐྱེས་མའི་དཔེ་ཚོགས། *Women of the Snow Land Series*) published in 2015 in Chengdu, in which Sera Khandro’s works comprise a full half of the series.¹⁶ Both of these collections suggest that Sera Khandro may be the most prolific female writer in Tibetan history.

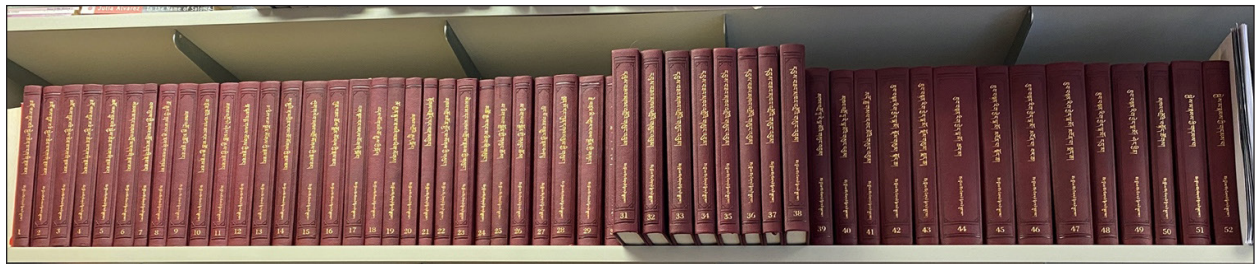


Fig. 1 Khandro Chözö Chenmo (མཁའ་འགྲོའི་ཚོས་མཛོད་ཆེན་མོ། *Ḍākinīs’ Great Dharma Treasury*), with the volumes 31–38 of Sera Khandro’s works pulled forward. Photo by Sarah Jacoby.

It is interesting to consider how new this increasingly widespread appreciation of Sera Khandro as a Tibetan Buddhist virtuoso and literary giant is, or to put that another way, how much time has passed since the end of her life in 1940 and the first publication of her works in Tibetan in 2009.¹⁷ Sera Khandro’s collected works, and within that her autobiography, were published by

16. Si khron bod yig dpe rnying bsdu sgrig khang 2015, vols. 9–15.
 17. Dbus bza’ mkha’ gro 2009.



Fig. 2 *Gangchen Kyemai Petsok* (གངས་ཅན་རྒྱལ་མའི་དཔེ་ཚོགས། *Women of the Snow Land Series*), with the upper volumes 9–15 all works by Sera Khandro. Photo by Sarah Jacoby.

the *Golok Khul Natsom Jawai Shunglé Khang* (མགོ་ལོག་སྐུལ་གནའ་རྩོམ་བྱ་བའི་གཞུང་ལས་ཁང་། Golok Prefecture Office of Old Manuscripts) under the main editorship of the esteemed Tibetan writer Ju Kalsang (འབྲུ་སྐལ་བཟང་།). In the preface he writes, “Although there were many religious teachings, subsequently they fell prey to a time of turmoil, leaving only a few remaining, and copies of those manuscripts are extremely rare.” (གསུང་ཚོས་མང་ཏུ་བཞུགས་ནའང་། སྤྱིས་དུས་ཟིང་གི་དབང་ཏུ་ཤོར་བས་ཉུང་ཏུ་ལས་མེད་པར་གྱུར་ཞིང་དཔེ་རྒྱུན་ཡང་ཤིན་ཏུ་དཀོན།)¹⁸ In other words, the reception history of Sera Khandro’s works is punctuated by the rupture caused by Tibet’s incorporation into the People’s Republic of China and the ensuing decades of chaos and devastation, capped by the Cultural Revolution. The impact of this trauma on Tibetan lives and religious lineages cannot be overstated. Like that of so many other families, Sera Khandro’s bloodline was cut during the Cultural Revolution when her grandson Doli Nyima died.¹⁹ We can only imagine how different the story of Sera Khandro’s reception might have been without this loss.

18. Dbus bza’ mkha’ ’gro 2009, vol. 25, 3.

19. According to Pad+ma ’od gsal 2003, Mdo li nyi ma (b. 1946) was the son of the treasure revealer Bsod nam lde’u btsan, (1910–1958, the grandson of Dudjom Lingpa fathered by Drimé Öser) and Chos dbyings sgrol ma (b. 1913, sole child of Sera Khandro who survived into adulthood).

It is not that Tibetans didn't know about Sera Khandro until someone came along and discovered her, but rather that her memory and her manuscripts have circulated locally in communities descended from her direct disciples. This is how I heard about her more than twenty years ago from her direct disciple Kyabjé Chatral Sangyé Dorjé Rinpoché (སྐུབས་ཇེ་བྱ་བལ་སངས་རྒྱས་རྗེ། 1913–2015), who brought a full set of her manuscripts out of Tibet with him in the 1950s. Dudjom Jigdral Yeshé Dorjé Rinpoché (བདུད་འཛོམས་འཇིགས་བལ་ཡེ་ཤེས་རྗེ། 1904–87) also brought her manuscripts with him, and in India reproduced a four-volume set of her revelations.²⁰ In Tibet I also found collections of Sera Khandro's manuscripts in several different communities in Kham and Amdo, and I have heard that there is a set at Riwoché, where Sera Khandro passed away in 1940.

There is an enormous amount to say about the writings of Sera Khandro.²¹ Her collected works include volumes of her revealed scriptures (གཏིར་མ།), hymns (མགུར།), visionary experiences (ཉམས་སྒྲུང་།), advice (ཞལ་གདམས།), philosophical commentaries (such as her commentary on Dudjom Lingpa's *Refining One's Perception* ལྷང་སྒྲུང་།), prophecy (ལུང་བསྟན།), and biography (རྣམ་ཐར།). Regarding the latter, first she wrote the biography of her guru Drimé Öser (རྗེ་མ་མེད་པའི་འོད་ཟེར་མཐའ་ཡས། 1881–1924), one of the sons of Traktung Dudjom Lingpa (བྲག་འཇུང་བདུད་འཛོམས་སྒྲིང་པ། 1835–1904), and then she began composing her own autobiography, which is almost twice the size of his, completing hers in 1934. Sera Khandro's autobiography charts her pathway to complete liberation (རྣམ་པར་ཐར་པ།) beginning with Preliminary practices (སྟོན་འགོ) and culminating in the pinnacle contemplative system of the Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism, the Great Perfection (རྫོགས་པ་ཆེན་པོ།). Unfolding across the pages of her autobiography is Sera Khandro's discovery of her true identity as an incarnation of Yeshé Tsogyal (ཡེ་ཤེས་མཚོ་རྒྱལ།) destined to reveal scriptures and sacred artifacts known as treasures.

Sera Khandro's renown stems from her illustrious calling as a treasure revealer, but it also stems from her elegant, inspiring, poetic, and profound writing style. The autobiography sings with poetry and song written in diverse meters, evocative of Buddhist hymns (མགུར།), as well as everyday song forms such as folk songs (གཞས།) and love songs (ལ་གཞས།). Alliteration, assonance, word repetition, and acrostic elements punctuate Sera Khandro's verses, producing an autobiography that is both aesthetically and spiritually rich. Interspersed with the melodies of her metered verses is uncommonly candid prose, much of it written as dialogue between interlocutors speaking varieties of Golok-dialect Tibetan.²² Through these dialogues, Sera Khandro effects a literary feat of bringing a whole social atmosphere that has rarely been put on paper to life, one that voices gritty truths about the desperation, domestic labor, abuse, denigration, exclusion, loss, and grief that marked her life and that of so many other women in her world. Splicing through these traumas are Sera Khandro's visions of *dākinīs*, goddess-like figures who appeared to her with counsel and

20. Bde ba'i rdo rje 1978.

21. For more information on Sera Khandro's life, works, and available editions of her manuscripts, see Jacoby 2014a and b.

22. For more on the dialogism of Sera Khandro's prose, see Jacoby 2019.

encouragement, succoring her spiritual aspirations. Sera Khandro's dialogues with *dākinīs*, as well as with a host of other nonhuman apparitions and vital forces inhabiting the sacred landscape (ཡུལ་ལྷོ། གཞི་བདག), challenge the metaphysics of modernity, calling upon us as her readers to re-imagine the porosity of personal agency and beckoning us to join her in exploring the exuberant radiance of the celestial buddhahelds she envisioned.

A Woman's Wit

But now I would like to temporarily shield our eyes from this radiance and turn instead toward the ground of early twentieth-century Tibet by zeroing in on one element of Sera Khandro's writing style that I find key to its candor, her wit. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, wit is "a quality of speech or writing which consists in the apt association of thought and expression, calculated to surprise and delight by its unexpectedness, . . . later always with reference to the utterance of brilliant or sparkling things in an amusing way."²³ What I want to consider here is wit that amuses not in the sense of joviality, but something sharper. The power of wit to sting is dressed in the art of word play, musicality, double entendre, and metaphor. As with other forms of metaphoric language, wit is grounded in the materiality and experiences of everyday life, from which it draws its imagery and vocabulary. Wit can pack a punch of social critique—one isn't always sure whether to laugh or cry. These are precisely the features that make wit so hard to translate—what is funny or ironic in one time and place often leaves those of us who are more distant from it scratching our heads, trying to catch up to the pace of the banter and work out the implied associations and cultural knowledge. The social critique conveyed through wit is also challenging to translate, for it refers to what people are doing and shouldn't be in the world outside of the text. This is also one of its greatest values, for it reveals much more than the actual words written on the page.

In what follows, we will read some passages from Sera Khandro's autobiography called དབུས་མོ་བདེ་བའི་རྩོམ་ཞེས་ཟེས་པའི་ཐུང་པོ་འབྲུང་འབྲེན་པའི་ཤིང་རྟ་སྐལ་ལྷན་དང་པའི་མཚོན་སྡེང་། *The Biography of the Central Tibetan Woman Dewai Dorjé: A Chariot Leading to Renunciation and a Reliquary of Faith for Fortunate Ones*. The work ranges from four hundred to more than five hundred pages long, depending on the handwriting or typeset, and I am currently preparing a full English translation of this work.

Episode I: On Dogs and Men

Sera Khandro was born in 1892 in Lhasa. During this time Qing rule in Tibet was waning, and the

23. "wit, n." OED Online. December 2022. Oxford University Press. <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/229567?rskey=itx-Tlf&result=1> (accessed December 14, 2022).

Ambans living in Lhasa representing the Qing court had little power over Tibetan affairs; the 13th Dalai Lama assumed political control in 1895. Sera Khandro was born in a four-story stone estate named Gyragashar (རྒྱ་ར་ག་ཤར།), located near the Jokhang around the Barkhor. Her father Jampa Gönpo (བྱམས་པ་མགོན་པོ།) was of Mongolian ancestry and held a position of political leadership, and her mother Tsering Chönzom (ཚེ་རིང་ཚོས་འཛོམ།) was Tibetan, from the Nup clan. In 1904 when Sera Khandro was only twelve (thirteen in Tibetan years), her beloved mother passed away and her father began arranging her marriage to a man from another politically powerful family. Sera Khandro was determined to avoid that future and pursue her religious calling, so she ran away and joined a group of Lhasa pilgrims headed by Dudjom Lingpa's son, Tulku Drimé Öser. After their pilgrimage to sacred sites in central Tibet, the encampment group traveled back to Golok together on foot, which took a grueling eight months.

In the following passage, the year is 1907 and Sera Khandro is fifteen. She has just escaped from her family home and is trying to catch up to the group of pilgrims. Soon hunger motivates her to try to beg for food, for the very first time in her life:

ལྷག་མ་ང་རང་གིས་རྒྱགས་ཕྱེ་བྱས་ནས་འོང་བས་ཐང་ཆེན་པོ་ཞིག་ཏུ་འབྲོག་པའི་སྐྱུ་སྲུགས་ཡོད་པས།
 བདག་གིས་མ་ཤེས་ཤིང་བྱང་ཐང་ལ་འབྲོང་ཡོད་ཟེར་བ་པ་གི་ཡིན་པར་གདའ་སྐྱམ་ནས་འགོ་མ་ཐོད།
 དགུང་མོ་སྐྱོགས་སྐྱོགས་ནས་རྟ་ལོར་ལུག་གསུམ་དེད་ནས་སྐྱའི་ཟུར་ལ་བཞག་འདུག་པས། དེ་ཏུས་
 འབྲོག་པ་ཡིན་པར་གོ་ནས་སྐྱང་བས་སྐྱོང་ཏུ་སོང། སྐྱང་ཁུག་མེད་པ་ལྷམ་ནང་ཏུ་ལྷགས་པས། ཀུན་གྱིས་
 ཏ་བགད་བྱེད་འདུག་ཅིང་འདི་སྐྱོན་མ་ཞིག་རེད་ཟེར། རྒྱ་མོ་ཞིག་གིས་སྐྱོན་མ་མ་རེད་སྐྱང་གསར་
 ཞིག་ཡིན་པ་འདྲ་ཟེར་ནས། མོ་རང་གིས་ང་ལ་ཁུག་མ་ཞིག་སྐྱིན་ཏུ་འོང་ནས་ཨ་ཙོ་བུ་མོ་མཛོས་མ་ཁྱོད་
 གཟུགས་བྱད་ལེགས་པས། བྱི་ཁ་ནས་ཐར་ཏུང་། རྐྱེས་པ་རྣམས་ཀྱི་འོག་ནས་ཐར་དཀའ་བ་གདའ་བེར།
 བདག་གི་སྐྱང་བས་རྣམས་ཁུར་ནས་འོང་གྱེ།

... I used the rest as travel provisions and continued on to a large plain where nomads' tents were pitched. I didn't know what they were. I wondered if they were the wild yaks people said were on the Changtang, and I didn't dare approach. In the evening the nomads herded their horses, yaks, and sheep from all directions and kept them next to the tent. Only then I understood that they were nomads and I went over to beg for food. I didn't have a begging bag, so I put the food in my boot.

Everybody roared with laughter, saying "She's a crazy girl."
 "She's not a crazy girl," an old woman said, "She seems to be a new beggar."
 Coming forward to give me a bag, she exclaimed, "Wow! Beautiful girl—with that fine figure you may be able to escape from the mouths of dogs, but it will be difficult to escape from the loins of men!"

I took the food with me.²⁴

Notable in this passage is what Sera Khandro doesn't write. Nowhere does she describe the old woman turning to the family dog and restraining it from attack. She doesn't have to because anyone who has ever been a stranger walking up to a Tibetan nomad's tent can picture what happens next. In our mind's eye, we can imagine the peril and proximity of dog bites in this risky business of begging. This minimalist depiction of a whole situation is one feature that makes this great Tibetan literature.

And then there is what she does write, especially how she compares dogs and men. The parallelism in the phrasing of “escape from the mouths of dogs” (ཁྱི་ཁ་ནས་ཐར།) and “escape from the loins of men” (སྐྱེས་པ་རྣམས་ཀྱི་འོག་ནས་ཐར།) makes it clear that we are meant to consider what qualities dogs and men share. But even this is a touch understated, for she specifies that dog's mouths are the menace, but as for men, the Tibetan literally reads “the underneath of men.” What is that exactly? Is it being underneath men in a general sense of being subordinate to men's authority? Or is it the physical body part “underneath men” that is the menace? My translation has opted for the latter interpretation, but there is a degree of subtlety in expression here.

What sticks with me in reading this passage is that this is the very beginning of Sera Khandro's life on her own as a woman who “wanders aimlessly with no fixed destination” (གནས་ངེས་མེད་འགྲིམ།), embodying the religious ideal of renouncing hearth and home. This old woman's quip reads like a threat and a warning, foreshadowing the troubles to come. This prophecy is both specific to this Tibetan place and time, and universal. It is a kind of women's wisdom passed down from elder to junior with care and concern, knowing what violence awaits those who attract men's lust.

Episode II: Sera Khandro's Silencing Power

Sera Khandro had a tendency to leave her interlocutors speechless, unable to find an apt reply. This feature comes up over and over again, but here we will look at just one example. Now we are moving along with Sera Khandro to Golok, which in the early twentieth century was by and large an independent territory that neither paid tribute to the Dalai Lama's government to the west, nor to the Qing—or later Republican China—to the east. Golok is perhaps even more famous for its fierce warriors and ruthless banditry than for being the homeland of a host of great Nyingma masters including the Dudjom lineage, Do Khyentsé Yeshé Dorjé (མདོ་མཁྱེན་པ་ལེ་ཤེས་རྗེ། 1800–1866), and a stream of many others. Through Sera Khandro's writing, we hear a great deal about both the vices and the virtues of life on the Golok grasslands.

When Sera Khandro arrived at Dartsang along with Drimé Öser's group of pilgrims, everyone's

24. Dbus bza' mkha' 'gro 2009, vol. 25, 104. Note that there are minor spelling variations across the different manuscript and print versions of this autobiography. Unless otherwise noted, the spelling reproduced in this article follows Dbus bza' mkha' 'gro 2009.

kin was delighted and welcomed them home, leaving Sera Khandro completely alone, embodying the true meaning of going from householder life into homelessness. At first she tried to rent a room in Drimé Öser's residence, but that didn't pan out because Drimé Öser's *yum* (ཡུམ།) Akyongsa (ཨ་སྐྱོང་བཟའ།) had no interest in housing the young and beautiful "Central Tibetan girl" (དབུས་མོ།), as they called her. She then worked as a maidservant for a local Golok family, which was initially difficult because she couldn't understand them and didn't know how to do the work tending livestock and doing domestic labor in a nomad's tent. By the time she was seventeen, she had figured all that out and was eager to extricate herself from such samsaric occupations to devote herself fully to dharma practice. The Golok family tried to convince Sera Khandro to stay and marry one of their sons, but she had no interest. Sensing her resolve, they agreed to send her off to Kharnang Gongma in Golok to stay with their relative, a nun named Tsuldrön (ཚུལ་སྐྱོན།) and receive dharma instruction with her from Dza Mura Tulku (རྩ་མུ་ར་སྐུ་ལ་སྐུ།). Tsuldrön found Sera Khandro's identity as "neither nun nor laywoman" (ཚོ་མིན་ནག་མིན།) unacceptable and urged Mura Tulku to ordain Sera Khandro. This prompted a long dialogue between Sera Khandro and Mura Tulku about what living virtuously really meant. After this, Sera Khandro narrates,

དེ་ནས་བདག་ཕྱིར་འོང་ནས་ཚུལ་སྐྱོན་ལ་མི་སྐུ་དང་དོན་མེད་ཀྱི་སློལ་སེར་རྣམས་ལ་བདག་གིས་ལུས་
 འབྲེལ་མི་བྱེད་པ་ཁས་སྲུང་ཡོད། དེ་མིན་ང་རང་གིས་ཚོ་མོ་མ་བྱས་སྐྱས་ཚོ། མོ་ན་རེ་ཨ་ཙོ་བྱོད་ཀྱི་ངོ་ལ་
 འབྲོང་ལྷགས་གོན་ཡོད་པ་འདྲ། སླ་ཚེན་ཁོང་ལྟ་བུ་ལ་འདི་འདྲའི་ཚོག་ཚོག་ཅི་ལ་ཞུ་ཤོད་ཟེར་ཞིང་འགྲམ་
 ཤ་འཐེན་འདུག བདག་གིས་རང་ལུས་ཀྱི་བྱ་བ་ཁོང་ལ་ཞུས་པས་མི་ཤོད་པ་མི་འདུག དེ་བས་བསྐྱབ་སྐྱོམ་
 སྐྱོག་ལ་ཉམས་ན་དེ་མི་ཤོད་སྐྱས་ཚོ། མོ་རང་གིས་ཅི་ཡང་མི་བཟེད།

Then I came back and told Tsuldrön, "I promised not to have a physical relationship with religious people who have no purpose to do so, or with laypeople. Aside from that, I didn't become a nun."

She replied, "Wow—it is as if you wear wild yak hide on your face.²⁵ Who would dare say such dirty words to a great lama like him?" and she pulled her cheeks.²⁶

I retorted, "Since I told him what I am able to do, there is no 'not daring.' What I wouldn't dare do is let my vows and precepts secretly deteriorate."

She didn't say anything.²⁷

With an economy of words, Sera Khandro leaves much more insinuated but unsaid about her nun interlocutor, offering critique at the same time as defending her choice to have relationships

25. In other words, you have thick skin; you are not easily ashamed.
 26. Pulling one's cheeks (*gram sha 'then*) is a Tibetan gesture expressing shock.
 27. Dbus bza' mkha' 'gro 2009, vol. 25, 132–133.

when there was a purpose (དོན་ཡོད་པ།), for one of the requisites for successful treasure revelation is having a consort.²⁸

Episode III: Two Songs

Despite her best intentions to pursue meaningful relationships, Sera Khandro ended up settling down with Gara Gyalsé Pema Namgyal (མགར་ར་རྒྱལ་སྤྲུལ་པ་རྒྱལ་པོ། b. 1882/3), son of Gara Terchen Pema Dundul Wangchuk Lingpa (མགར་ར་གཏེར་ཆེན་པོ་བདུན་འདུལ་དབང་ཕྱག་སྒྲིང་པ། 1857–1910) of Benak Monastery, situated on the Mar River in what is today Pema County, Golok. Her relationship with Gyalsé quickly soured, partly because he didn’t support her increasing renown as a treasure revealer. In the passage that follows, Sera Khandro is twenty-one years old and the year is 1913. She went out to gather firewood for cooking, but on the way she had a vision that delayed her. This is what happened next:

དེ་ནས་བདག་གིས་ཤིང་ཁུར་ནས་རང་གིས་ལ་འོང་བས་ང་རང་འགོར་ཆེ་སོང་བས། རྒྱལ་སྤྲུལ་ལ་
གསོལ་ཇ་དང་ཕྱི་སོང་བའི་རྒྱུན་གྱིས་ཕུག་འབེབ་གནང་ནས་གིས་ཕྱི་ཕྱི་ལ་ཕུད་བུང་། བདག་གིས་ཡིད་
ཤིན་ཏུ་སྐྱོད་གསལ་ནས་མོངས་སྤུ་འདི་ལྟར་བྲང་ངོ།

བན་ནག་སྤུག་ཚལ་གནས་ན།
ཚོགས་ངན་འཁོར་ལོ་བསྐྱོར་གི།
སེམས་སྐྱོའི་ཚོངས་སྤུ་ལེན་དུས།
བྱ་ཁྲ་ཏའི་ཨ་འི་ཟེར་འདུག་²⁹
ཚོ་རོགས་ངན་པའི་ཞལ་ངོ།
རྩ་རིར་ཉི་ཤིབ་གྲག་འདུ།
གནས་ཁང་གད་ནག་འོག་སྐྱོང་།
ཤིབ་འབྲུག་གཙོང་གི་གཞི་མ།
ང་རང་ས་མཐའི་རྒྱང་མོར།
སྐྱོ་ཤོགས་ཨ་སྐྱོན་གནས་རེད།
ཡང་དག་ཚོས་བསྐྱེད་པར་ཞོག
ཉིན་མཁོན་རྒྱན་ཆད་དཀའ་འདུག
ང་ནི་གཡོག་མིན་གནས་མིན།
བྱ་ངན་འདི་འདྲ་སྤངས་ནས།
རྒྱལ་ཁམས་སྐྱོར་བ་བྱེད་འགོ།

འཛིན་སྤྲུལ་ཡོད་ཚེ། རྒྱལ་སྤྲུལ་གྱིས་སྐྱོད་ཅི་ཟེར་གི་ཡོད། ཁོང་ལ་གསོལ་ཇ་སྐྱོལ་ཤོག་གསུངས། བདག་ཡང་

28. For a fuller explanation of this, see Thondup 1986; Jacoby 2014, ch. 4.
29. This line follows the manuscript (ca. 1934) spelling; Dbus bza' mkha' 'gro 2009, 197, reads “*bya khwa tas a Shi'u zer 'dug*.”

ཁྱིམ་དུ་སོང་བས་སོང་གི་སྤྱགས་ཁོ་ཞི་ནས་བདག་ལ་ཁྱོད་ཀྱིས་སྐྱ་ཅི་འདྲ་སྐྱངས་གསུངས། བདག་གིས་སྐྱ་
འདི་ལྟར་སྐྱངས་ཞུས།

བན་ཡག་དགའ་ཚལ་གནས་ན།
ཁང་³⁰ཤེས་འཇིན་པའི་སྐྱེས་བུས།
སོས་གསུམ་ནམ་ལྗེའི་གདངས་བཞིན།
དྲུག་ནག་རྒྱན་ཚད་མི་འདུག
སྐྱོ་སྐྱོགས་ཡུལ་ནས་འོང་བའི།
གཡུ་འབྲུག་རྒྱ་རྩལ་ཚོད་ཀྱང་།
སྐྱབས་རེར་བྱ་ཐབས་བལ་བྱང་།
ལས་རྒྱང་འཕེན་པ་བཟད་དུས།
ཅི་བྱེད་ལས་ཀྱིས་བསྐྱར་འོང་།
ཞེས་སྐྱངས་པ་ཡིན་ཞུས།

དེ་སྐྱབས་ཡུལ་མི་རྣམས་ཀྱིས་ཀྱང་ང་རང་ལ་ཤིན་ཏུ་སྤང་ཞིང་འདྲི་མོ་རེད་ཟེར་འདུག རང་གིས་ཀྱང་
དམན་ས་བརྒྱང་སྟེ་ཟབ་གཏོར་འབྲི་ཕབ་བྱེད་པ་སོགས་གསང་རྒྱ་དམ་པོ་བྱས་ཡོད་སྐྱབས།

Then, I gathered firewood and returned home quite late. Because I was delayed in serving Gyalsé his tea, he smacked me and threw me out of the house. I was devastated and sang a song of despair like this:

In the sorrow grove of Benak, “bad monk,”³¹
an evil entourage encircles me.
As I sing this despairing song of sadness,
a crow caws, “*aiiiii*.”
The face of my evil life partner
is like the sun’s crooked shadow on the rocky slope.
Our home is an empty hollow in a dark cliff,
the foundation of shadow, coldness, and disease.
I am a beggar girl from a distant land,
with only the blue sky as my friend in sorrow.

30. Dbus bza’ mkha’ ’gro 2009 reads *cing* but the manuscript (ca. 1934) and Bla rung Ar+ya tA re’i dpe tshogs rtsom sgrig khang 2017, vol. 31, 153, read *cang*, which I adopt here.
31. Sera Khandro is punning on the name of Gyalsé’s religious community, here spelled “ban nag,” which can be etymologized to mean “bad or negative monk,” though this certainly was not its intended meaning. When she rephrases her song below in front of Gyalsé, she changes the spelling to “ban yag,” which can be etymologized to mean “good or virtuous monk.” Contemporary publications call this monastery Pad yag; see ‘Phrin las 2008, 442.

Forget about practicing authentic Dharma—
it's difficult to stop our daily quarreling.
Now, I will abandon this evil conduct
of being neither servant nor bride,
and go wander about the country.

Gyalsé said, “What are you talking about?” and he told me to come make his tea.
When I returned to the house, his anger had subsided. “What was that song you
sang?” he asked.

I told him that I sang a song like this:

In the pleasure grove of Benyak, “good monk,”
The fine horse catching man³²
has a disposition like the weather in the three spring months,
ever shifting from friendly to ferocious.
The turquoise dragon³³ from the south
has exuberant agility,
but sometimes is powerless to do anything.
When the force of this karmic energy is finished,
karma will determine what will happen.

I sang this song.

At that time the local people hated me and said that I was a demoness. I laid low
and kept the treasure texts that were coming to me extremely secret.³⁴

Reading this I'm struck by how much this writing has in common with issues that contemporary Tibetan women writers are addressing, such as domestic abuse. I'm also struck by the two versions of the same song, both in the trochaic trimeter characteristic of Tibetan folk songs (གཞུང་ལུགས་)—one that explicitly states Sera Khandro's despair and the other that encodes her meaning in front of Gyalsé.³⁵ The connection between women and code runs deep in Tibetan cultural memory, even

32. Referring to Gyalsé. An alternate translation could be “The all-knowing man...”

33. The turquoise dragon refers to Sera Khandro, who was born in the Water Dragon year, 1892.

34. *Dbus bza' mkha' gro* 2009, vol. 25, 196–198.

35. There are many well-known examples of Tibetan folk songs in trochaic trimeter, such as those attributed to the sixth Dalai Lama (Sørensen 1990).

to the very founding of the empire itself with the coded songs of Semarkar (སད་མར་ཀར།), recorded in the *Old Tibetan Chronicle*, to her brother Songtsen Gampo (སྲོང་བཙན་སྐམ་པོ།) prior to his conquest of Shangshung in the 7th century.³⁶ For another famous example, one cannot but notice the particular skill of women to encode and decode in the *Life of Milarepa* when Nyangtsa Kargyen (ལྷུང་ཚུ་དཀར་རྒྱན།), mother of Milarepa (མི་ལ་རས་པ།), sews gold into a yogin’s cloak and only the lama’s wife is able to figure it out and retrieve the gold for Milarepa.³⁷ And of course in the treasure tradition Yeshé Tsogyal is famous for encoding Padmasambhava’s treasures in scripts called *khandroi dayik* (མཁའ་འགྲོའི་བརྟེན་ཡིག), which male treasure revealers need female consorts to decode. In Sera Khandro’s case apparitional *dākinīs* are constantly appearing before her with coded prophecy, offering her enigmatic encouragement.

Here Sera Khandro’s double-speak is not about sacred revelation but marital discord, illustrating that secular concerns sound even where least expected, in this “traditional” Tibetan *namthar* about spiritual liberation. Notable also in this passage is the way that Sera Khandro’s visionary aptitude and skill at revelation render her a demoness in the eyes of Gyalsé and his kin, suggesting the mixed blessing of female power—in this moment when she fails to fulfill her domestic duties the way Gyalsé wants, she moves from *dākinī* to demoness, healer to witch.

Episode IV: “My husband is an Ass”

The same passage continues, without break from where we left off above:

ཉིན་གཅིག་རྒྱལ་སྐུ་སངས་ཁང་ཁོང་གི་སྐུ་རྒྱུ་འབྲིང་བ་འཛིགས་མེད་དཀོན་མཆོག་ཅེས་པ་དེ་དཔལ་ལྷུལ་
 དགོན་ཏུ་སྐུ་སངས་བཞུགས་ཡོད་པས་དེའི་སར་བྱོན་སོང་། ང་རང་གཅིག་སུ་མ་གཏོགས་སུ་གཅིག་ཀྱང་
 མེད་པས། རང་གཏོར་སྐྱེན་བརྒྱུད་ཀྱི་ཚོས་སྐོར་མཚོ་རྒྱལ་ལལ་ཆེན་གཏོར་བྱུང་རྣམས་ཐར་དང་བཅས་པ་
 ཚོག་མེད་ཏུ་ཡོད་པ་ཞིག་སྲུང་ནས་གཏན་ལ་པབ་སྟེ་མཇུག་མ་ཚོགས་པ་ཞིག་ཡོད། དེ་གཏན་ལ་པབ་
 ཅིང་བསྐྱད་ཡོད་པའི་ཚོག་མཚམས།

ཁོ་མོ་བདག་ནི་འགོ་བའི་དོན་ལས་མེད།
 ཁྱོད་ལྟ་རིན་ཆེན་འདམ་གྱིས་གོས་མི་སྲིད།
 ཚོས་རྣམས་ཉེན་ཅིང་འབྲེལ་འབྱུང་ཁོ་ནར་རག།

ཅེས་བྲི་ཞིང་ཡོད་སྐབས་སྐོ་བྱུར་ཏུ་རྒྱུ་ག་ཀུན་བཟང་ཞེས་པའི་བན་ཀན་ཞིག་ཡོད་པ་དེ་ཐོན་བྱུང་ནས།
 ཁོང་གིས་བདག་ལ་ཐོག་སྐྱད་ཡིན་ཟེར་ནས་ཐོས་བ་སྤེར་མ་གང་འོང་འདུག་ཁོ་རང་གིས་བདག་གི་ཡི་གེ་
 འི་བ་མཚོང་སོང་བས་ཡི་གེ་དེ་ཅི་རེད་ཟེར། བདག་གིས་གཏོར་ཚོས་ཞིག་རེད་སྐྱེས། ཁོ་ན་རེ་མགར་ར་སྐྱ་
 མའི་གཏོར་ཚོས་ཁྱོད་ཀྱིས་བདག་པོ་བྱས་པ་དེ་མཚར་གི་དང་། ལྷ་མ་རྒྱལ་སྐུས་ཁྱོད་ཀྱིས་བརྟེན་བཏང་

36. See Uray 1972 and Dickie 2016.
 37. See also Gyatso 2022, 205–208.

བ་དེ་མ་ཉན་ཟེར། བདག་གིས་བྱིད་སང་གི་རྒྱལ་སྤྲུལ་གྱིས་ང་ལྟ་བུའི་ནག་མོ་ཞིག་ལོན་ན། བོང་ལིའི་མགོ་
 ལ་གསེར་སྲུབ་བཞག་པའི་དཔེ་དང་མཚོངས། བདག་གིས་བྱིད་སང་གི་རྒྱལ་སྤྲུལ་ལ་གནོད་བསྐྱེད་མེད།
 དཀྱིལ་འཁོར་བཤམས་ཡག་གི་སྤྲིང་དུ་བུམ་པ་བརྩུད་ལྡན་ཟེར་བ་བཞིན་ནང་དོན་གྱི་ཡེ་ཤེས་ལ་ཕན་པ་
 མ་གཏོགས་གནོད་བྱས་མེད། གལ་ཏེ་བྱིད་གྱིས་བདག་གིས་རྒྱལ་སྤྲུལ་ལ་གནོད་ཡོད་སྟུང་ན། ང་མིན་ཅུང་
 ལྡར་ནས་བྱིད་གྱི་རྒྱལ་སྤྲུལ་བརྒྱུད་ཚར་ངེས་རེད་སྟུང་པས། ཁོང་ཡང་ཚོག་པ་ཟོས་ནས་ང་རང་ལ་ཚོག་
 ངན་སྡུ་ཚོགས་གྱིས་གང་གནོད་བྱེད་འདུག དེ་ལ་རྒྱུན་ནས་བདག་གིས་སྟོན་བརྒྱུད་མཚོ་རྒྱལ་ཞལ་ལུང་མི་
 ལ་བསྐྱེད་ནས་ཟབ་གཏེར་བྲི་ཕབ་མི་བྱེད་སྟུང་པའི་དམ་བཅའ་བྱས།

During this time, one day Gyalsé went to visit his middle brother, Jikmé Könchok, who was a monk at Payul Monastery. I was alone and there wasn't anybody around. A *Tsogyal Shelchem (Final Testament of Tsogyal)* from the *Nyengyü kyi Chökor (Oral Transmission Dharma Cycle)* of my treasure together with her biography had come to me as a revelation. I had written it down earlier, but the end was unfinished. When I was writing the lines,

I have no purpose aside from benefiting sentient beings.
 It is impossible for a precious jewel to be stained by mud.
 Phenomena depend only on interdependent causation . . .

all of a sudden an old monk named Kyaga Kunsang arrived. Saying it was an offering of the first portion, he came with a full plate of tsampa bread. He saw the text that I was writing and asked,

“What’s that text?”
 “It’s a treasure scripture,” I replied.
 “It’s surprising that you are taking care of Gara Lama’s treasure scripture,” he said. “It’s terrible that you ruined Lama Gyalsé.”

I retorted, “Your Gyalsé getting a wife like me is like the proverb of harnessing a donkey with a golden bridle. I haven’t harmed your Gyalsé. Like the saying ‘a nectar-filled vase on top of a finely-assembled maṇḍala,’ all I did was benefit his inner wisdom, not harm it. If you think that I harmed Gyalsé, apart from me, your Gyalsé was surely already ruined.”

He too became angry and said whatever harmful things he could to hurt me. Due to that, I burned the *Nyengyü Tsogyal Shelung (Oral Transmission Instructions of Tsogyal)* in the fire and vowed not to write profound treasures.³⁸

38. Dbus bza’ mkha’ ’gro 2009, vol. 25, 198–199.

“Harnessing a donkey with a golden bridle” conjures an image that speaks a thousand words. A golden bridle is more than metaphor—Tibetans really did outfit their very best horses in golden tack; an army general might ride a stallion wearing a golden bridle, for instance.



Fig. 3 “Bit and Bridle,” Metropolitan Museum of Art, 15–17th century³⁹

But not a donkey. So no, Sera Khandro did not actually say in so many words, “My husband is an ass,” but she came quite close, through the Tibetan art of the well-placed proverb.

Another interesting word to consider in the passage above is “*nakmo*”: “Your Gyalsé getting a wife like me” (བྱིད་སང་གི་རྒྱལ་སྐུ་ལྷ་མོ་ལྷ་སུའི་ནག་མོ་ཞིག་ལོན་ན།) . . . This word deserves to be the center of its own separate research, considering the conflation of darkness, impurity, criminality, and femininity within it. *Nakmo* literally means “black or unvirtuous woman,” but in use it means wife in the everyday, ordinary sense of married woman who keeps hearth and home. What’s interesting in the context of Sera Khandro’s *namthar* is that elsewhere she never uses *nakmo* to refer to herself, and so here she is intentionally lowering herself by identifying as Gyalsé’s wife in this mundane sense. Typically she calls herself “neither nun nor laywoman” (ཇོ་མིན་ནག་མིན།), or “neither servant nor bride” (གཞོན་མིན་གནས་མིན།), emphasizing in both these expressions her in-between status as a laywoman with expertise in dharma. In any case, through these witty word choices, Sera Khandro’s anger flashes through time, fresh even now, a century later.

Episode V: No way

The last passage in this essay is not in any way funny, especially given the ongoing trauma caused by sex abuse in several international Vajrayāna Buddhist communities. With that in mind, I think

39. “Bit and Bridle.” Metropolitan Museum of Art, 15–17th century, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/26641?ft=bit+and+bridle&offset=0&rpp=40&pos=1>

it is really important to listen carefully to what historical women such as Sera Khandro had to say about the problem of religious men soliciting sex, which apparently is an old problem. Sera Khandro applied her sharp wit to this topic as well: The year is 1916 and Sera Khandro is twenty-four, still living with Gyalsé and now the mother of their three-year-old daughter Chöying Drönma. Out of the blue, Sera Khandro writes that,

དེ་སྐབས་སུ་ཉིན་གཅིག་མགར་ར་རྒྱལ་མཚན་ཞེས་པ་དེ་འོང་ནས་བྱོང་ང་རང་ལ་རྒྱལ་སྐྱེས་ནས་གནང་
 བ་ཐོབ་ཡོད་པས་སྦྱོང་པ་འབྲེལ་དགོས་ཡང་ཡང་ཟེར་འདུག་པས། བདག་གི་བསམ་པ་ལ་ཁོ་རང་གི་སློ་
 སེམས་བདུད་ཀྱིས་བརྒྱབས་པར་འདྲ་སྟམ་སྟེ།

One day Gara Gyaltzen came and said again and again, “Since Gyalsé gave me permission to have you, we need to get together.”

I thought to myself that it seemed like his mind had been possessed by demons...⁴⁰

That’s a terrible way to approach Sera Khandro, given the recurrent tension she describes between Gyalsé and herself. Notable here is the possessive tone of the phrase “I have permission from Gyalsé to have you” (བྱོང་ང་རང་ལ་རྒྱལ་སྐྱེས་ནས་གནང་བ་ཐོབ་ཡོད།). Also interesting is the expression (སྦྱོང་པ་འབྲེལ་དགོས།) which literally means something more like “we need to make a practice connection” or “we need to have a physical relationship.” Her response to this is quite long, including advising this monk not to waste his precious human birth by being overwhelmed with lust. She recaps his reply cryptically: “He said a lot about lewd behavior and violations of decency.”(རྒྱ་འབྲས་བུ་བསད་དང་སྦྱོང་པ་འཚོལ་སྟོག་གི་གཏམ་མང་པོ་བཤད་པ་ལ།).⁴¹

This launches Sera Khandro into 8-syllable verse:

དེ་ལྟ་བུའི་ལུས་ངན་ངས་མི་འདོད།
 །ང་རྒྱེ་ལུས་དམན་པ་ཐ་མལ་ཡང་།
 །བཞིན་ལྟ་ན་སྤྱད་པ་མཁའ་འགོའི་རིགས།
 །སློ་ཚལ་⁴²རྒྱུང་བུད་མེད་ལྟར་སྤང་ཡང་།
 །སེམས་སྦྱེ་མེད་སྦྱུ་གསུམ་ངོ་བོ་མཐོང་།
 །ལས་བྱ་བྱེད་འཁོར་བའི་ཚུལ་བརྒྱུང་ཡང་།
 །མཉམ་ཉིད་ཀྱི་ཡི་ཤེས་བྲལ་མ་དགོས།
 །རྒྱུང་བརྒྱལ་རང་བྱམ་རྒྱུད་པ་ཡིས།

40. Dbus bza’ mkha’ ’gro 2009, vol. 25, 237.
 41. Dbus bza’ mkha’ ’gro 2009, vol. 25, 237.
 42. Following the manuscript spelling; spelled *blo cor* in Dbus bza’ mkha’ ’gro 2009, vol. 25, 238.

།གང་སྤང་ཀུན་བདེ་བ་ཆེན་པོའི་ངང་།
།དབྱིངས་ཡི་ཤེས་མཉམ་བཅའ་སྐོང་བྱ་གྲོལ།

།ཉོད་ལྟ་བུའི་སྐྱེ་ལུས་དགོས་པ་མེད།
།ཚོ་འདི་ཕྱི་གཉིས་སྐྱུག་ངས་མི་བྱེད།
།མདོ་མེད་ཉོད་བསམ་སློ་ལེགས་པར་ཐོངས།
།དོན་ཚུང་དང་དོན་ལྡན་ལུས་མ་བཞི།
།ལས་འབྲས་བུ་བསྐྱེ་མེད་སྤྲིན་པའི་བྱས།
།སྤྲིང་མེད་ཉོད་ཇི་ལྟར་བྱེད་རྒྱ་ཡིན།
།ད་དེ་དོན་བསམ་ལ་རང་ཚོད་བྱུངས།

I don't desire someone with an evil body like you.
I may be an ordinary person with an inferior female body,
But my face is beautiful, that of a *khandro*.
My mentality may appear like that of a silly woman,
but my mind sees the essence of the unborn Three Bodies.
My work and activities may look samsaric,
but I don't need to part with the primordial wisdom of equanimity.
By mastering the ten winds,
everything appears as the nature of great bliss,
and I am liberated in the expanse of co-extensive space and primordial wisdom.
I don't need someone with a body like yours.
I won't create suffering for this life and the next.

You, dissolute one, think carefully:
don't exchange your important body for a trivial one.
When the fruits of karma undeceivingly ripen,
Faint-hearted one, what will you do?
Now, think about this and control yourself.⁴³

In conclusion, we can trace distinct ties between concerns Sera Khandro voiced about sexual misconduct and violence, the ethics of Vajrayāna consort practices, domestic abuse, and misogyny and topics featured in contemporary Tibetan women's writing. Some people say that traditional

43. Dbus bza' mkha' 'gro 2009, vol. 25, 238.

or premodern Tibetan writing is all about religion, all about praising the guru, whereas at long last modern Tibetan writing opens up space for the love of literature as an end in itself. But if you really read Sera Khandro's autobiography, it is both an example of the "traditional" Tibetan genre of *namthar*, the story of her complete spiritual liberation, and a work of great Tibetan literature. The candor and artistry with which Sera Khandro spun verse and dialogical prose about her quotidian and sublime life experiences blend social critique with Buddhist devotion in eloquent language that bespeaks a love of literary expression beyond what would serve Buddhist soteriology or record-keeping utility.

As I think about the ways in which Sera Khandro fits into the kaleidoscope of twentieth-century Tibetan writing, another famous figure comes to mind, Gendun Chöphel (དགེ་འདུན་ཚེས་འཕེལ། 1903–1951). Sera Khandro never traveled outside of Tibetan cultural areas as Gendun Chöphel famously did, nor does her writing reflect his particular flavor of iconoclasm. However, they share more than similar birth and death dates—they share a love of word play that is perhaps most apparent in the acrostic poetry each wrote. They also share the fact that their literary brilliance was lost to the Tibetan public for many decades after their deaths due to the ལུས་ཟིང་། or "time of turmoil," as Ju Kalsang phrased it. Given this chasm of lost decades, there is a tendency to attach strong period labels to twentieth-century Tibetan literature, moving from "premodern" genres of writing and then, after decades of rupture, starting up in the 1980s with modern Tibetan literature. In this schema the end of "premodern" Tibet is often problematically conflated with Tibet's incorporation into the People's Republic of China, as if Tibetan thinkers, writers, and government officials were not also part of the twentieth-century before this occurred, and were not also exploring new distinctively Tibetan literary and political formations. Both Sera Khandro and Gendun Chöphel lived in these dynamically changing times at the turn of the twentieth century, and we see this reflected in their writing. Perhaps, then, we can think of their works as bridges between older traditional Tibetan genres, which are often presented as relentlessly religious, and newer forms of modern Tibetan poetry and prose, which are often presented as fundamentally secular even as Buddhist imagery, ideas, and ethics thread through them. Better yet, Sera Khandro's writings are treasures, buried during a time that was not yet ripe for them, ready for re-discovery.

Bibliography

Sera Khandro's Works Cited (alt. names Bde ba'i rdo rje; Dbus bza' mkha' 'gro)

- Bde ba'i rdo rje. ca. 1934. Dbus mo bde ba'i rdo rje'i rnam par thar pa nges 'byung 'dren pa'i shing rta skal ldan dad pa'i mchod sdong. Unpublished Manuscript.
- Bde ba'i rdo rje. 1978. *Mtsho rgyal dngos snang bde skyong dbang mo yi zab gter gsang ba'i chos mdzod rin po che*, vols. 1–4. Kalimpong: Dupjung Lama.
- Dbus bza' mkha' 'gro. 2009. *Dbus bza' mkha' 'gro'i gsung 'bum/Mgo log dpe rnying dpe tshogs*, vols. 25–31. Si khron: Si khron mi rigs dpe skrun khang.
- Dbus bza' mkha' 'gro kun bzang bde skyong dbang mo. 2017. *Mkha' 'gro'i chos mdzod chen mo*, vols. 31–38. Lha sa: Bod ljongs Bod yig dpe rnying dpe skrun khang.
- Se ra mkha' 'gro. 2015. *Se ra mkha' 'gro bde chen bde ba'i rdo rje'i gsung 'bum/Gang can skye ma'i dpe tshogs*, vols. 9–15. Si khron: Si khron mi rigs dpe skrun khang.

Other Tibetan Language Works Cited

- Bde skyid sgrol ma. 2016. *Byur dmar 'khri shing*. Bod kyi deng rabs bud med rtsom pa po'i dpe tshogs deb phreng gnyis pa. Si khron: Si khron mi rigs dpe skrun khang.
- Bla rung Ar+ya tA re'i dpe tshogs rtsom sgrig khang. 2017. *Mkha' 'gro'i chos mdzod chen mo*, pod 53. Lha sa: Bod ljongs Bod yig dpe rnying dpe skrun khang.
- Bod gzhug skyid. 2016. *Skya rengs*. Bod kyi deng rabs bud med rtsom pa po'i dpe tshogs deb phreng gnyis pa. Si khron: Si khron mi rigs dpe skrun khang.
- 'Chi med. 2012. *Dzla ba'i rmi lam*. Zi ling: mtsho sngon mi rigs dpe skrun khang.
- . 2016. Bod kyi deng rabs bud med rtsom pa po'i dpe tshogs deb phreng gnyis pa. *Chu'i lang tsho*. Si khron: Si khron mi rigs dpe skrun khang.
- Dpal mo (rtsom sgrig pa). 2005. *Bzho lung*. Deng rabs bod kyi bod med rtsom pa po'i snyan rtsom gces btus. Pe cin: mi rigs dpe skrun khang.
- . 2006. *Dpyad rtsom phyogs bsgrigs*. Deng rabs bod kyi skyes ma'i brtsams chos bdams sgrig. Pe cin: krung go'i bod rig pa dpe skrun khang.

- . 2011a. *Sgrung rtsom phyogs bsgrigs*. Deng rabs bod kyi bod med kyi dpe tshogs las. Pe cin: krunng go'i bod rig pa dpe skrun khang.
- . 2011b. *Lhug rtsom phyogs bsgrigs*. Deng rabs bod kyi bod med kyi dpe tshogs las. Pe cin: krunng go'i bod rig pa dpe skrun khang.
- . 2011c. *Snyan rtsom phyogs bsgrigs*. Deng rabs bod kyi bod med kyi dpe tshogs las. Pe cin: krunng go'i bod rig pa dpe skrun khang.
- Dpal mo. 2014. *Dpyid kyi dpal mo*. Zi ling: mtsho sngon mi rigs dpe skrun khang.
- Mkha' mo rgyal. 2018. *Phyir log pa*. Bod kyi deng rabs bud med rtsom pa po'i dpe tshogs deb phreng gnyis pa. Zi ling: Mtsho sngon mi rigs dpe skrun khang.
- Nyi ma 'tsho. 2003. *Mi tshe 'di'i 'grul bzhud theng dang po*. New Delhi: Archana Press.
- . 2009. *Zur zhig: Nyi ma 'tsho'i brtsams sgrung phyogs bsgrigs*. New Delhi: Archana Press.
- Pad+ma 'od gsal. 2003. *Deb chung a ru ra'i dga' tshal*. Si khron: Si khron mi rigs dpe skrun khang.
- 'Phrin las, ed. 2008. *Mgo log bod rigs rang skyong khul gyi bod brgyud nang bstan dgon sde khag gi lo rgyus snying bsdus*. Xining: Mtsho sngon mi rigs dpe skrun khang.
- Skal bzang lha mo. 1999. *Drang srong bsti gnas kyi rmi lam yun cig*. Dharamsala: Amnye Machen Institute.
- Smin snang mdzes. 2006. *Gangs ri'i sras mo*. n.p.
- . 2015. *Tshor ba'i glu*. Dharamshala: Sa rā bod kyi par skrun khang.
- Tshe sgron skyid. 2005. *Skyo snang gi zlos gar*. Lanzhou: Kan su'u mi rigs dpe skrun khang.
- . 2016. *Zhen*. Bod kyi deng rabs bud med rtsom pa po'i dpe tshogs deb phreng gnyis pa. Si khron: Si khron mi rigs dpe skrun khang.
- Tshe ring 'tsho. 2016. *A ma'i bzho ze'u*. Bod kyi deng rabs bud med rtsom pa po'i dpe tshogs deb phreng gnyis pa. Si khron: Si khron mi rigs dpe skrun khang.

English Language Works Cited

- Dickie, Tenzin. 2016. "Semarkar." *Treasury of Lives*, accessed December 16, 2022, <http://treasury-offives.org/biographies/view/Semarkar/13566>.
- . 2017. *Old Demons, New Deities: Twenty-One Short Stories from Tibet*. New York: OR Books.
- Dhomba, Tsering Wangmo. 2002. *Rules of the House*. Berkeley, CA: Apogee Press.
- . 2005. *In the Absent Everyday*. Berkeley, CA: Apogee Press.
- . 2011. *My Rice Tastes Like the Lake*. Berkeley, CA: Apogee Press.
- . 2016. *Coming Home to Tibet: A Memoir of love, loss, and belonging*. Boulder: Shambhala Publications.

- Gyatso, Janet. 2022. "Reading the Mila Life Story: Doubles, Double-Takes, and the Literary Affordances of Text." *Journal of Tibetan Literature* 1.1: 185–210.
- Jabb, Lama. 2021. "The Immortal Ring of Samsara and Poetry." *Yeshe: A Journal of Tibetan Literature, Arts and Humanities* 1.1.
<https://yeshe.org/the-immortal-ring-of-samsara-and-poetry/>
- . 2022. Distilling Joys and Woes: An Appreciation of Contemporary Tibetan Women's Writing རྒྱུད་སྐྱུག་བསྟུལ་པའི་དེང་རབས་བོད་མོའི་བརྒྱམས་ཚོས་ལྷོང་རྣམ། *Journal of Tibetan Literature* 1.1: 211–26.
- Jacoby, Sarah. 2014a. *Love and Liberation: Autobiographical Writings of the Tibetan Buddhist Visionary Sera Khandro*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- . 2014b. "The Excellent Path of Devotion: An Annotated Translation of Sera Khandro's Short Autobiography," In *Himalayan Passages: Tibetan and Newar Studies in Honor of Hubert Decler*. Edited by Benjamin Bogin and Andrew Quintman, 163–202. Boston: Wisdom Publications.
- . 2019. "Tibetan Studies and the Art of Dialogue." *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines* 48, Avril: 152–169.
- Lama, Tsering Yangzom. 2022. *We Measure the Earth with our Bodies*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Monet, Tashi Dekyid. 2022. "Conference Notes on the Tibetan Women Writing Symposium: A Celebration of Tibetan Women's Literature གངས་ཅན་རྒྱུས་མས་ཚུམ་རིག་གླེང་བ། བོད་མོའི་ཚུམ་རིག་མཛད་ཇེས་གཞེངས་སུ་བསྟོན་བ།" *Journal of Tibetan Literature* 1.1: 243–47.
- Padma 'tsho. 2021. "The Future of Tibetan Women." In *Voices from Larung Gar: Shaping Tibetan Buddhism for the Twenty-First Century*. Edited by Holly Gayley, 209–218. Boulder: Snow Lion.
- Padma 'tsho and Sarah Jacoby. 2020. "Gender Equality in and on Tibetan Buddhist Nuns' Terms" *Religions* 11.10: 543. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11100543>
- . 2021. "Lessons from Buddhist Foremothers." In *Voices from Larung Gar: Shaping Tibetan Buddhism for the Twenty-First Century*. Edited by Holly Gayley, 219–233. Boulder: Snow Lion.
- Sørensen, Per. 1990. *Divinity Secularized: An Inquiry into the Nature and Form of the Songs Ascribed to the Sixth Dalai Lama*. Wien: Arbeitskreis für Tibetische und Buddhistische Studien Universität Wien.
- Thondup, Tulku. 1986. *Hidden Teachings of Tibet: An Explanation of the Terma Tradition of Tibetan Buddhism*. Boston: Wisdom Publications.
- Uray, Géza. 1972. "Queen Sad-mar-kar's Songs in the *Old Tibetan Chronicle*." *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 25: 5–38.

Willock, Nicole. 2023. "Samtha: The Borderlands of Tibetan Translation." In *Living Treasure: Tibetan and Buddhist Studies in Honor of Janet Gyatso*. Edited by Holly Gayley and Andrew Quintman. Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 77–94.

