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# Tibetan Perceptions of LGBTQ

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*SIT Study Abroad*

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# Tibetan Perceptions of LGBTQ

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## Anthropology & Sociology and Psychology

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## Abstract

This project is aimed at understanding the perceptions of LGBTQ identities, people, and issues within the Tibetan exile community in Dharamsala, India. The project starts by contextualizing feminism in Tibetan spheres as well as Buddhist conceptions of gender and sexuality, as many Tibetans are practicing Buddhists. The focus then turns to the reactions to and experiences of queer Tibetans and how Tibetans talk about and conceptualize queerness. Finally, this project looks at the formation of various networks that have formed amongst a small community of out LGBTQ Tibetans. The main objective of this paper is to provide a context for LGBTQ politics in Tibetan spheres in addition to creating visibility for this community. It is important for a dialogue to begin on this topic but that can really only come from within Tibetan communities.

## **Acknowledgements**

There are many people who contributed to this project. I would first like to thank the staff of the SIT Nepal: Tibetan and Himalayan Peoples program for their constant support and interest in my topic and helping me along. Without all of your guidance, advice, and resources this project would not have happened. I also want to thank my parents for providing me with the opportunity to have such an incredible and eye opening experience.

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Finally, I would like to thank everyone that I spoke to for this project. Tenzin Mariko and Sharnon, you both influenced this project so much and I am so grateful for the time you both took to help me. Molly, you were an incredible resource and friend and provided me with the confidence and assistance that I needed to pull this project off. To everyone else that I interviewed and spoke to, thank you for your patience and honesty. I could not have completed this without all of your help and support!

## **Methodology**

This project utilized a combination of both interviews and literature review. There was no compensation for interviews and the identities of all those interviewed have been changed to remain confidential. The literature reviewed ranges from academic works on Buddhism, gender, and sexuality to personal blog and social media posts. In this way, there is a well-rounded view of the perspectives on LGBTQ identities, people, and issues in Tibetan exile communities.

My position and privilege as a white American college student was something that I considered often throughout my research. There were moments when it felt inappropriate for me to be doing this particular topic when it involved such a marginalized community within an already marginalized community and I came from a position of privilege. I at no time wanted to take the voices or platform away from queer Tibetans and hope that this research can provide a context in which the community can approach this issue further. The complication also arises in which I am an outsider. This can affect both my cultural understanding of aspects to this issue as well as the responses that I received from various sources. It is important for true activism and understanding to come from within and I did not intend to further marginalize any Tibetan voices in the process of this research.

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## Introduction

The Tibetan community in exile has faced discrimination since 1959 when thousands of Tibetans fled Chinese-occupied Tibet. After settling in India and Nepal, many Tibetan refugees have not been able to get proper citizenship papers, passports, or other forms of legal documentation that allow people to be mobile and independent. Tibetans in exile have difficulty reaching family members and friends who remain in Tibet and many will probably never return to their home country in their lifetime. Tibetans still living in Tibet undergo hyper surveillance and institutional threats to their culture and history. Needless to say, Tibetans both in exile and in Tibet face constant marginalization.

What does this then mean for Tibetans who have non-normative or marginalized identities? The focus of many Tibetan institutions in exile, such as the Tibetan Women's Association and Tibetan Youth Congress, is on human rights abuses in Tibet. There is very little attention given to social inequalities and injustices within exile communities. The rhetoric in Tibetan activist spheres such as these revolve mainly around Tibetan identity, ignoring the intersection of other aspects of identity such as age, sexual orientation, and ability.

This especially affects the ways in which Tibetans engage with the topic of LGBTQ people and issues. Because of the prevalence of Tibetan identity, LGBTQ identities often get forgotten in dialogues within Tibetan communities. There is very little visibility and awareness for LGBTQ Tibetans, but there have been attempts to start the conversation.

The following pages analyze the context in which queer Tibetans are situated and how they navigate that context. It is important to have an understanding of how feminism and gender studies are conceptualized in a Tibetan and Buddhist context in order to understand the lived experiences and perceptions of LGBTQ Tibetans. In no way is this project a complete account of queer Tibetans as it only draws from the stories and experiences of a few individuals. With this being said, however, the

aim of this project is to provide a base framework for future research into queer lives, activism, and perceptions in Tibetan exile communities.

## **Tibetan Feminism**

Tibetan feminism comes in many different forms. From formal organizations to comments made by religious leaders, feminist rhetoric is utilized in many spheres of Tibetan activism. Feminist activism in Tibetan communities first brings to mind the Tibetan Women's Association (TWA), an organization started in order to publicize human right abuses toward women in Tibet.<sup>1</sup> Now, the TWA hosts workshops for women on topics such as family planning, provides scholarships to Tibetan women, and writes publications on rights abuses in Tibet.<sup>2</sup>

While the TWA works to empower and promote the rights of Tibetan women, it does fall short in some ways. This includes its primary focus on women in Tibet. It is written on the website that the primary focus of the TWA is to publicize and challenge abuses toward women in Chinese-occupied Tibet.<sup>3</sup> For women in exile, the main goal is "the preservation and promotion of the distinct religion, culture and identity of the Tibetan people."<sup>4</sup> The only mention of problems within Tibetan exile communities is to help women in exile have access to proper health care and education.<sup>5</sup> There is very little mention of gender inequality in Tibetan exile communities and a sense that the only abuses toward women's rights happen to women still living in Tibet. The TWA's website also makes no mention of other aspects of identity, such as age, sexual orientation, or ability. This excludes marginalized communities within Tibetan exile communities and ignores an intersectional approach to feminist activism.

An organization that attempts to address the issues of intersectionality and ignoring gender inequality within Tibetan communities that the TWA fails to

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<sup>1</sup> Butler, Alex. *Feminism, Nationalism and Exiled Tibetan Women*. New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> "Our Aims and Objectives," Tibetan Women's Association. 4/17/2018.

<sup>3</sup> "History," Tibetan Women's Association. 4/17/2018.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> "Our Aims and Objectives," Tibetan Women's Association.



recognize is the Tibetan Feminist Collective (TFC). The TFC is “a multimedia platform<sup>6</sup>” – including a blog, Facebook page, and Instagram account – that focuses on feminist issues related to Tibet and Tibetans in exile. The TFC criticizes the sentiment reflected in the TWA’s aims that there is no gender inequality in Tibetan communities.<sup>7</sup> They also discuss how many Tibetans harbor the idea that feminism is a “western” import and that feminists are trying to deepen the social divide between men and women.<sup>8</sup> It is because of these sentiments and other deeply ingrained gender inequalities that the TFC was created and creates posts about relevant issues within the community. In addition, all of the editors are Tibetan women from the exile community who are able to write from an inside perspective. This perspective allows for posters and readers to be self-reflexive when thinking of feminist issues.

The TFC also works to be more intersectional than just focusing on women’s issues. They point out that the expectations for women to have kids to keep the Tibetan population thriving limits space for queer identities and how no Tibetan organizations exist to support LGBTQ Tibetans.<sup>9</sup> The TFC also addresses issues of race, classism, effects of colonialism and other social justice issues.

In addition to formal feminist organizations, religious leaders such as the Dalai Lama and the Karmapa have made comments regarding gender equality in Tibetan communities. His Holiness the Dalai Lama has made multiple comments about the need for a reevaluation of Buddhist perspectives on gender roles of women and women’s status in Tibetan society.<sup>10</sup> He also has voiced his own beliefs that more women should hold leadership positions and are more than capable of these roles.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> “About,” *Tibetan Feminist Collective* (blog).

<sup>7</sup> “Vital Underpinnings of Tibetan Feminism,” *Tibetan Feminist Collective* (blog), June 8, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> “Tibet’s Pride,” *Tibetan Feminist Collective* (blog), June 28, 2015

“Vital Underpinnings of Tibetan Feminism,” *Tibetan Feminist Collective* (blog).

<sup>10</sup> “Dalai Lama Voices Support for Gay Marriage,” NBC News, March 7, 2014.

<sup>11</sup> Kristof, Nicholas, “Dalai Lama gets Mischievous,” *The New York Times*, July 16, 2015.

The 17<sup>th</sup> Karmapa has also made several comments about gender identity and equality. In his book *The Heart is Noble: Changing the World from the Inside Out* he discusses how gender identity is all in our minds. He claims that accepting constructed gender identities and concepts of femininity and masculinity is self-limiting and attaches us to a false reality.<sup>12</sup> He also discusses how we all have the capacity to develop so-called feminine and masculine qualities and should all aspire to obtain positive qualities we have labeled as such. These qualities are not limited based on our biological sex.<sup>13</sup> The Karmapa's stance on the nature of gender reflects feminist assertions that gender is a social construct although experientially real. His Holiness the Karmapa also calls for conscious and genuine activism, meaning that one actually takes action to make a change instead of just talking about making a change.<sup>14</sup> He himself has taken huge steps toward restoring full ordination of nuns in the Kagyu Buddhist sect which has been a conversation for years but has not gone anywhere until now.<sup>15</sup>

These comments made by prominent religious leaders in Tibetan Buddhist sects set the stage for new dialogues surrounding feminist issues. They lay the moral groundwork for Tibetan lay people to address issues within their society that effect many different marginalized social groups, including women and queer Tibetans. Projects such as the Tibetan Feminist Collective create a space for Tibetans to learn about and voice their own opinions about feminist issues that can lead to wider conversations and activism for marginalized groups. It is important for these issues to be set out in the open in order for Tibetan communities to engage with the issues their members face. While these platforms have opened the door toward feminist dialogue, there is still room for more intersectional approaches to many of the inequalities that remain in Tibetan exile communities. Marginalized groups, such as

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<sup>12</sup> Dorje, Ogyen Trinley (His Holiness the 17<sup>th</sup> Karmapa). *The Heart is Noble: Changing the World from the Inside Out*. Boston: Shambala Publications Inc., 2013.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Dorje, Ogyen Trinley (His Holiness the 17<sup>th</sup> Karmapa). "A Buddhist Perspective: The Environment, Gender, and Activism." Lecture at Princeton University, Princeton, NJ, April 1, 2015.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

queer Tibetans, could use more visibility and awareness on feminist platforms such as these.

## **Buddhist Perspectives on Gender and Sexuality**

Buddhist conceptions of gender are complicated. Alan Sponberg breaks down early Buddhist understanding of gender into four parts: soteriological inclusiveness, institutional androcentrism, ascetic misogyny, and soteriological androgyny.<sup>16</sup> Soteriological inclusiveness refers to the early Buddhist ideal that biological sex does not hinder one's ability to reach liberation and that both men and women have access to the Dharma. While this may have been the case early on, the other concepts explained by Sponberg indicate gender inequality in practices of Buddhism. Institutional androcentrism indicates the institutional structure of Buddhist learning in which men dominate and women are subordinate. This is seen in the deferral of nuns to monks' authority as well as in how many Buddhist texts are directed toward a male audience. Ascetic misogyny refers to the tendency of Buddhist teachings to paint women in the light of the temptress and as a threat to male celibacy and inducing desire, which can then hinder the path to liberation. This notion shifts responsibility to the object of desire rather than the male observer. Finally, soteriological androgyny points to the Buddhist ideal of manifesting both femininity and masculinity. This means that both feminine and masculine qualities are necessary for an individual and they complement one another.<sup>17</sup> This idea, however, does not leave room for non-binary conceptions of gender and limits notions of "masculine" and "feminine."

The dichotomy of male and female is also seen in many Buddhist symbols, the most prominent of which is feminine wisdom and masculine method, both of which are necessary for spiritual liberation. One cannot achieve liberation without the union of both wisdom and method. At first glance, this seems like gender

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<sup>16</sup> Alan Sponberg, "Attitudes toward Women and the Feminine in Early Buddhism," in *Buddhism, Sexuality, and Gender*, ed. José Ignacio Cabezón (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

equality, as the feminine aspect is just as important as the masculine aspect. When you look closer, however, this may not be the case. José Ignacio Cabezón discusses how this distinction reflects common gender roles of the time and place it was written.<sup>18</sup>

In this context, it was the norm that the caste and ethnicity of the father determined that of the child while the mother's ethnicity did not matter. In this way, a woman could have a child of any ethnicity while a man could only have children of one ethnicity. Cabezón likens this cultural practice to the roles of wisdom and method in Buddhist practice. Wisdom can create a variety of spiritually accomplished beings but it is the role of the method to determine the nature of the spiritual accomplishment.<sup>19</sup> In this way we see how societal conceptions of gender and social identities can influence many aspects of religious life.

While there is little in early Buddhist text on same-sex relationships, Buddhist philosophy does discuss sexuality more generally, including the dangers of sexual desire as well as what constitutes sexual misconduct for lay people.<sup>20</sup> At the base of Buddhist perspectives on sexuality lie the concepts of attachment and obsessive desire. Obsessive desire means going beyond your biological need for something to the point of excess and represents attachment to the physical world as well as ignorance of the true nature of reality.<sup>21</sup> In this way, sexual acts and desire beyond those intended for procreation are a form of obsessive desire. Sex and sexual desire then hinder the process of reaching enlightenment.<sup>22</sup> Because of this, it is best to abstain from sex altogether, which is reflected in the ideal of monastics vowing to be celibate. It is unrealistic and not practical, however, for lay people to

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<sup>18</sup> José Ignacio Cabezón, "Mother Wisdom, Father Love: Gender-Based Imagery in Mahayana Buddhist Thought," in *Buddhism, Sexuality, and Gender*, ed. José Ignacio Cabezón (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Cabezón, José Ignacio. "Thinking Through Texts: Toward a Critical Buddhist Theology of Sexuality." Lecture at Naropa University, Boulder, CO, September 23, 2008.

"Stances of Faiths on LGBTQ Issues: Buddhism." Human Rights Campaign. 4/30/2018.

<sup>21</sup> Berzin, Alexander. "Buddhist Sexual Ethics: Main Issues." Study Buddhism: Project of Berzin Archives. 4/30/2018.

<sup>22</sup> Alan Sponberg, "Attitudes toward Women and the Feminine in Early Buddhism."

abstain from sex. In order to address this, later texts dictated appropriate sexual conduct for lay people, clearly laying out what constitutes sexual misconduct.<sup>23</sup>

These guidelines for sexual conduct mainly cover what body parts are appropriate to use for sexual contact. These body parts are limited to male and female sexual organs. Oral and anal sex as well as using hands are considered inappropriate.<sup>24</sup> While this was intended for heterosexual couples, it creates a religious and moral justification for discrimination based on sexual orientation by reinforcing the notion that sexual acts between people of the same sex, and consequently homosexuality, are unnatural and dirty or tainted. This is a common trend as religion, not just Buddhism, is often pointed to as an explanation for why homosexuality is wrong and paints non-heterosexual individuals as morally corrupt. This has very real consequences on the lives of queer people in creating a dilemma for many between their sexuality and their society's conceptions of morality.

Contemporary religious leaders such as the Dalai Lama and the 17<sup>th</sup> Karmapa have voiced their own opinions on same-sex relationships. In an interview with Larry King, the Dalai Lama explained that as long as the people in the relationship consent to the relationship and are happy together, it's ok. He does reiterate, however, the concept of inappropriate organs for sexual contact and reminds us that sexual acts in a same-sex relationship are considered misconduct.<sup>25</sup> This reinforces the notion that sexual acts by same-sex couples are morally wrong, though he does leave room for acceptance and reconfiguring religious ideologies for a modern context.

In a talk given at Princeton University in 2015, the Karmapa fully endorsed same-sex relationships that were based in true love. He emphasized the important of love in a relationship, explaining that if two people were in a relationship solely because of desire and personal gratification then it is not a good relationship. If two people, however, are in love then there is no problem. It does not matter if the

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<sup>23</sup> Cabezón, José Ignacio. "Thinking Through Texts: Toward a Critical Buddhist Theology of Sexuality."

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> "Dalai Lama Voices Support for Gay Marriage," NBC News.

partners are of the same gender or different genders as long as they are not together only for personal gratification.<sup>26</sup> The Karmapa also made a comment in his book about how some people may want to change their biological characteristics and he endorsed this choice.<sup>27</sup> According to this comment, there is no reason why transgender individuals should not be accepted. These comments have the power to lay a path toward LGBTQ activism among Tibetans and can possibly lead to more dialogue in a wider Tibetan context.

### **Tenzin Mariko**

In the Tibetan community, there are very few public figures for the LGBTQ community. The most famous by far is Tenzin Mariko, a transgender woman. Mariko was born male and spent her childhood as a monk in Darjeeling. In 2015 Mariko transitioned and came out to the Tibetan community as a transgender woman at the Miss Tibet pageant.<sup>28</sup> Since then, she has become a bit of a celebrity among Tibetans and dances in performances from weddings to concerts in Tibetan settlements. Whenever something about LGBTQ is mentioned, Tibetans almost always point to Mariko for reference, including older and younger generations.

Overall, the Tibetan community accepts Mariko for who she is. Mariko admits that at times people do talk about her but it less so now than when she first came out. For Mariko, however, what was most important was her family accepting her for who she is. She says that it has taken some time but her family has become more comfortable with her gender identity. Mariko attributes this acceptance to the way that she lives her life. For many people living in India, the only touchstones for the concept of transgender are so-called “she-male” prostitutes and hijra. When Mariko

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<sup>26</sup> Dorje, Ogyen Trinley (His Holiness the 17<sup>th</sup> Karmapa). “A Buddhist Perspective: The Environment, Gender, and Activism.” Lecture at Princeton University, Princeton, NJ, April 1, 2015.

<sup>27</sup> Dorje, Ogyen Trinley (His Holiness the 17<sup>th</sup> Karmapa), *The Heart is Noble: Changing the World from the Inside Out*.

<sup>28</sup> Gurung, Tsering D. “The Former Buddhist Monk Who Is Now A Tibetan Queer Icon,” July 24, 2017.

showed that a person can be transgender and successful without selling their body, her family and others opened up more.<sup>29</sup> In addition, disrobing and leaving monastic life made it easier for many Tibetans to accept Mariko's gender identity. This includes religious figures, such as Kyabje Mingyur Rinpoche and Kyabje Tsoknyi Rinpoche. When Mariko met these lamas, they told her that she was living her life in a positive way and being a good person, which was all that mattered.<sup>30</sup>

Mariko's very public coming out as well as her profession make her a kind of Tibetan celebrity. This puts her in a position of inspiration for other Tibetans to feel comfortable coming out. She says that she hopes her being out will make room for other queer Tibetans to come out as well. At the moment, however, Mariko is the most well known queer Tibetan. Her celebrity has placed her in the public eye of many Tibetan communities.

On her Instagram and even just walking around town, Mariko is always completely put together with full makeup and fashionable, feminine clothes. This begs the question of whether other, less normative expressions of gender identity would be accepted in the same way that Mariko has been accepted. She conforms to normative beauty standards for women and presents herself in a "feminine" way. It is possible that because she is presenting herself in a familiarly feminine manner, people may be more receptive to her gender identity. If another Tibetan attempted to come out in a similarly public way but with a less gender-conforming expression, they may not be accepted in the same way.

Mariko's femininity and celebrity put her in a place of scrutiny. Many comments on her Instagram posts illustrate pressure from the community to remain in the box of normative female beauty standards.

jamlatsering123 You r gaining weight

Instagram post by Tenzin Mariko and  
a user's comment



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<sup>29</sup> Tenzin Mariko, personal communication, April 16, 2018.

<sup>30</sup> Tenzin Mariko, personal communication.

On nearly all of her photos there are many comments addressing Mariko's physical appearance. This puts pressure on Mariko to further conform to normative conceptions of beauty but also limits other queer Tibetans from expressing themselves in non-normative ways. Comments about Mariko's figure and her looking sexy reinforce ideas about what women should look like and how they should present themselves. Other expressions of femininity, by trans or cis women, are then limited.

fearless789 Hotssss

tenzinchoezen Wow 🍑🍑🍑🍑

dhongkarmola U look always sexy dear

iamtenpa 🙄🙄🙄

tenzinzombe M so jealous babe. So sexy.....

gomes\_brown\_ Sexy

dear\_fentyzin Slaying @tenzin\_mariko

tsering\_eejrod Wow looking sexy

sonam9670 Wow looking sexy

abudechen 🙄😂🙄wow

vale\_maretto Beautiful mariko💕💕

apatshering25 Sexy gal .... Beautiful

saldonnamgyal Omg sexy 🍑🍑🍑🍷🍷🍷

🍑🍑

d\_unicorn\_girl\_ Woww you are amazing 🍑

tenzphuntsok I like ur figure ...

tenzindroelma U look stunning

sleepyrabbit7 cool👏👏Asian beauty😊

free\_tibet\_pls Superb Mark

kun\_zeal 🍑🍑🍑

zalinagamat Hottie!

om\_shanti\_om\_017 Looking so hot

kim3winnie Wow oh my god. So beautiful

wtsering13 ♡ B-e-a-u-ti-ful ♡

dabhu76 Stunning zema🍑❤️

juanantonioabellanjulia 😊😊😊❤️🙏

kelsangphunstok Beautiful

Comments on Tenzin Mariko's public Instagram account

Some of the comments on Mariko's Instagram illustrate harassment and sexual exploitation that she and other women experience on social media. As seen above, male commenters do not hesitate to address how her body looks and how they find her attractive. Other commenters take it a step farther and make unsolicited sexual references.

yhugal Hi ,how to pronounce "fuck me" in Tibetan?



Harassing comment on one of Mariko's posts

Mariko also does face some criticism for these expressions. One comment on a photo of Mariko in a tank top and underwear lying on a bed criticizes Mariko for sharing such a photo.



tentsewang Be a good example for Tibetan girls don't try to spoil the name and the culture of ours... Don't make fool of yourself...

Post by Mariko and public comment

This commenter's call on Mariko to set a good example for Tibetan women and not to spoil the Tibetan culture has complicated implications. This commenter fully sees Mariko as a woman and does not question her gender identity, indicating acceptance of transgender identity. While this may be true, the comment also plays into dangerous stereotypes and expectations for women. It imposes an ideal of female purity and virtuosity that women should not show off their bodies or be sexual in any kind of public way. The comment also projects the idea of women as carriers of national identity and cultural preservation. Often times, women are charged with the responsibility of passing on nationalistic identity to the next generation in their roles both as mothers and members of a cultural group.<sup>31</sup> In this

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<sup>31</sup> Butler, Alex. *Feminism, Nationalism and Exiled Tibetan Women*.

way, women and women's bodies become sites of projection for nationalistic pride and identity. Mariko is criticized for presenting herself in a certain way on her Instagram account because she is “spoiling” Tibetan culture. She is also not the only Tibetan woman to be charged with this responsibility. Recently, 2016 Miss Tibet winner Tenzin Sangnyi was criticized for not speaking fluent Tibetan.<sup>32</sup> These cases illustrate the heavy burden many women carry in preserving nationalistic and cultural ideals.

Mariko does take on the task of cultural preservation in some ways. She often wears a chupa, a common Tibetan dress for women and a symbol of cultural preservation for many Tibetans. Mariko also posts many photos of her with the Tibetan flag with hashtags such as #IAMTibet and #FreeTibet. In her role as a celebrity and a kind of queer icon, Mariko must also support the primary Tibetan activist mission: gaining an autonomous Tibet. This relates back to the need for Mariko to participate in the reproduction of nationalistic movements. As a public icon, it is expected that she utilize her platform to promote the Tibetan cause. She also wants to,<sup>33</sup> as being Tibetan is an integral part of Mariko's identity.



<sup>32</sup> Krishna, Rachael, “This Beauty Queen is being Attacked by Trolls for not being ‘Traditional’ Enough,” BuzzFeed, June 30, 2016.

<sup>33</sup> Tenzin Mariko, personal communication, April 16, 2018.

Photo of Tibetan nationalist pride on Tenzin Mariko's public Instagram page

Overall, Mariko's highly publicized life and the general acceptance of her gender identity indicate that there is space for queer Tibetans to present themselves in public life.

## **Invisibility of LGBTQ Tibetans and Issues**

Despite Tenzin Mariko's public presence, there is very little dialogue about LGBTQ people and issues amongst Tibetans in McLeod Ganj. Whenever the topic of LGBTQ was brought up, the Tibetans that I spoke with had one of two responses: they would either say that Tibetans don't have "that" or that "we just don't talk about it." Many people would also mention Mariko and say that she was the only LGBTQ Tibetan. A few people asked for clarification on what LGBTQ meant and were not familiar with that term. Overall, there is a silence in Tibetan circles around queerness and many people just shut down when the topic arises.

There are some generational differences in reactions to the topic of LGBTQ issues. One Tibetan man, Lobsang, who was in his fifties, once I had explained what LGBTQ stood for, pursed his lips, shook his head, and said "Oh no, we don't have *that* here. We don't talk about that" and then would not engage with the topic further.<sup>34</sup> Another woman in her early sixties had a similar reaction but did mention Mariko, saying that she was the only out Tibetan and that there was no one else.<sup>35</sup> Members of younger generations pointed out the silence in the community but did not shut down as quickly as older Tibetans. One young man when asked about LGBTQ Tibetans reiterated that Mariko was the only publicly out person and that Tibetans do not discuss the topic, but he did indicate that he and his friends were a bit more open to the idea of having gay or lesbian friends.<sup>36</sup>

While Tibetans generally claim that there are no LGBTQ Tibetans, Americans living in Tibetan communities see otherwise. Two American women living in

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<sup>34</sup> Lobsang, personal communication, April 14, 2018.

<sup>35</sup> Dikki, personal communication, May 1, 2018.

<sup>36</sup> Sonam, personal communication, April 22, 2018.

McLeod Ganj explained that there are many instances going out to bars when men will go home with other men.<sup>37</sup> Even though this happens and people know that it is happening, no one talks about it. The men who go home together do not consider themselves as gay and would not admit to these activities. This could be because there just is not as much of a need to label oneself in terms of sexuality, there is a fear of repercussions for not being heterosexual, or sex between men is not necessarily always a sexual orientation. Whatever the reason for this denial of such activities, the topic of queerness does not come up in dialogues in Tibetan spheres.

This is also reflected in various organizations that have been established in exile, namely the Tibetan Women's Association (TWA) and the Tibetan Youth Congress (TYC). The TWA aims to address gender inequality and rights abuses in Tibet and exile communities through publications on human rights abuses in Tibet, workshops on topics such as family planning, scholarships for women, and other programs.<sup>38</sup> Much of the content on the TWA website reflects many feminist ideals of empowering women. There is absolutely no mention, however, of other aspects of identity that effect people's experiences, such as sexual orientation. The focus of this organization is not intersectional and ignores possible rights abuses of Tibetans with non-heteronormative identities both in Tibet and in exile communities. Similarly, the Tibetan Youth Congress has aims to protest and call attention to human rights abuses against Tibetans in Tibet and to preserve Tibetan culture. There is no mention, however, of abuses in exile communities or of any other aspect of identity besides Tibetan nationality.<sup>39</sup>

These organizations exist to support their community and to provide a way for people to feel safe and cared for. This is not the case, however, for queer Tibetans. Organizations such as the TWA and TYC leave out further marginalized groups within the Tibetan exile community. In this way, the Tibetan identity is the focal point of much mainstream Tibetan activism and other aspects of identity are excluded from the conversation.

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<sup>37</sup> Morgan and Jennifer, personal communication, April 21, 2018.

<sup>38</sup> "Our Aims and Objectives," Tibetan Women's Association.

<sup>39</sup> "About TYC," Tibetan youth Congress. 4/18/2018.

The silence around LGBTQ identities and issues in Tibetan communities has a great effect on queer Tibetans. Virtually all of the queer Tibetans that I came across, mostly online, claimed to be the only or the first gay Tibetan. Tenzin Mariko, for example, says that she is the first and only transgender Tibetan.<sup>40</sup> A Tibetan man, Tenzin Phelps, posted a YouTube video of his coming out story with the title “Coming Out: First Openly Gay Tibetan”<sup>41</sup> and another wrote on his blog about his own feelings of loneliness.<sup>42</sup> The absence of dialogue around LGBTQ people and issues leaves many queer Tibetans feeling isolated and alone. In his coming out video, Tenzin Phelps talks about his own experiences feeling so isolated, alone, and ashamed of his sexuality that he attempted suicide.<sup>43</sup> The author of the blog “A Gay Tibetan” discusses how it can often feel lonely to be a Tibetan in exile and how this loneliness is amplified as a queer Tibetan.<sup>44</sup>

This silence does indicate an air of homophobia in some Tibetan communities. Ignoring the issue and pretending that queer Tibetans do not exist is in itself a form of violence against LGBTQ individuals and does not contribute to the establishment of a safe space for queer and questioning Tibetans to explore their identities. In order for activism and change to occur, conversations must be started and traditionally minded people must be made uncomfortable so that they can move forward.

## **Online Networks**

Although there is an air of silence around LGBTQ issues, there are some online sources that approach the topic and start those very conversations. In addition, many queer Tibetans in exile turn to online forums to share their experiences and offer support. The primary online media for these support networks are blogs, both personal and structured organization’s blogs.

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<sup>40</sup> Tenzin Mariko, personal communication.

<sup>41</sup> Phelps, Tenzin. “3. Coming Out: first Openly Gay Tibetan.” YouTube Video. September 3, 2016.

<sup>42</sup> “My First Blog!” *A Gay Tibetan* (blog), January 10, 2014.

<sup>43</sup> Phelps, Tenzin. “3. Coming Out: first Openly Gay Tibetan.”

<sup>44</sup> “My First Blog!” *A Gay Tibetan* (blog).

The primary organization that addresses LGBTQ issues in a Tibetan context is the Tibetan Feminist Collective (TFC). The TFC is a blog that discusses issues in Tibetan exile communities through a feminist lens.<sup>45</sup> In many posts, the TFC calls for a more intersectional approach to Tibetan activist spheres and is critical of the ways in which social justice issues are often approached by Tibetan activists. Where the TWA lacks in critical analysis of gender relations and inequalities in exile Tibetan communities, TFC succeeds in directly addressing issues of sexism and homophobia. In one post, the TFC discusses the lack of LGBTQ support organizations and acknowledges the need for some recognition of queer Tibetans.<sup>46</sup> They also discuss how there is a gap in attitudes toward LGBTQ people and issues across generations, stating that older generations tend to be more conservative in their attitudes while younger generations are often more tolerant.

The TFC's Instagram account has a bit more activity in terms of LGBTQ awareness than the blog. There are a few posts that address LGBTQ activism and reflect the intersectional nature of the rest of their social media presence.



Post on the Tibetan Feminist Collective public Instagram about queer activism

<sup>45</sup>– “About,” *Tibetan Feminist Collective* (blog).

<sup>46</sup> “Tibet’s Pride,” *Tibetan Feminist Collective* (blog), June 28, 2015.



Photo on the Tibetan Feminist Collective's public Instagram account in support of Tenzin Phelps, a Tibetan who posted a coming out video to YouTube

Another more recently founded blog called the Tibetan Equality Project primarily focuses on bringing visibility to queer Tibetans and Tibetan-specific LGBTQ issues. The founder, Tenzin, describes the purpose of the blog as a way to bring about much-needed representation and to make people feel more comfortable sharing their stories.<sup>47</sup> Submissions from queer Tibetans sharing their own stories are encouraged but there is only one correspondence posted. In addition to this correspondence, there are a few posts for LGBTQ Tibetans, such as a reaction to the Karmapa's comments on same-sex relationships.<sup>48</sup>

The personal correspondence that was posted provides another example of the silence around queerness in Tibetan exile communities. The sender talks about

<sup>47</sup> "Reaching Out to LGBTQ Tibetans," *The Tibetan Equality Project* (blog), October 30, 2017.

<sup>48</sup> "The 17<sup>th</sup> Gyalwang Karmapa Expresses Support for LGBTQ Relationships," *Tibetan Equality Project* (blog), November 1, 2017.



their own experience realizing that they were bisexual and coming out, or attempting to come out, to friends and family. They say that overall their friends were supportive though some did lash out and that they have had trouble figuring out how to tell their father. They tell of showing their father an article about gay people to see his reaction and him saying that homosexuality is a sin and their struggles were a result of bad karma.<sup>49</sup> This reaction had made it difficult for them to feel comfortable coming out to their dad. This post illustrates the experience of one Tibetan living in exile so cannot be generalized to all queer Tibetans. It does, however, create a space for queer Tibetans to feel that they can have an outlet for their own thoughts and feelings about their experiences and identity.

Other blogs written by Tibetans that discussed LGBTQ issues were more personal. One, called Angry Tibetan Girl, is a personal blog of a Tibetan woman sharing her thoughts on a broad range of social and political issues for Tibetans in exile. One of her posts discusses LGBTQ Tibetans and the intense silence around the topic. She mentions her own observations that many of the Tibetans she knows who are more tolerant of LGBTQ people and discussions are those who have had more exposure to queer people and/or conversations about LGBTQ issues are more accepting and tolerant of those people and conversations than those Tibetans who live in more isolated communities that reinforce the silence.<sup>50</sup> This relates to a comment made by Tenzin Mariko about her own experience coming out in the community. She mentioned how she had to navigate explaining her gender identity to people in a way that they could wrap their heads around because they had never had to think about such a concept before her.<sup>51</sup> Once people got used to her and saw that she was living a positive life, they were able to understand and accept the idea of a transgender person more easily.

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<sup>49</sup> "[Q&A] Thoughts from the Closet: On Being Bisexual, Coming Out to Tibetan Family Members and Reasons for Hope," *Tibetan Equality Project* (blog), December 30, 2017.

<sup>50</sup> "LGBTQ Tibetans and the Homophobia Revealed in the Suppression of the Subject," *Angry Tibetan Girl* (blog), 2014.

<sup>51</sup> Tenzin Mariko, personal communication.



Another personal blog by a Tibetan primarily consists of one gay Tibetan man's personal accounts of his experiences. He started the blog in the hopes of creating a safe space and network for queer Tibetans to not feel alone.<sup>52</sup> He shares very personal accounts of his own experiences coming out to his family<sup>53</sup> as well as his thoughts on different issues such as men holding hands without that meaning that they are gay in some countries.<sup>54</sup> He also touches on the intersection of being queer and being Tibetan. In his first post, as mentioned earlier, he talks about how being Tibetan in exile can be very lonely and that loneliness is amplified being a queer Tibetan.<sup>55</sup> Another post discusses relationships with non-Tibetan men.<sup>56</sup> He expresses feelings that even other Asian gay men cannot fully understand where he is coming from as a Tibetan. Tibetan identity is extremely important to many Tibetans, especially those living in exile, and creates a sense of being nationless. This can then affect being able to connect with people that do not have the same national, ethnic, and cultural ties. The intersection of Tibetan and LGBTQ identity is important in understanding how queer Tibetans navigate their relationships and activities.

There are also forums used outside of blogs, such as videos on YouTube. As mentioned earlier, one Tibetan young man posted a coming out video, also in the hopes of bringing some visibility to LGBTQ Tibetans. He shared his whole story, from recognizing feelings he had for other boys to emotionally struggling through his sexual orientation to coming out to his sister.<sup>57</sup> This video is extremely honest and raw and shares extremely personal experiences to a wide audience. Phelps shares his own attempted suicide and feelings of loneliness he experienced while coming to terms with his sexuality. The story of Tenzin Phelps provides an example

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<sup>52</sup> "My First Blog!" *A Gay Tibetan* (blog).

<sup>53</sup> "I came out to my brother," *A Gay Tibetan* (blog), September 1, 2015.

"I don't give a fuck," *A Gay Tibetan* (blog), October 23, 2016.

<sup>54</sup> "Whats gay in conservative cultures?" *A Gay Tibetan* (blog), May 10, 2014.

<sup>55</sup> "My First Blog!" *A Gay Tibetan* (blog).

<sup>56</sup> "Dating a Gay Tibetan," *A Gay Tibetan* (blog), March 18, 2017.

<sup>57</sup> Phelps, Tenzin. "3. Coming Out: first Openly Gay Tibetan."

of how the silence around queerness in Tibetan communities acts as a form of violence, isolating and demoralizing LGBTQ Tibetans.

What all of these forums have in common is a desire to make visible queer Tibetans. Creating a dialogue is a vital first step in the process of LGBTQ activism. Once awareness and visibility has been reached, more concrete steps and forward action can be taken to form a space where LGBTQ Tibetans feel safe and not in conflict with their various identities.

## Conclusion

Future activism for LGBTQ Tibetans, again, starts with dialogue. Currently, there are not enough people talking about this issue and challenging harmful stereotypes and judgments about LGBTQ individuals. This silence *is* violence and further marginalizes individuals who are struggling with their own identities. Silence allows for abuses to be swept under the rug. These abuses include pushing people like Tenzin Phelps to feeling so alone and isolated that they would turn to suicide. They include making people feel that they cannot rely on their families, as the author of *A Gay Tibetan* blog did not call his brother right away when he was admitted into the hospital because his boyfriend was there.<sup>58</sup>

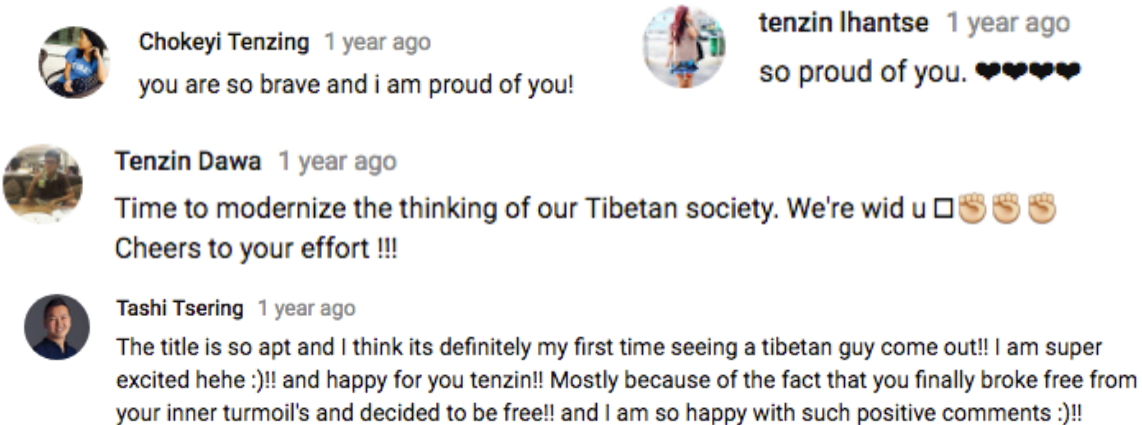
This necessary activism can only come from within Tibetan communities themselves. Allies need to step up and use their own privilege as cis-gendered and heterosexual people to create a safe space for queer Tibetans to share their stories and be comfortable coming out. Tibetans need to engage with feminist dialogues and open up to including movements that intersect with the “Free Tibet” movement. There needs to be an outlet in Tibetan communities and Tibetan activist spheres for issues that intersect with Tibetan identity, not just Tibetan identity.

Support also does exist. The existence of forums such as the Tibetan Feminist Collective and the Tibetan Equality Project illustrate the roles of allies and the desire within Tibetan communities to create an LGBTQ-friendly space. Comments on

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<sup>58</sup> “I came out to my brother,” *A Gay Tibetan* (blog)

Tenzin Mariko's Instagram posts and on Tenzin Phelps' coming out video reveal a whole network of Tibetans who support LGBTQ people and who see the need for more dialogue on the subject. Scrolling through the comments section on Tenzin Phelps' video show pages and pages of Tibetans offering their support, commending Phelps' bravery for publicly announcing his identity in a community shrouded in so much silence on the subject.



Comments on Tenzin Phelps' coming out video on YouTube

While these comments of support are encouraging for the future of LGBTQ activism and acceptance in Tibetan communities, it is so important for these conversations not to end and to move beyond just being conversations. As the Karmapa explained in his talk on activism, action is what makes true activism.<sup>59</sup> If no one actually *does* anything about an issue, then it will not be resolved. There is room in Tibetan activist spheres and dialogues for more intersectional approaches to social issues. And there is a need for this. In the end, however, as seen in these supportive comments and in the generational differences of younger Tibetans being more open to queerness, change is coming.

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<sup>59</sup> Dorje, Ogyen Trinley (His Holiness the 17<sup>th</sup> Karmapa). "A Buddhist Perspective: The Environment, Gender, and Activism."

### **Important Terms**

*Heteronormativity* – of, relating to, or based on the attitude that heterosexuality is the only normal and natural expression of sexuality (Merriam-Webster Online dictionary)

*Hijra* – a gender identity, most commonly found in India, in which an individual either has both male and female sexual organs and/or one who does identifies as neither male nor female

*Intersectionality* - the complex, cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination (such as racism, sexism, and classism) combine, overlap, or intersect especially in the experiences of marginalized individuals or groups (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary)

*LGBTQ* – stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer

*Queer* – overarching term that includes non-heterosexual sexual orientations and non-binary gender expressions/identities

*Transgender* – of, relating to, or being a person whose gender identity differs from the sex the person had or was identified as having at birth; *especially* : of, relating to, or being a person whose gender identity is opposite the sex the person had or was identified as having at birth (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary)

## **Suggestions for Future Research**

It is important for future research to try and get in contact with more queer-identified Tibetans. I reached out to the authors of multiple blogs to interview them and to provide contact information of other queer Tibetans that would be comfortable speaking about their experiences but I got no responses. Because there is such an intense silence around the issue, it is very difficult to find individuals who either identify as LGBTQ or who sleep with people of the same gender who are willing to talk about this issue. Of course, having more time to build strong relationships with people and getting them to talk more in depth about their social circles and experiences is always helpful.

Future research should also look into the views of current monastics on this issue. There were a lot of sources on the various comments made by figures such as the Dalai Lama and the Karmapa but it would be helpful to know what the average monk or nun has to say on the topic of same-sex relationships.

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### Photos:

Tibetan Pride Flag: Instagram post by the Tibetan Feminist Collective from June 26,



2016

Comment #1: Comment on Tenzin Mariko Instagram post from April 3, 2018

Mariko Photo #1: Instagram Post from April 3, 2018

Comment #2: Comment on Tenzin Mariko Instagram post from April 3, 2018

Comment #3: Comment on Tenzin Mariko Instagram post from November 25, 2017

Comment #4: Comment on Tenzin Mariko Instagram post from September 14, 2017

Comment #5: Comment on Tenzin Mariko Instagram post from July 20, 2017

Mariko Photo #2: Instagram Post from March 12, 2017

Comment #6: Comment on Tenzin Mariko Instagram post from March 12, 2017

Mariko Photo #3: Instagram post from September 18, 2017

Queer Activism Photo: Instagram post by the Tibetan Feminist Collective from  
October 26, 2016

Tenzin Phelps Photo: Instagram post by the Tibetan Feminist Collective from  
September 5, 2016

Comments #7-10: Comments on Tenzin Phelps' Coming Out YouTube video from  
September 3, 2016



Me interviewing Tommy, a gay Indian man, on the experiences and situation for LGBTQ Indians