THE CONSTRUCTION OF A TIBETAN IDENTITY: WOMEN'S PRACTICES AND GLOBAL PROCESS

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"Women's issues" occupy a prominent place on the global political agenda. This is evidenced by four United Nations international conferences in as many decades, plus a multiplicity of meetings at the local and regional levels in preparation for these conferences[1]. Through these forums women are ostensibly given a voice in local, national, regional, and world affairs.[2] Perhaps equally significant, if not more so, however, is the fact that "women's issues" have become global in scope and thus provide an avenue by which to enter a global political discourse, much in the way that environmentalism and human rights afford such an opportunity.

These entrées into global politics are of course important for nation-states that are trying to establish or solidify a political foothold in a Western dominated global politics. They are also important for groups of people, those who are not politically and officially recognized, as a means of gaining de facto recognition. In other words, through these issues and through the avenues afforded by some non-governmental organizations, these groups are given a voice in the international forum where they would otherwise be silenced.

It is in this latter context that I examine the case of exiled Tibetans, a politically marginalized and officially (legalistically) unrecognized political group which, in recent years, has garnered a great deal of international media attention and de facto recognition as a political entity. Incorporating an agenda of "women's issues" into their overall international political strategy has had several consequences for Tibetan exiles, some of them intended and some of them not.

The goals of this paper are several: One, to show the rise of women's political identity in the Tibetan exile community and to discuss the historical context of women's place in Tibetan society; two, to depict how the engagement of "women's issues" constitutes a practice of identity for Tibetan refugees more generally; and three, to illustrate an instance in which the context of the global directly implicates the creation or construction of an identity of a people.

In this paper then, I situate the construction of Tibetan women's identity and, more generally, Tibetan exile identity, in the context of the structure of global politics. I draw on Jonathan Friedman (1994), who is concerned with the interconnectedness of identity construction with global processes. The idea of global process he defines as "the structure of the conditions" (Friedman 1994: 1) that govern the way in which identities are constituted. Friedman's concern is with "the way in which moving objects and people are identified, assimilated, marginalized or rejected" (1994: 1).

Historical Setting

Tibetan women did not have a place, historically, in politics and government.[3] In the Tibetan oligarchy, administrators and advisors, invariably male, were selected from the noble and monastic sectors. They served under the Dalai Lama

or a regent. Tibetan women worked in the homes and fields. They sometimes owned businesses and were free to come and go in the household as they pleased. They were present, therefore, in all of public life except in government and politics.[4]

Tibetan women say that they have always, historically, been held in high esteem. The Dalai Lama also indicates that this was the case (1990: 69). Their absence from politics and government is viewed more as a factor of a mutually beneficial division of labor rather than an indication of disparities in the power relations between men and women. Women's power is said to have been found in the household. Indeed in traditional Tibetan society, power was vested in a relatively few people anyway, and the exclusion of women from the domain of politics was in keeping with the exclusion of the masses from that domain. Nevertheless, even among the nobility, there were few, if any, women who held government positions in pre-1959 Tibet.

Women have become involved in government service since 1959, when the diaspora began. Since coming to exile, women, almost from the earliest days, were placed into positions of public trust. Those who were going to boarding school or college in India were recruited by Tibetan leaders to help set up the refugee settlements and aid in the administration of the government in exile. Being multi-lingual, some served in key roles as translators between Tibetan spokespeople and foreign journalists or Indian bureaucrats and leaders. In the early 1960s, under democratic reforms instituted by the Dalai Lama, Tibetan women of the aristocracy were enlisted into office. But, according to one Tibetan informant, this involvement was rather half-hearted. Apparently facing pressure from husbands and in-laws to stay at home, there was a trend of women resigning their posts in the middle of their terms of office.

The Tibetan Women's Association

In the early 1980s, upon the suggestion of the Dalai Lama, a women's organization was formed. Called the Tibetan Women's Association (*pume tsokba*), its stated goal is "to work towards the regaining of Tibetan independence under the benevolent leadership of Nobel Laureate, His Holiness the Dalai Lama (TWA Brochure nd:3)." Membership is open to all Tibetan women in exile. But it tends to be less attractive to the average younger woman perhaps because joining entails tacit agreement to particular precepts upheld by the organization. There is a built-in social conservatism that young women do not find appealing. There are pressures, sometimes subtle and sometimes not so subtle, to abide by certain rules of conduct. These may include proper dress (wearing traditional Tibetan dress called *chuba* to all official, formal, or semi-formal occasions) and proscriptions against ethnically exogamous marriages. Thus membership in the Women' Association carries with it certain responsibilities that are closely linked with notions of patriotism, i.e. racial purity and ethnic particularity.

The organizational structure of the Women's Association is democratic. Members join local or regional chapters and elect their regional leaders. Every three years, a "general body meeting" is held for all regional leaders. General elections are held among these to fill executive committee posts. The executive committee is headquartered in Dharamsala, northern India, also the location of the Tibetan exile government and residence of the Dalai Lama, and consists of a president, vice president, general secretary, and information secretary, as well as other officers. As of 1992 there were 36

chapters of the Tibetan Women's Association worldwide. The Women's Association, like the Tibetan Youth Congress, has come to be a de facto "training ground" for future members of the Assembly of Tibetan People's Deputies, the parliament in exile.

Although founded in 1984, the Tibetan Women's Association is identified, not as a new organization, but as one that has its roots in the events in 1959 which culminated in the diaspora and which, in some ways signify the genesis of modern Tibetan nationalism. The complex of events that occurred in March of 1959 have been aggregated by Tibetans into one symbolic day known as "Uprising Day" or Tibetan National Day. Commemorated on March 10 annually by Tibetans worldwide, this event has become a key symbol of the Tibetan nation (Nowak 1984). It is an event that draws a large attendance by men, women, and children.

Women are said to have staged their own uprising, on March 12 (Dalai Lama 1990; Nowak 1984; Richardson 1984). March 12 has now come to symbolize women's special role or place in the Tibetan struggle. For on that day in 1959, "only women were in the streets. On the first day, it was a few thousand, four or five thousand. On the 18th it was 15,000 women, which some of our reporters say is not impossible because a lot of women had come out from eastern and western Tibet. The contemporary Women's Association traces its origin to this movement."[5] This depiction of Tibetan Women's Uprising Day as the precursor to the present Tibetan Women's Association has become increasingly solidified in Tibetan narratives as "official" Association history. Today's Women's Association is reportedly a "revitalization" of the earlier movement, which supposedly lay "dormant" through the 1960s and 70s. The link to 1959 I suggest is less factual than ideological and symbolic. Among the founders and current members of the "revitalized" association there are no members of the earlier organization, and indeed, as I mentioned earlier, the impetus for starting the organization came from the Dalai Lama. The continuity with 1959 suggests that the contemporary women's association has grass roots origins, as the 1959 movement is supposed to have had, rather than having its impetus in the highest echelons of power. It also serves to link the contemporary Women's Association with the patriotic (nationalist) struggle, thereby legitimating women's involvement in politics at all. In other words, this linkage enrobes women's political activism in the legitimate national struggle thereby obscuring the fact that women are also gaining social power through this activism.

Through the association, women are entering into political life in a way that has few precedents in Tibetan political history. The Tibetan Women's Association and the advocacy of the Dalai Lama of that organization places women to some extent beyond the reproach of their husbands and in-laws, although it is clear from interviews with women activists that there are still substantial pressures placed on women in politics. But to argue with their wives that they should not be involved in politics or in the Women's Association is tantamount to being unpatriotic and to arguing with the Dalai Lama himself.

Women's Views

Women couch their "reasons" for being politically active in terms of responsibility. Women members of the Assembly of Tibetan People's Deputies (the Tibetan exile parliament) do not consider themselves "politicians" nor as primarily interested in politics per se. Rather, they are compelled by the circumstances of their lives and by the

responsibility they feel to work for the Tibetan cause. As one woman said, "All Tibetans must take responsibility for working for the Tibetan cause. It should not be left to men alone."[6] The political role that women have taken on is thus considered an anomaly. It is due to political necessity and a sense of responsibility, but women would otherwise prefer to tend to their children and homes, and perhaps businesses. This was a sentiment frequently expressed by women.

Their involvement is readily legitimated by and incorporated into the nationalist project. But how do women make sense of the changes in social relations with respect to men?

Women I interviewed almost invariably told me that historically, traditionally, women have always been equal to men. There was never any discrimination. It was by choice that women stayed at home or did not avail themselves of opportunities. In this way, rising to the political task at hand does not represent a break with the past, but rather a continuity with a dormant aspect of it, much as the Women's Association is a reawakening of a dormant earlier organization. Tibetans contrast themselves with other Asian women. One woman said that Tibetan culture was "an island surrounded by societies that oppressed women", namely India and China.[7] It was clear that Tibetan women wanted to make sure that Westerners understood this difference. But at the same time that they distanced themselves from other Asian traditions, they also distinguished themselves from their western counterparts. "Our women's movement is not about women's liberation," said one woman. "We never needed liberation in the Western sense." Their political activism is instead about the liberation of the Tibetan nation.[8] Tibetan women's status is thereby viewed as surpassing that of women of the West.

Women as Equals?

A brief discussion on the relative status of women in Tibetan society in the past and in exile is in order. Claims of an historically egalitarian society, one in which women do not need "liberation in the Western sense," are usually tied to Buddhism. But woman's position vis a vis Buddhism is quite ambigious, both historically and in the present. Woman is portrayed in Mahayana Buddhist texts as sometimes a temptress and seductress and sometimes as the suffering mother (see Paul 1985 [1979]). As temptress, she represents to men the source of their potential downfall. "What was feminine or sensual was samsara, the world of bondage, suffering, and desire, which led to cycles of rebirth. This world of the feminine had to be vanquished at all costs" (Paul 1985: 5). She is a demonness in need of taming and suppression, the *srinmo* (see Gyatso 1989: 32-51). As mother, woman was a reminder of suffering, again linking her to earthly existence and samsara (Paul 1985: 60-66). But conversely, the female is also a helpful deity, a bodhisattva or celestial Buddha, as in the case of Guan Yin, the equivalent in Chinese Buddhism of Avalokitesvara in Indian and Tibetan Buddhism (Paul 1985: 247-256; Yu 1996). She is also a teacher/guru and the spiritual equal of male counterparts (see Gross 1989: 11-32). There are also numerous female deities in Tibetan Buddhism, called *dakinis*, that serve as spiritual helpers to practitioners. But here too, we are faced with ambiguity--many of them are wrathful and horrific, while at the same time, leading to enlightenment.

The status of the female in Tibetan society is generally ambiguous as well. Social and economic evidence suggests that the status of Tibetan women did indeed differ

significantly from that of women in India and China. Miller cites Li An-che, a Chinese anthropologist, who noted the independence of Tibetan women and "recommended that China's women be "liberated" along the lines of the traditional Tibetan practices" (Miller 1980: 158-159). A Thematic Apperception Test (Miller 1978: esp. 389-390; 1980) given to 90 Tibetans in India is also telling of the ambiguity of the feminine: they are "cool, delicate, temperate, patient, wise and forebearing...impetuous, violent, witchlike..." and both more likely to fail than men and "as capable as men, if not better, at running a business or a household." They are "cunning as foxes, hiding vile tempers, and mean spirits behind calm and attractive features."

But on the other hand, ambiguity does not seem limited to females. Men are "short-tempered, rude, impatient, open to violent means...calm, judicious, rational...cunning as foxes, hiding vile characters and weak spirits behind calm and attractive features" (Miller 1978: 389-390).

It seems that in comparison to women in other parts of Asia (as well as in the West during much of its history), Tibetan women fared relatively well indeed. Nevertheless, there is plenty of evidence of disparities in social power between Tibetan men and women in exile. Tibetan religion, through its monastic system was and continues to be male dominated (c.f.Campbell 1996). Many popular teachings given by Gelugpa monks at the Library of Tibetan Works in Dharamsala elaborate on the vileness of woman and the dangers of associating with her.[9] More generally, the higher rebirth is thought to be male. And in practical ways as well, disparaties between monks and nuns clearly exist. Monasteries and monks in exile enjoy greater access to resources than do nuns and nunneries and monks are generally afforded more prestige.[10] Furthermore, in Tibetan Buddhism, the highest ordination for nuns (*bikshuni* vows) is not available, suggesting that perhaps women's interest in the religious life was not viewed as having the same degree of significance as men's interest.

Additional ethnographic evidence of disparities in social power between men and women, or at least an ambiguity about it, was apparent in the exile context. I describe two examples below. The first example considers "Women's Uprising Day" in 1994 and the second example concerns the triennial general body meeting of the Tibetan Women's Association, a six day event held in April 1994 that culminates in the election of a new central executive committee.

Women's Uprising Day

The March 12 Women's Uprising Day is viewed as a women's event and the responsibility for commemorating it lies especially and almost exclusively with women. On March 12, 1994, the women of Dharamsala, northern India, were supposed to gather at the main temple for a ceremony and political speeches, followed by a march to Lower Dharamsala's Kotwali Bazaar, some 10 kilometers away. Two days earlier, March 10, was the Tibetan National Uprising Day, and thousands of Tibetans (and some Westerners) participated in a similar ceremony and march.

On the morning of March 12, as I headed for the temple, a jeep with a public address system was driving around McLeod Ganj. A man was calling women forth, telling them to close their shops and join the event. One of my close Tibetan friends, a political activist herself, was angry that Tibetan women showed such a lack of interest and committment that they had to be cajoled to participate.

My thought, however, was that women are made to do double-duty. They were expected to suffer additional loss of income caused by closing their shops another day. My friend, herself, still exhausted from her participation in the March 10 event, put her own health at risk to be a leading participant in the March 12 event, while her male activist counterparts attended to their businesses or took the day off (it was a Saturday). And the nuns who had to participate would lose income because they would not be able to participate in the prayer ceremonies that were occurring at the same time.[11] Women were expected to endure for a second time in a week the heat and long trek down to Lower Dharamsala. This was an event in which men were not expected to participate, although a group of monks from the Namgyal Monastery were present for the initial ceremony (to consecrate the event?) and a handful of men were present on the march. The monks were excused before the political speeches and went to the rooftop of the monastery. During the rest of the women's ceremony, the monks could be heard conducting their routine prayers and chants.

I wondered whether the fact that it was a women's event meant that it was taken less seriously and given less overall significance than the March 10 event. The male dignitaries and politicians who sat on the stage did not include the Dalai Lama, who had, as is customary, been present to give his annual March 10 address two days before.

The general lack of male participation, other than as cajolers and organizers, might suggest that the event is less significant than the March 10 event, or it might suggest that women, having no need of men, are capable of staging their own, independent initiative, just as they did in 1959. The specific lack of the Dalai Lama's presence, however, suggests the former rather than the latter. The presence of the Dalai Lama, who in addition to being a religious figure, is the symbol extraordinaire of the Tibetan nation, invariably lends legitimacy, sanctity and prestige to any event.

Tibetan Women's Association General Body Meeting

In April 1994 over 100 Tibetan women from all over India and Nepal, as well as delegates from Canada and Switzerland, all leaders of the regional branches of the Tibetan Women's Association, gathered in a meeting hall at Gangchen Kyishong, the administrative complex in Dharamsala of the Tibetan exile government, to consider issues facing the exile community, the role that women would play in it, and to conduct general elections, held every third year, for the executive posts of the organization's central body. As is customary for any major gathering of the Tibetan people, the meeting was innaugurated by His Holiness the Dalai Lama. In addition to the meeting participants, the high officials of the Tibetan government, the kalons, were present, a handful of Westerners were present, as well as local Indian dignitaries, who had front-row seats along with the kalons.

Religious symbolism intermingled with secular symbols of the nation in the room's decor. The stage was adorned with a brocade cloth in which two Tibetan flags were depicted in a background of orange. Orange is a color associated with monks who have received training at one of the tantric universities (Gyume or Gyuto). The border of the cloth was blue, yellow and red, colors of the Tibetan flag. Also hanging on the wall was a thangka of Buddha, a banner depicting the eight auspicious signs,[12] and paper cuttings of the lotus flower and the yak.

As the Dalai Lama entered the room, a musical group from the Tibetan Institute of the Performing Arts played the Tibetan National Anthem on flutes. The Dalai Lama greeted everyone, paying special attention to the Indian dignitaries. To the left of the Dalai Lama were seated the executive board of the Women's Association and behind them, some members of the exile government. Tea was served to everyone present and a prayer and blessing were given over tea. After tea, rice was served and a blessing again given by the Dalai Lama.

In the Dalai Lama's address that evening, he started out by speaking about the role of women in Tibetan society but quickly turned to the benefits of breast feeding. He noted that it was beneficial not only for nurturing the children, but for the mother's health as well (preventing breast cancer). He reminisced about his father. Apparently his father used to recount how, when he (the father) was 10 years old, he would come in from working in the fields and run to his mother for breast milk.

I was surprised that this would be the topic of the address, given that the Women's Association was chartered as a political organization, but I could detect no similar reaction from my Tibetan friends and acquaintances when I later made inquiries about their reaction to this speech. Perhaps they were unwilling to express a critical opinion or perhaps it did not strike them as incongruous.

The business sessions were held in the succeeding six days. Among those who attended as observers were representatives from the three regional associations, a representative from the Regional Tibetan Youth Congress of Delhi, a representative from the Tibetan Youth Congress (central executive), a few monks, and a reporter for the weekly Tibetan newspaper *Mangtso* (now defunct), as well as a handful of westerners. In addition, other individuals from various offices of the government and the Tibetan Library popped in and out during the course of the meetings.

I noticed throughout the proceedings the tendency of male observers to offer advice to the women on how to conduct themselves in the meeting. For example, at one point, the representative from the regional U-Tsang (Central Tibet) Association said he wanted to clarify a point, despite the fact that he recognized that he had "no right to speak." He said, "Everyone's talking, 'I want this and I want to do that', but you are here representing your Women's Association so you should keep that in mind when speaking." Generally, men who commented seemed to take a decidedly didactic approach.

For example, a "hearing" was held on women's status. I was able to get parts of it in translation. A senior member of the Women's Association gave a talk on the "Status of Women in Traditional Tibetan Society". The presenter stated that she had not had time to prepare for the talk and proceeded to give her family genealogy. The moderator asked her to speak to the topic. She then briefly talked about the tradition of polyandry in Tibet, and noted that in Tibet, at least in the U-tsang (Central Tibet) area, women "had equal rights...They both go for business and even in the home they work together."

During the question and answer period, a male Tibetan scholar rose and chastized the presenter for not being prepared. "...I think on 12th March it was announced about the hearings," he said. "This isn't right."

He then talked at some length on the deplorable situation of education among Tibetan women and scolded the women for

not having addressed this issue during the meetings. "Six days of meetings and nobody has said anything about how to improve education of Tibetan women, how to encourage women to come up in politics. But for six days, wasted discussion." The tide of the conversation then shifted to the question of education and questions were addressed on that topic for awhile.

But women showed that they too could mete out criticism. The second presenter, another male scholar, discussed the question of whether men and women could have equal rights. The questions women raised in a frank discussion afterward were telling. For example, one woman pointed out the high incidence of wife and child abuse by men in the settlements, who were often intoxicated. "What needs to be changed, the status of men or women?" she queried.

The reply was that this was "very bad, but that women can form associations and seek help from the law."

The woman replied, "You say we can seek help, but you didn't say men should change."

Another question raised by a woman: "So many people, whenever there are meetings of the Tibetan Women's Association, they put it down. Why is this?"

The reply, "TWA is a big association so you have to be organized very well. You will improve slowly." He also pointed out that "whenever I say something you get very emotional and beat your hearts. Emotions should be in back, not open."

Another woman stated: "So many husbands send their wives to sell sweaters thinking they'll get more business. Why is this? Whose fault, the husband's or the wife's?

The reply, "Indian people think Tibetan things are very cheap. Tibetan women smile at the Indians and they think they get things cheap."

Retort, "You haven't said whose fault."

Reply, "Of course this is the husband's fault."

These snippets during the hearing indicate a dynamic public dialogue between Tibetan men and women. The preachiness of the men suggests that they believed women to be less skilled at conducting political business or dealing with social issues in a rational (non-emotional) manner. However, the fact that Tibetan women were able to boldly address the kinds of issues they raised suggests that Tibetan women have significant "rights", for in many situations in the East and West, women would not think of challenging men, particularly not in a public forum.[13] It indicates also the fact that there are gender disparities and that Tibetan women are aware of these, despite the standard, formulaic responses about equal status and rights.[14]

How do we account for the seeming contradiction between the rhetoric of equality and the obvious awareness of gender inequities exhibited at the meeting? One possible explanation is that of priorities. The idea of "liberation in the western sense" takes less priority than the need to liberate their country. Another presenter at the hearing, born and raised in Canada, contrasted the Western women's movement with the Tibetan women's movement in this way: "The Tibetan women's movement...is based on a nationalistic movement, the struggle against cultural genocide, human rights violations, torture, sexual abuse, and being arrested without trial." The Tibetan women's movement, which began March 12, 1959, "women's uprising day," was, she said, "A Tibetan movement under the

banner of a free Tibet." The Tibetan women's movement continues to be primarily nationalistic, although clearly women are aware of the need in the Tibetan exile community for educational, economic, and political upliftment of women.

But Tibetan women need a way to address the questions of their Western "friends", who frequently ask about women's status. Indeed, the Dalai Lama's suggestion that women start their own organization arose from the fact that he was often asked by Western journalists about the situation of Tibetan women.[15] Western inquisitors want to know if Tibetan women enjoy "equal rights". Tibetans, knowing the context out of which Westerners ask this question, must answer within that context, despite the fact that it may be one that they have, until now, not viewed as relevant to their situation. By attributing a historical basis for an equal status to men, women can ward off these questions. At the same time, they may obviate any claim or complaint that they are in competition with men, (it's not liberation "in the western sense"), thereby preserving the social balance or status quo in their own relationships.

Global Processes and the Politics of Identity

The rhetoric of equality circulates widely in the exile community. The Dalai Lama and the exile government, through an ongoing democratization process, promote the egalitarian ideal. Changes toward democratization of Tibetan political life were instituted immediately upon establishing the government in exile in 1960 and are viewed as steps toward modernizing the Tibetan political and social system. At the same time, these reforms are exactly the kinds of changes the West advocates. Exiled Tibetans thus situate themselves within the political sphere of the West, theoretically paving the way for the establishment of alliances. This contrasts with the politics of China. The Dalai Lama has clearly been the impetus behind many of the changes or reforms in Tibetan political life and he is well-attuned to the ideological framework of the West, as we see from the initiation of the Women's Association itself and the establishment of such offices as the "women's desk", the "environment desk", and the "human rights desk", all under the Department of Information and International Relations. The responses of women to questions about their status reflect the Dalai Lama's concerns. These are namely that Westerners understand that Tibetan women have, historically, had greater status than their neighbors to the east and south and today stand shoulder to shoulder with Tibetan men, and that they are, and always have been, "liberated". Hence the formulaic nature of the responses from women.

The rhetoric of equality has also been present in the written word. Foreign scholars, travelers, and military attaches, as well as the Tibetan literati all contribute to the idea that Tibetan women have historically held "equal" social positions. These accounts have yet to be either confirmed or disputed in academic literature. Charles Bell cites accounts in Rockhill (1891) and Kawaguchi (1909), as well as providing his own evidence: "The Tibetan woman is brought up with boys and men. She is physically strong; she is undeniably intelligent. When still a girl, she may hold charge of part of the household. Later on, a grown woman, she will probably have a great influence with her husband. And if her husband is absent or dead, she may manage the estate till her son grows to manhood" (Bell 1992: 156). He notes that Tibetan women do heavy work, right alongside the men. However, we know that women in many parts of the world typically work long hours and do

heavy work. This alone does not mean that they enjoy equal status with men. In fact, in many instances it may indicate the opposite.

Rinchen Lhamo, a Tibetan woman who married Louis King, a British consular, and moved to England wrote: "With us neither the one sex nor the other is considered the inferior or superior. Men and women treat each other as equals. The women are not kept in seclusion, but take full part in social life and in business affairs. Husband and wife are companions and partners, but the husband is the head of the household, and not the wife, as some of your writers have it. The status of women in our country is much the same as in yours" (1985 [1926]): 125). Lhamo's book, *We Tibetans*, seems to be largely an attempt to set the record straight and correct what she believes are the erroneous perceptions of various Western writers. For example, she notes that reports of polyandry in Tibet are untrue. "Polyandry is not a Tibetan form of marriage. I am a Tibetan, and I know of no case of it. Nor have we polygamy" (1985: 129). This can be seen only as an attempt to ward off negative perceptions of Tibetans that such exotic marriage practices might evoke in Westerners, for there is certainly clear enough evidence indicating the veracity of reports of these practices. That Lhamo compares the status of women of Tibet with that of European women (in the 1920s) is also no great recommendation. The improvement of women's status in the West has been an uneven, usually uphill battle.

But perhaps Rinchen Lhamo does get at something of the truth about Tibetan women, because to say, "The status of women in our country is much the same as yours", is to say that women's status is indeed ambiguous, as the evidence suggests. As in the West, women don't have parity with men in many areas of social, political, and economic life. The pervasive, if unspoken and unacknowledged attitude is that women's place is behind or beneath men's. Yet at the same time, as in the West, women are able to achieve some success, recognition and respect.

The Feminization of Tibetan Identity in Global Context

By establishing a women's organization and by promoting women in the political process, Tibetans align themselves ideologically with the West. In recent years, Tibetan women have gained increasing visibility not only in Tibetan politics in India, where they serve as members of the Assembly of Tibetan People's Deputies and on the Dalai Lama's cabinet, but in the international sphere as well. Examples of this increasing visibility include participation in numerous international forums sponsored by the United Nations. The Women's Association was active in trying to gain approval from the U.N. for Tibetan representation at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. They attended the various preparatory meetings for the conference and the parallel summit for non-governmental organizations at the conference. They were present at the World Social Summit for Development in Denmark in 1995 and at the International Conference on Population and Development in Egypt in 1994. The Women's Association is very outspoken on the issue of human rights in Tibet and has published in English a number of brochures that address these, including *Our Will Against Their Might: Women Prisoners of Conscience in Tibet; Tears of Silence: A Report on Tibetan Women and Population Control; A State-Owned Womb*; and *Silent Prayers and Collective Screams*.

Tibetan women are thus engaged in a variety of global discourses involving the

status of women and children and more generally, on human rights. They are a noticeable part of any public rally or demonstration and, as Tibetans themselves have noted, as women, tend to attract more media attention and sympathy than a rally or protest of men or dominated by men (Samdup 1994).

Tibetan women, because of their outspokenness and competency in the public arena, take their place among the world's women and despite the fact that they do not seek liberation "in the western sense", they join western feminists in the global mainstream. At the same time, they draw on prevalent western gender stereotypes about woman as the "gentler sex", and as innocent victims. Similarly, the entire Tibetan struggle is cast in this way, with Tibetans as a "gentler race" and as innocent victims of Chinese aggression. The Dalai Lama never condemns the Chinese and he tells Tibetans not to view them as enemies. He emphasizes the Buddhist message of compassion, kindness, nonviolence, and universal responsibility. Couching the struggle in the universal Buddhist values, he "spiritualizes" the Tibetan cause, raising it out of the mundane realm of territorial and political disputes to the level of universal human values.

In western gender ideology, attributes such as compassion and kindness belong to the feminine. Nonviolence or nonaggression are also associated with the feminine. In this way we see that Tibetan identity in the Western context is feminized. Because it is framed in terms that are viewed as "feminine" in the West, the Tibetan movement poses little threat to the West, but it may also suggest a reason that the West does not need to take the Tibet issue too seriously.[16] Tibetan women, thus, "represent" Tibetans and the Tibetan cause in the international arena in a manner consistent with the other ways in which the Tibetan cause and Tibetan people are represented by the the Dalai Lama and exile government policy. Women are in a sense appropriate vehicles for carrying the message of the Tibetan struggle.

They, as political actors, are important symbols within a universalizing western-generated gender ideology. Women, by their womanhood, visible in the political struggle of Tibetans in exile, are in some respects the embodiment of that struggle. Women, as feminine, as quintessentially powerless or disempowered, the physically weaker sex, yet simultaneously the standard bearers of cultural values, of home, of family, and as the child bearers and nurturers, of the future itself, can be implemented as part of the larger Tibetan political project. The charges of the Tibetan government-in-exile against China, of torture and mistreatment of Tibetan citizens and destruction of the environment by dumping nuclear waste, killing endangered animal species, and deforestation, unite the two enterprises -- the particularly Tibetan one of recruiting support to save the Tibetan nation, and the universal one of saving the earth and its endangered inhabitants, human beings included. This mingling and mixing of the particular with the universal, of the local with the global, contrasts with the position of China. If the Tibetan nationalist enterprise is portrayed in "softer", feminized, universally meaningful terms, then the Chinese are portrayed as masculinized aggressors whose interests are nationalistic, self-serving, and isolationist.

Conclusion

All of the foregoing is not to suggest that the involvement of Tibetan women in the political arena is contrived or insincere. What I have tried to show is that women's involvement in politics, the establishment of a new identity for Tibetan women,

cannot be disentangled from the wider matrix of global social and political dynamics and the meanings of which they are a part. Tibetan women, at a symbolic level, lend credibility or legitimacy to the political enterprises of the Tibetan exile government in the international context. Through them, as through other key symbols of western political liberalism such as human rights and democratization, the mixing of the particular with the universal, of the local with the global, occurs with respect to the Tibet issue. This intermingling itself serves the Tibetan exile cause by linking it with issues that have currency in international politics and contrasting it with the more localized or particularized interests of the Chinese government, which has a decidedly protectionistic policy towards these issues in its own country. In this way, Tibetan exiles, otherwise a politically disenfranchised group, gain a voice and an identity in the world.[17]

Notes

This is a substantially revised version of a paper presented in 1992 at the American Anthropological Association annual meetings in San Francisco and in *Rangzen: The magazine of the Tibetan Youth Congress* in 1994.

[1] I became familiar with the extensiveness of women's involvement in the various preparatory forums while conducting research on Tibetan refugees in India in 1994. Tibetan women were availing themselves of opportunities to meet with and be recognized by the Indian women's groups that were preparing for the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing 1995).

[2] The ultimate impact of this "voice" on policy is debatable, but the question is beyond the scope of this paper.

[3] I am speaking specifically of the government in Lhasa. There is evidence that women in other parts of Tibet could and did become chieftains. In addition, various sources make reference to two areas in Western Tibet called "the Land of Women" and presumably there, women's access to political power would have been quite a different matter.

[4] I use the term "public" in its contemporary and Western sense. Habermas (in Mukerji and Schudson 1991) points out that public/private distinctions are a relatively recent historical development. The "public" realm of feudal Europe referred to wherever the ruler or his representative was located at any given time. "Public" realm was not fixed spatially, but was a temporal phenomenon, "travelling" as it were, with the ruler. Thus Tibetan women's involvement in the marketplace does not necessarily upset the public/private dichotomy that so often characterizes gender relations.

[5] interview with a member, 1992.

[6] interview with a woman Assembly member.

[7] interview with a New York area Tibetan woman.

[8] ibid.

[9] discussions with a close friend, who studied Buddhism at the Library of Tibetan Works for three years and attended teachings there for one year.

[10] in an interview with a nun (ani) in which I was investigating the status of women in Tibetan exile society and pursuing the question of relative prestige between monks and nuns, at first she assured me that men and women, monks and nuns, are of equal status. But as I queried further and rephrased my questions, it became clear that indeed, Tibetans afford monks with more "respect" than nuns.

[11] After ceremonies at Tsuklhakhang, a group of nuns was ready to leave to do prayers (something for which they could receive payment), but were rounded up and made to participate in the march.

[12] The eight auspicious signs are motifs that are used frequently in Tibetan architecture and art. Commercially available stickers depicting each of the signs explains the symbolism as such: the right coiled white conch shell symbolizes the resonance of the sounds of the dharma and the awakening of people of varying dispositions to its call; the precious umbrella represents the protection of living beings from harmful forces; the victory banner, symbolizing the victory of the pure body, speech and mind from all negativities; the golden fish symbolizes fearlessness and the freedom from suffering and the ability to move freely; the vase of treasure, which represents long life, wealth and prosperity and all good things of the world and of liberation; the lotus flower symbolizes the purification of the body, speech and mind; the auspicious drawing (or endless knot) symbolizes mutual dependencies of religious and secular and the union of wisdom and method and wisdom and compassion; the wheel symbolizes the turning of the Buddha's doctrine.

[13] It is possible, too, that the meeting situation was a space that permitted those kinds of exchanges, a place where the normative rules of male-female relationships, could be temporarily suspended.

[14] I recognize, of course, that when I say "standard rhetoric" I am referring to the fact that this is what women tell *foreigners* who ask about these issues.

[15] interview with a TWA executive committee member.

[16] I am not suggesting that there aren't other "reasons", strategic, political, economic, etc.

[17] The efficacy of this voice and identity is not being addressed here.

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