

From state feminism to individual projects: some theoretical and empirical reflections on female emancipation in Tibet

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Nicola Schneider

11th of July 2019, IATS, Paris (INALCO)

"From state feminism to individual projects: some theoretical and empirical reflections on female emancipation in Tibet"

My paper will first trace the advent of state feminism in Tibet during the early 1950s with the foundation of the 'Tibetan Patriotic Women's Association' (*Bod ljongs rgyal gces bud med tshogs pa*), closely linked to the introduction of the Chinese communist regime with its mass organizations. The strong mobilization of Tibetan women during the uprising in 1959 in Tibet led to a split among its members and then to a temporary interruption of state feminism; only many years later, state feminism has been reactivated by two different movements: the 'Tibetan Women's Federation' in Tibet (*Bod kyi bud med mnyam 'brel lhan tshogs*) and the 'Tibetan Women's Association' (*Bod kyi bud med tshogs pa*) in exile, both with their respective political agendas.

I will then present several examples from Tibet and exile of more individually led projects and actions in favor of women and gender equality since the last twenty years such as the 'Tibetan Nun's Project' (*Bod kyi btsun ma'i las 'char*), which successfully introduced the *geshema* degree (*dge bshes ma*) for nuns and female WeChat groups seeking to inform themselves about and distribute feminist ideas. Finally, my paper will ask if state feminism was, and somehow is always, a hindrance to the development of collectively led feminist movements and political empowerment in Tibetan communities.

Introduction

First of all, I would like to welcome all the participants and listeners to our panel "What is 'feminism' about in Tibet?. We are pleased about the interest you have shown in this subject and also a bit sad for those who have finally not been able to come.

Let me first say some words on the title and subject we have chosen, which is voluntarily formulated as an interrogation rather as an affirmation. By doing so, we wanted to invite researchers on Tibet to think about a rather disputed term or concept, which has been applied by some Western researchers, especially those interested in Buddhism and gender, but with which Tibetan women generally speaking do not seem to identify very much. Of course, there are some exceptions, like for instance the female artist Monsal Pekar on which I have presented a paper at the last IATS and which will soon come out on the AsianArt.com website. She is one of the rare Tibetan women who considers herself to be a feminist and openly says that she is "fighting for women's rights" (to quote her own words). Another one is no other than the Dalai Lama, who said at several occasions in interviews that he considers himself to be a feminist and furthermore that he might come back in the body of a woman.

But the question remains open: are we talking here about exceptions that confirm somehow a rule (that feminism does *not* exist in Tibet)? Or can we detect some changes going on concerning the notion of feminism and its application in Tibetan society? As for me, I came to the conclusion that the latter is the case: diapo.

Let me explain how I came first to this conclusion or to the question why it is necessary to do research about feminism in Tibet. For my PhD and some follow up research, I studied Tibetan nuns, a population, which can be considered as being rather conservative. Like you might all know, nuns were (and always are in some regards) relegated to the second rank in the monastic community: they are not represented in the ecclesiastic hierarchy; they do not have the same monastic status (that is they cannot receive full ordination); they do not have the same economic support and their education was, until recently, only basic. However, in the recent three decades, the situation for nuns has changed dramatically: thanks to the efforts of many people from different backgrounds, nuns have now access to the highest Buddhist education and can become *geshe* (or *geshema*) or *khenpo* (or *khenmo*) – even though this is of

course not the case everywhere. They are also on the way to obtain full ordination – a subject to which Darcie will come back later.
As for their access to the *geshema*-degree, which I have studied in the long run and in detail, they had to undergo a long journey with multiple barriers. To make it short here, they had to negotiate hard and wait for each small step further. In anthropological words, they had to "bargain with patriarchy", a notion, which I borrow from Deniz Kandiyoti, Bina Agarwal and others[1]. The "bargain" approach wants to throw light on how gender asymmetries are constructed and contested in the household and outside, and the links between both. Tibetan nuns also had to contest gender asymmetries and they did so in a silent way that is instead of claiming gender equality with loud voices, they were *doing* (learning how to debate and so forth) and proving thus that they are capable to do so. In this way, they succeeded to draw attention and finally they were allowed to pass their examination to become *geshema*. Diapo
Not only that, by the time they were ready for the first final examination, in May 2016, the term *geshema*, a feminized form of the word *geshe* that was not in use in the past, was already introduced into Tibetan vocabulary, showing its acceptance by the society in large.
But is contesting or challenging gender roles synonymous with being a feminist? I myself don't think so. And I have not met any Tibetan nun telling me openly that she considers herself to be a feminist – even though I have met nuns from Indian Himalayas who told me that they consider themselves to be feminists! Be that like it is.
Let us have a short look on what the definition of 'feminism' in the West is: diapo. Without going further into detail (and polemics or differences even in Western cultures), we have the following short definitions in English *Read here the ppt.*
With these few and short definitions, we can already see that there is no clear cut meaning behind the word/concept of feminism in our own cultural areas. And if many people can identify with the first definition mentioned here, this is probably not the case with the last one, which also presumes some kind of active political action from the person who considers herself or himself to be a feminist. As for Tibetan women I have questioned and who rarely say that they consider themselves to be a feminist, once I mentioned the first definition given here, they agreed with it.
Let us now turn to some Tibetan translations of the term "feminism" (diapo) We have here quite diverging notions which can translate the Western term "feminism", reaching from "gender equality" to "women's rights" and "women's power". In my view, this is one of the reasons why Tibetans have problems to identify with it. Not only can words like "right" or "power" be interpreted in very different ways, but it is also difficult to add an agentive suffix in order to translate the word "feminist". We are in a situation of "lost in translation" and it also reminds us of not putting our ideas and concepts on other cultures, taking them as granted. Instead we need to look for what really happens in other cultures. At the same time, we have to keep in mind that ideas also circulate and even more so today in a more and more globalized world.
Let us now turn to Tibetan notions of gender and gender inequality. These tend to turn around the gender distinction of *pho mchog* and *mo dman* (diapo) – the excellent or superior male and the inferior female,… and the highly derogatory derived term *skyes dman* (diapo) – inferior birth, which is used (among other words) to refer to "woman". According to Tibetan scholars[2]

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[1] Kandiyoti, Deniz, « Bargaining with Patriarchy », *Gender and Society*, 2 (3), September, 1988, p. 274-290. Bina Agarwal, « 'Bargaining' » and gender relations : within and beyond the household », *Feminist Economics*, 3 (1), 1997, p. 1-51.
2 Tshe ring chos mtsho, 1995, « Bod rigs bud med skor gyi zhib 'jug rgya mtsho'i chu thigs / Preliminary Research on Women in Tibetan Society », in *G.yu mtsho / Journal of Tibetan Women's Studies*, vol. 3, n° 1, p. 3-13 & Tashi Tsering Josayma, « Bod kyi rig gzhung nang bud med kyi nus pa dang bzhad yams skor kha bsngogs tsam byas pa », *The Tibet Journal*, vol. 42 (1), 2017, pp. 111-141.

(discussed by Tsering Chötso and recently by Tashi Tsering Josayama), this distinction came most probably with the arrival of Buddhist religion and is linked to the ideology of female pollution/defilement (*grib*), current in Indian and Chinese society in ancient time. According to findings, the Tibetan terminology was more equal before that with neutral words like *pho* / *mo*; *skyes pa* / *skyes ma* and so forth being in use to refer to men and women.
Even though we can always find the term *skyes dman* in use today, diapo the honorific term in Tibetan for woman, *bud med*[3], has replaced it in Tibet as well as in exile, at least in official language.
Let us now come to the question: when and how did feminism reach Tibet?
According to my tracing it was first introduced by the communist party, in 1952, when Lhasa saw the foundation of its branch of the All-China Women's Federation: the Tibetan Patriotic Women's Association (*Bod ljongs rgyal gces bud med tshogs pa*) (diapo). It is one of the two mass organizations founded by the Chinese Communist Party (the other being the Patriotic Youth Association) and considered to be one of the United Front organizations. The initial idea came from some wives of Chinese Generals who brought it to the wives of Tibetan ministers during a dinner party (among them Rinchen Dolma Taring, Ngapö Tseten Dölkar and Thangmé Könchog Palmo, to name just a few). Once the Dalai Lama had given his consent, the Tibetan ladies were ready to found the association.
Right from the beginning, Chinese communists considered Women's liberation (*funü jiefang*) to be a priority goal for "New China". Thus general emancipation was to be achieved with women's large-scale involvement in public production.[4] In order to realize this aim, the All-China Women's Federation (*Quanguo funü lianhehui*[5]) was entrusted with mobilizing women to take public roles in politics, urban and village government, production, education, and campaigns for marriage.[6] The Lhasa PWA being a branch of the Federation followed the same model. In the years following the foundation of the PWA in Lhasa, meetings and lectures were arranged regularly with the purpose to study about attacks from imperialists, to learn about mother and children's healthcare, to praise the fatherland. The association also aimed to teach illiterate women how to read and to write and how to take responsibility in the society. Some of the association's activities were more concrete: like digging and planting trees, helping in the fields or carrying baskets. It seems that many members of the women's association appreciated the so-called Chinese way. I quote Mrs Surkhang: "They would say that today we women have a lot to be appreciative about. The Communist Party has given women equality, and it is just great that we can meet in an office. . . . They wanted women to be respected and have equal rights."[7] "They said that in the old days we Tibetan women were hopeless. Even regarding school, it was felt women didn't need education. They were just kept at home. So today women are on par with the men and can be educated."[8]
Being a member of the women's association had also some advantages, the most important being travelling around. Thus many of the Tibetan women got for the first time the occasion to visit Beijing and other places in China, and even to go abroad (Congress of the People for Peace" in Vienna, 1952 – Tsering Dolma).
But when on March 10, 1959, the Tibetan Uprising took place, a group of Tibetan women organized one day later a meeting to dissolve the PWA and founded a new association: the

[3] Already in use to indicate religious women and women of high rank in the past, see Chokyi Dronma, Diemberger, p. 13.
[4] Pong, 2009: 84 et 89.
[5] The Federation was closed down during the first part of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1969).
[6] For example, a mayor change in Chinese marriage law took place in 1953 (see Croll).
[7] Mrs Surkhang interview.
[8] Goldstein, 2009: 406; Mrs Surkhang interview.

Tibetan Women's Association. Joint by ordinary women, as well as by many nuns, they organized three separated demonstrations between 12th and 18th of March diapo.
Because of the historical developments, both associations had to be stopped, but what can be seen is that the PWA introduced a new concept: organized political activity by women. This concept was mostly state driven, that is relying on communist ideology.
The TPWA was newly founded and renamed in June 1960 under the auspices of the Women's Federation of China and has several branches in Tibetan inhabited areas. In exile, the revival of the Tibetan Women's Association took more time and was re-launched in 1984 after the advice of the DL. The latter is considered to be an NGO, but most of its agenda is closely linked to the one of the Central Tibetan administration and, until recently, was doing little with regard to particular gender issues (like sexual harassment, awareness rising on gender inequality etc.). Thus, like the first one, it might be seen as a form of state feminism, albeit with a different political ideology.
Both do not seem to reach out to women in a very efficient way: in exile, the TWA had for long time no particular gender issues – even though the TWA counts as one of the two largest NGOs; in Tibet also, several women told me that the Women's Federation does not sufficiently reach out to the community (it seems that it is difficult to know what they exactly do in Jyekundo for example). However, both count also very devoted members who do or have done their best to improve the condition of women.

Individual Projects

Meanwhile, in the last two decades, a couple of Tibetan women have come out to speak in favor of feminism or have started to run their own projects directed towards women in particular. Among the former, we find mostly intellectuals and artists (diapo) like the artist Monsal Pekar I mentioned earlier, the writer and blogger Jamyang Kyi or the female rapper Tenzin Seldon. All have spoken for more gender equality and have criticized customs and habits, which are depreciative for women.
Several NGOs have been created and run by women for women, like Machik, Shem or Phende (most having been forced to shut down). They are mostly involved in women's education and women's health issues but have helped also in other areas like building of water pipelines.
New technologies and social media are creatively used by Tibetan women to share and discuss ideas on gender and female emancipation, while at the same time exchanging books, articles and other information material. Thus we find WeChat groups like "Bod pa'i bud med" or "Great Women" with more than a hundred members. The latter has also organized several gatherings at Charu, a co-working space in Chengdu, around particular topics like for ex. "Defining the key terminologies (of feminism)" (what is feminism? the difference with men-hating; what needs to be done to achieve equal participation?) or "Looks aren't everything" (a book by Cameron Russell). The sessions run like this: several women volunteer to present short films with interviews of famous women or books and share their reflections with the public.
In exile, similar initiatives have been taken, like the launching of the blog/website "Tibetan feminist collective" diapo by three Tibetan women, two from the US and one from India, who form the editorial board. Authors can submit their ideas through articles, which then can be discussed by other people. Articles reach from critical discussions of Western feminist ideologies to more Tibetan orientated problems like the cancellation of the election of Mrs. Dardon Sharling as a Kalon because of age limit (she had not passed her 35th birthday at the moment of election; see "Exile Tibet: Where Is the Representation for Women?").
One of the founders is a young Tibetan lady, Kaysang, who had a formal education in gender studies. Very engaged in informal discussion groups on gender issues and empowerment, she

is also one of the rare women who considers herself to be a feminist. In 2017, she participated as a staff member in the revision of the Women's Empowerment Policy in Eight Points formulated by the Women's Empowerment Desk and adopted at the first ever CTA-organized Tibetan Women's Empowerment Conference in Dharamsala in February 2017.

The Women's Empowerment Desk is a project-funded office founded in 2008 by the Central Tibetan Administration. It (I cite):

> … aims to ensure gender perspectives are incorporated in the design, implementation and monitoring of all of CTA's program activities. It works to ensure women and men participate in and benefit equally and strengthen CTA capacity to address key issues facing Tibetan woman and girls. A major responsibility of WED is to ensure that the Tibetan Women's Empowerment Policy is implemented to the fullest extent possible. (Women Status Report 2018)

Right after the conference, the WED organized with the help of some Indian experts a large-scale study on the status of Tibetan women. Some of the results are: there is a need for awareness of gender equality issues; there is need of programs that inform women about different legislations that protect them from sexual harassment; economic opportunities have to be strengthened; women are always underrepresented in the political sphere, in settlements like in the Parliament; there is lack of awareness of Sexual and Gender-based violence (mostly considered to be domestic violence by respondents) – hesitancy to report cases to Higher authorities (be they Indian or Tibetan); on one side women claim they are equal – on the other side society does not think so.

On the one hand, the Women's Empowerment Desk can also be considered as a kind of state feminism (being linked closely to the administration), but on the other hand it is a donor dependent project. It stands in concurrence/contrast to the TWA: which is registered as a NGO; but whereas the latter is well known in the community, the former is near to unknown (over 90% of the study sample did not know of its existence).

Most of the projects I have presented so far are public or publically available; let me finish with 2 less public ones. The first is initiated by an official, serving in a department for poverty alleviation among nomads. In the frame of her work, she has noticed that uneducated single women with children face special hardships. And in order to help them, she has decided to teach them Chinese language (through WeChat) in her free time. She also organizes meetings once a while where she explains to the female leaders of different nomadic communities how to cope best with future in her view. She underlines in particular the necessity to educate the children in order to enable them to find better jobs in town.

The next and last example is a female entrepreneur, who started her career as a simple tailor and who has build up her own factory with 20 fixed employees over the years. Being from a nomadic family and having learnt tailoring at the age of 7 from her mother, she has slowly expanded her know how and creates her own designs, a mix between traditional Tibetan *chuba* and modern designs. Having started with a small shop in town, she has now settled her factory at the outskirts. Most of her employees are young women from nomadic communities, which she recruits on voluntary basis and to whom she teaches tailoring. If they like the job and learn quickly, she employs them after a period of 6 weeks, thus helping these women to become professionals and settle in town. Her artistic work, but also her social enterprise have brought her a lot of recognition and prizes, among other from the bureau of the Women's federation.

In conclusion:

To conclude, I would like to come back to the question: can we detect some changes going on concerning the notion of feminism and its application in Tibetan society? I think we can and I further think that we can start to discern some features of feminism made by Tibetans. Even

though most Tibetan women are always shy to express their feelings (I would say mostly because of the bad reputation feminism has as causing social disorder, being anti-Buddhist, fighting between sexes, too Westernized…) they see the need to empower women and are willing to help other women to do so. They are not feminist activists, like we can find in Western countries or in Present-day China, but they thrive towards more gender equality and thus meet the definition of feminism mentioned. For instance they meet always with lack of awareness (like the WED remarks in its report on Woman status), but this might be only a question of time and generation.

From state feminism to individual projects: some theoretical and empirical reflections on female emancipation in Tibet

Nicola Schneider

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IATS, 11th of July 2019

What is ‘feminism’ in Tibet about?

བོད་ནང་གི་གུང་མེད་ཀྱི་ཁེ་དབང་རིང་ལུགས་ནི་གང་གི་རྐོར་ཡིན་ནམ།





The first 20 *geshemas* with His Holiness the Dalai Lama during the graduation ceremony in Drepung Monastery, South India (December 2016)

Feminism
some English definitions

- Lexico online: The advocacy of women's rights on the ground of the equality of the sexes.
- Oxford English: The belief and aim that women should have the same rights and opportunities as men; the struggle to achieve this aim.
- Merriam Webster (American):
  - the theory of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes
  - organized activity on behalf of women's rights and interests

Feminism

some possible Tibetan translations

- ཕོ་མོ་འདྲ་མཉམ་ - equality of the sexes
- ཕོ་མོ་འདྲ་མཉམ་རིང་ལུགས་ (Goldstein)
- བུད་མེད་ཀྱི་དབང་ཆ་ - women’s rights/power
- བུད་མེད་ཕོབ་ཐང་ - women’s rights/ treatment/privilege
- བུད་མེད་ཀྱི་ནུས་སྟོབས་ - women’s capacity/ ability/ power
- བུད་མེད་ཀྱི་ཁེ་དབང་རིང་ལུགས་ (women’s rights; here in the title, thanks to Nyima Dorje!)
- ཕོ་མོའི་རྟེན་ལ་དབྱེ་འབྱེད་ - gender issue (Tashi Tsering Josayma)

Gender inequality: the Tibetan approach

- ཕོ་མཆོག་ ---- མོ་དམན་
- the excellent / superior male -- the inferior female

Gender inequality: the Tibetan approach

- ཕོ་མཆོག་ ---- མོ་དམན་
  - སྐྱེས་དམན་ woman

Gender inequality: the Tibetan approach

- ཕོ་མཆོག་ ---- མོ་དམན་
  - སྐྱེས་དམན་ woman
- Now mostly བུད་མེད་

State feminism

- བོད་ལྷོངས་རྒྱལ་གཅེས་བུད་མེད་ཚོགས་པ་
- Tibetan Patriotic Women’s Association founded in Lhasa in 1952



Photo taken during the foundation of the Tibetan Patriotic Women's Association in Lhasa (May 1952?)

© From Phuntshok Taklha*, Mi tshe'i byung ba brjod pa*, vol. 2, 1995.

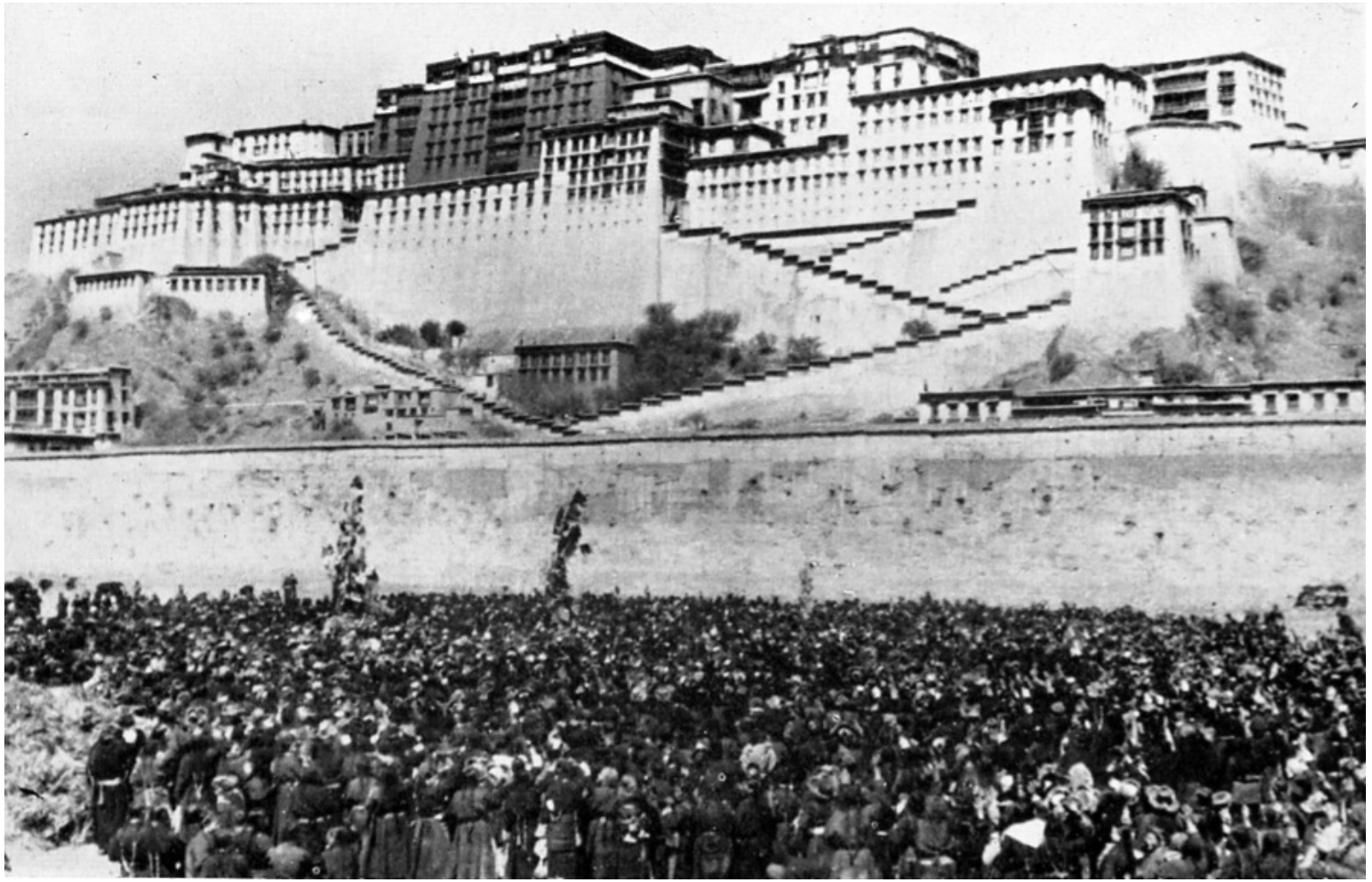


Photo probably taken by Jigme Taring

Outspoken feminists



ཟ་མ་མོའི་སྐྱེད་སྤྱག་གངས་མ་ཆར།

རྩོམ་པའི་ཡིག་ཚགས།

འདོགས་ཆ་དང་བྱད་མེད་ཀྱི་འབྲེལ་བ།

[སྤྱིན་དྲུག] [2014-1-2]

ར་ཇ་འཇམ་དབྱངས་སྐྱིད།



The First Tibetan female rap-artist Tenzin Seldon on rapping her way through a minefield of self-induced complex to never celebrate mediocrity

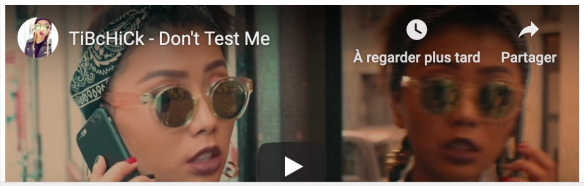
- January 08, 2018 19:04

By Tenzin Dharpo

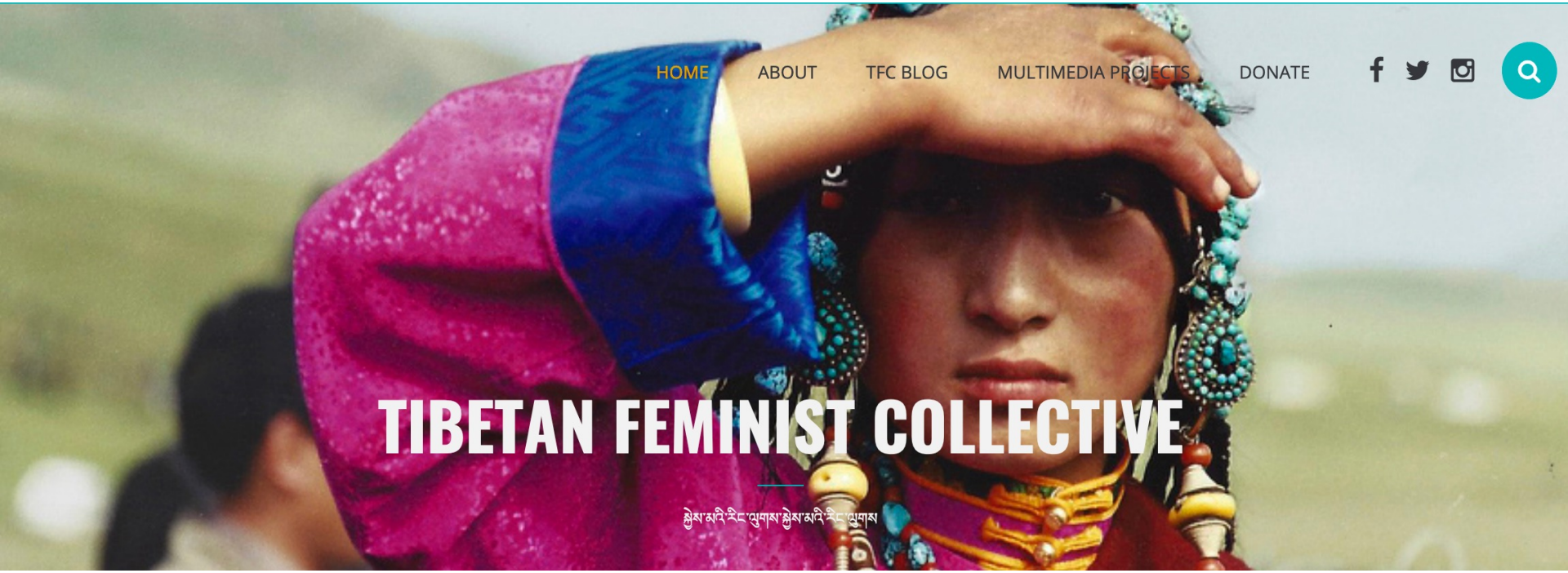


The exile Tibetan music scene at first glance is a reluctant cocktail of generic pop culture replicas, propelled by new artistes who are introduced every Kalachakras and Losars only to vanish shortly afterwards, while so-called seasoned musicians earn their dues performing live shows at any respectable gathering in the Tibetan diaspora whether it is in Jackson Heights, New York or the remote Menchuka in Arunachal Pradesh, tucked safely in the far corner of Northeast India. It is not a farfetched observation to say that while Tibetan music in exile is not devoid of talent, it has no machinery or market to sustain talent in the long run.

Social network and youtube have given a whole new platform for Tibetan artists to showcase their talents and become Tibetan celebrities. From Yeshi Khando to Sonam Topden, from Kunsel to Tenzin Dolma, there is already a mini showbiz industry thriving right under our nose.



Discussing feminist ideas…



Thank you!



The Last Supper: A Tibetan Feminist interpretation of Da Vinci's work