

Environmental Metamorphosis: An Analysis of the Causes of the Differences between the Female Views of Tibetan Buddhism and Chinese Buddhism

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Abstract: By analyzing the formation of Buddhist view of women in ancient India and the development of Buddhism after it was introduced into different regions of China, the author explores the differences between Tibetan Buddhism and Chinese Buddhist view of women and the reasons for their formation. In Tibetan Buddhism, women's status is higher, and men and women are relatively equal; the status of women in Han Buddhism is relatively low. The view of women in Han Buddhism is influenced by Confucianism. Although there is the concept of equality between men and women, it still shows that men are superior to women in the practice of life. Tibetan Buddhism shows a unique view of women with Tibetan characteristics. On the whole, the view can be divided into women's liberation tendency at the conceptual level and masculinity at the practical level.

Keywords: Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism, Feminism.

1. Introduction

The Buddhist perspective on femininity denotes the stances and attitudes that Buddhism, as a faith system, upholds regarding matters concerning women. Within society, women fulfill crucial roles and have contributions to societal advancement and evolution that are on par with those of their male counterparts. Despite this, most women have been subject to disparities, subjugation, and trivialization due to a variety of physiological and psychological reasons. The Buddhist principle of "universal equality" has not been exempt from these prejudices. With Buddhism's incursion into China, it branched into three primary schools: Chinese Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism, and Theravada Buddhism. Each branch, while sharing a common origin, exhibits significant variances in its perception of women, influenced by factors such as the era of their propagation, sects, and the societal norms of their regions of proliferation. In general, the standing of women is esteemed highest within Tibetan Buddhism, where gender parity is more prevalent, followed by Chinese Buddhism. Theravada Buddhism, which was introduced during the Theravada era, has incorporated elements of misogyny and notions of female degradation into its doctrine, thus positioning women at the lowest rung within its hierarchy.

This paper aims to conduct a comparative analysis of the divergences between the views on femininity held by Tibetan and Chinese Buddhism, drawing insights from the processes of Buddhism's indigenization, modernization, and sinicization.

2. "Inquiries into the Origins": Tracing the Evolution of Buddhist Perspectives on Women

The resplendent ancient Indian civilization was the cradle of early Buddhism. Brahmanism, then the predominant religion of ancient Indian societal framework, was fervently adopted by the era's sovereigns. Within its doctrine, stark biases and belittlements against women were deeply

entrenched in the societal norms of ancient India. The malevolence towards women of that age is glaringly evident in the Brahmanical texts. The Rigveda portrays women as inherently inadequate and transient in their relationships, while the Atharvaveda correlates femininity with maladies and calamities. The Manusmriti decrees that, "In her youth, a woman must be subject to her father; as a young adult, to her husband; upon the demise of her spouse, to her son; if childless, to the kin of her husband; in the absence of such kin, to the sovereign. A woman is never to be self-governing at whim." [1] Under the shackles of ancient Indian society, women were deprived of their liberty, reduced to mere objects designed to amplify the prowess and stature of men.

Primitive Buddhism, the fountainhead of all Buddhist lineages, shaped and confined the furtherance of Buddhist philosophy, ethos, and monastic code. The perspective on women in proto-Buddhism, as a foundational element for both Tibetan and Han Buddhist views on femininity, represents an indispensable aspect of the religion's history.

2.1. Clarifying the Source - The Femicentric Perspective in Early Buddhism

Weber asserted that "the mark of religions of the non-privileged classes is a tendency towards the equality of women." [2] Buddhism, as a non-mainstream religion, naturally gravitated toward women, encapsulating a simple concept of gender equality within its teachings. Nonetheless, within the societal structure of the time, Siddhartha Gautama was compelled to make concessions to the prevailing societal attitudes of ancient India. In this regard, Buddhism exhibited its remarkable versatility—women were permitted to renounce worldly life, but they had to be adjunct to male practitioners.

The original Buddhist perspective on women can be characterized by two components: 1. The Assertion of the Dharma's Five Hundred Year Decrease; 2. The establishment of the Eight Garudhammas.

2.1.1. The Assertion of the Dharma's Five Hundred Year Decrease

Female lay followers (Upāsikās) in early Buddhism did not encounter significant obstructions on their spiritual pathway.

However, the journey to becoming bhikkhunis (female monastics) was fraught with difficulties. Gautama Buddha's maternal aunt, Mahapajapati Gotami, petitioned him to formally ordain as a monk within Buddhism, yet he refused them. As recorded in Madhyamāgama, "... At that time, deeply devoted Gotami approached the Buddha, paid her respects, and standing aside, respectfully addressed the Buddha, 'I have heard that through diligent practice, women can attain the four stages of sainthood, and I wish to accept and abide by the Buddha's laws. With faith in household life, I aspire to leave it for the path.' The Buddha replied, 'Hold, Gotami! I am not pleased by women entering my legal framework. Those who don the robes shall fully dedicate their lives to pure and profound ascetic practice.' Gotami made her plea again, and thusly thrice, but the Buddha would not acquiesce." [3] Only after the persistent entreaties of Ananda did Gautama reluctantly consent to female ordination, and crafted the Eight Garudhammas specifically for female practitioners: "Now, as women are admitted into my religious discipline, they must ensure that the purity of the ascetic practices is not long-standing... If a woman wishes to become a mendicant, there are eight rules of respect that she must not breach... She may enter my religious precepts." [4] After the passing of Buddha, Ananda faced censure from other bhikkhus for aiding women in their ordination, purportedly leading to the non-longevity of the Dharma.

2.1.2. The Establishment of the Eight Garudhammas

The Eight Garudhammas are eight specific precepts devised by Gautama for the bhikkhuni community: 1) A bhikkhuni of a hundred years must greet a newly ordained bhikkhu; 2) Bhikkhunis must not slander bhikkhus; 3) Bhikkhunis may not accuse bhikkhus of wrongdoing; 4) Bhikkhunis, upon full precept ordination, must receive the precepts within the bhikkhu sangha, while bhikkhus do not have to do so within the bhikkhuni sangha; 5) Bhikkhunis with offenses must confess within the bhikkhu sangha, whereas bhikkhus do not have to do so within the bhikkhuni sangha; 6) Bhikkhunis are to receive education and admonitions from bhikkhus bi-monthly; 7) Bhikkhunis must not live in the same location as bhikkhus, nor too distant from them; 8) Upon completion of the rains retreat, bhikkhunis must request bhikkhus to witness and adjudicate any seen, heard, or suspected offenses. This framework rendered the bhikkhuni sangha incapable of independent existence, always leaning on the bhikkhu sangha for support.

The assertion of the Dharma's five hundred year decrease, together with the structure of the Eight Garudhammas, distinctly mandated the subservience of the bhikkhuni sangha to the bhikkhu sangha, necessitating female practitioners to be reliant on male practitioners within the community. Yet, we should not assess the ancient Buddhist perception of women separate from the context of the times. To allow Buddhism to establish footing in an ancient Indian society where the status of women was extremely low, Gautama Buddha had to accommodate the societal norms of ancient India. A forceful imposition of gender equality would have backfired. In addition, while Gautama was alive, he did not insist on blind compliance to the Eight Garudhammas. As noted in the Copper Plate Vinaya, "A group of six bhikkhus intentionally threw mud at the bhikkhunis. Learning of this, Buddha instructed that henceforth, bhikkhunis need not show reverence to these six bhikkhus." [5].

Consequently, the original Buddhist view of women can be observed as a "subtle combination of overt disparagement and

covert praise."

2.2. One Flower with Two Leaves - The Female Perspective in Han Chinese Buddhism

In the early stages of Han Chinese Buddhism, there was limited discussion on the female perspective within the religion, which was associated with the absence of bhikṣuṇīs (female monks) during this period. Although some scriptures introduced in the early days contained expressions related to women, such as the statement in the Mahāparinirvāna Sūtra that "all women are the abode of evil" [6], and the story of the dragon girl transforming into a man and becoming a Buddha in the Lotus Sūtra, Han Chinese Buddhism initially chose to avoid discussing issues concerning women. However, as bhikṣuṇī monasteries began to take shape in the Wei, Jin, Southern, and Northern Dynasties, the female perspective in Han Chinese Buddhism gradually matured, forming a Buddhist female perspective with unique Han Chinese characteristics.

The female perspective in Han Chinese Buddhism can be broadly divided into two parts: 1) the tendency towards female liberation at the conceptual and theoretical level; 2) male superiority in practical cultivation.

2.2.1. Equality at the Ultimate Liberation Level

Han Chinese Buddhism inherits the Mahayana Buddhist concept of "equality of all sentient beings." However, in the scriptures of Han Chinese Buddhism, it is easy to find depreciation of women. For instance, in the Fa Yuan Zhu Lin (Treasure Grove of Buddhist Doctrine), the vision of the Pure Land of the Buddha is described as "without women" "...making our country devoid of women, and any woman who wishes to be reborn in our country will become a man" [7]. In the "Ten Essentials of Pure Land," women are described as "being bewildered by feminine beauty and licentious sounds, and invaded by evil karma and pollution, having no present Buddha to rely on" [8]. It seems that women are not included within the scope of the "equal sentient beings."

In fact, Han Chinese Buddhism has not excluded women from the category of "sentient beings." It does not define gender based on biological characteristics, but rather on virtue: those with noble qualities such as purity, courage, and few desires are considered male; while those with tainted qualities such as jealousy, desire, and obstinacy are considered female. Even if a person has a female form, they can still be called a great man if they possess no tainted qualities. The Mahayana Buddhist definition of women is closer to Plato's description: "Men who cannot control themselves in life, are timid and cowardly, and lack a sense of justice, degenerate into women." [9]. Furthermore, in the Wang Sheng Ji (Collection of Rebirth Stories), Zhu Hong summarized the sentient beings who were reborn in the Pure Land throughout the dynasties, including women, animals, and evil people. This shows that the concept of equality in Han Chinese Buddhism is not simply a superficial equality between men and women, but rather an ultimate equality where all sentient beings, regardless of whether they are animals, evil people, or women, can be reborn in the Pure Land, without distinction of rank or status.

In summary, the equality concept inherited by Han Chinese Buddhism provides a sense of comfort for women in Han China at the psychological level and shows them a path to liberation.

2.2.2. Male Supremacy in Practice

However, Han Chinese Buddhism still perpetuates the male supremacy in practice that originated from primitive Buddhism and Hinayana Buddhism.

Monks in Han China were born and raised in a society dominated by Confucianism, where the deeply ingrained idea of male superiority and female inferiority had already taken root in their minds. Although the Wang Sheng Ji (Collection of Rebirth Stories) records some cases of women being reborn in the Pure Land, Zhu Hong's evaluation of the Buddha's Pure Land states, "In the Land of Ultimate Bliss, there are truly no women. If a woman is born there, she will possess the appearance of a great man... In the pure and clean realm, it is impossible to find even a male appearance, how much less a female one?"[10] This preconceived belief further reinforces the notion of male supremacy. In the Pure Land, male appearances are difficult to find, so how could there be female appearances? If the establishment of the Eight Precepts by Siddhartha Gautama in primitive Buddhism was a concession to the social mores of ancient India, then the complete acceptance of these precepts in Han Chinese Buddhism can only be seen as a submission to the ingrained Confucian idea of "male superiority and female inferiority."

In actual practice, nuns in Han Chinese Buddhism are treated similarly to bhikṣuṇīs in primitive Buddhism, still adhering to the Eight Precepts and a vast number of monastic rules that far exceed those for monks. Siddhartha Gautama's allowance of women to become nuns in primitive Buddhism symbolized a difficult first step towards a more enlightened and equal Buddhist view of women in practice. However, six centuries later, due to social norms and other reasons, the female perspective in Han Chinese Buddhism still clung to the female view of primitive Buddhism and Hinayana Buddhism.

The liberation of female practitioners in Han Chinese Buddhism exists only in conceptual and theoretical ideals, like a reflection in a mirror or a moon in the water. In reality, they remain shackled in their practice.

2.3. Twin Blossoms Blooming Together - The Feminine Perspective in Tibetan Buddhism

The formation of the Buddhist perspective on women is not solely influenced by the inheritance and evolution of Buddhism itself. It is also constrained by multiple factors such as the social structure, cultural background, and political system of the era. As Tibetan Buddhism and Han Chinese Buddhism were introduced into their respective regions at different time nodes and social backgrounds, there exist certain differences in their perspectives on women.

The feminine perspective in Tibetan Buddhism can generally be embodied in two aspects: 1) the egalitarianism of men and women on the conceptual and philosophical level; 2) the complex duality in actual spiritual practice.

2.3.1. The Equality of Men and Women in Ultimate Liberation

Although the feminine perspective in Tibetan Buddhism also originates from the feminine perspective of primitive Indian Buddhism, the powerful female cultural background stemming from the Tibetan belief system, which venerates female deities as the core, has not exerted a significant influence on Tibetan Buddhism. Firstly, Tibetans believe that female power ensures the prosperity of the ethnic group. They

trust that through the power of Yin (i.e., female energy), the increase of property can be guaranteed. Secondly, female power symbolizes reproduction, and female power is considered an essential part of ensuring the continuation of the ethnic group by Tibetans. Therefore, it is not the negative view of women's inferiority in primitive Buddhism that has deeply integrated with the Tibetan perspective on women, but rather the perspective of ultimate liberation that views all beings as equal.

In addition, Tibetan Buddhism often combines both exoteric and esoteric practices, thus inheriting the concept of gender equality in Tantric Buddhism relatively completely. Tantric Buddhism elevates the concept of gender equality to its utmost. Unlike the concept of "female-to-male rebirth" in Mahayana Buddhism, Tantric Buddhism further affirms women, believing that women can achieve enlightenment in their female form without having to transform into a male body. Therefore, the unique Tibetan culture of female veneration and the characteristic of combining exoteric and esoteric practices have led to the formation of a distinctive and profound feminine perspective in Tibetan Buddhism that is deeply rooted in Tibetan culture.

2.3.2. The Complex Duality in Practice

In the realm of religious practice, the feminine perspective in Tibetan Buddhism manifests as a complex duality. Firstly, the female monks (a term used in Tibetan Buddhism to refer to female practitioners) are generally more respected and enjoy greater freedom compared to the bhikṣuṇīs in Han Chinese Buddhism. While Tibetan Buddhism has been influenced by the feminine perspective of primitive Buddhism to a certain extent, resulting in the status of female practitioners being lower than male practitioners, their social status is still far higher than that of ordinary male laypeople. Secondly, both female devotees in families and female monks have relatively liberally religious activity spaces and clear religious practice goals. Outstanding female monks such as Dorje Palmo and Dorje Tritten, have provided positive role models for women in Tibetan Buddhism, demonstrating the possibility for female practitioners to achieve self-worth and religious goals through Buddhism, both for those who have left the householder's life and those who remain.

However, traditional Tibetan society remains patriarchal. Additionally, as mentioned earlier, Tibetan Buddhism has also been influenced by the notion of women's inferiority to a certain extent. Consequently, many religious taboos are still associated with women, such as the prohibition of placing fresh meat in women's tents, women's inability to enter monasteries except on major festivals, and the prohibition of placing women's clothing on sacred texts or Buddhist statues.

In summary, on the conceptual level, Tibetan Buddhism exhibits a feminine culture rich in meaning and power. However, despite the relatively high status attained by female practitioners in the practical realm of Tibetan Buddhism, traces of the notion of women's inferiority still persist.

3. The Reasons for the Differences in the Feminine Perspective between Tibetan Buddhism and Han Chinese Buddhism

The differences exhibited between Han Chinese Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism indicate that the emergence and transformation of Buddhist feminine perspectives are not purely internal issues within Buddhism. Instead, they are

subject to the constraints and influences of various social and cultural factors. The author believes that there are three main reasons for the differences in the feminine perspectives between Han Chinese Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism: (1) the different cultural backgrounds of the two regions; (2) the different social backgrounds of the two regions; (3) the different denominations inherited by the two.

3.1. Different Cultural Backgrounds of the Two Regions

As an imported religion, Buddhism must quickly find common ground with local cultures to take root and grow in the places where it is propagated, thereby facilitating its further integration and development in those regions. The different cultural backgrounds of Han and Tibetan regions have led to the emergence of differences in the feminine perspectives of Han Chinese Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism.

3.1.1. The Cultural Background of Male Dominance and Female Inferiority in Han China

When Mahayana Buddhism was introduced to Han China, Confucianism was the dominant ideology adhered to by the feudal rulers. Against such a backdrop, in order to quickly establish itself in Han China, Buddhism extensively absorbed and integrated the ideas of both Confucianism and Taoism. The spurious sutra, *The Buddha Speaks of the Difficulty of Repaying the Kindness of Parents*, is a product of Buddhism catering to the Confucian concept of “filial piety.”

Before the introduction of Buddhism to Han China, the mainstream female perspective of Confucianism, which advocates “male dominance and female inferiority” and “the husband is the standard for the wife,” had already been established. As stated in the *Book of Rites*, one of the important classics of Confucianism, “Etiquette is the order of heaven and earth, and order distinguishes all things” [11]. Etiquette, as one of the main means for Confucianism to achieve its ultimate ideals, constrains and regulates every move of people in feudal society. The *Book of Rites* provides detailed behavioral norms for different classes, including the living norms for women in feudal society. Confucianism demands that women adhere to the “Three Obediences”: “A woman has three obligations of obedience and no independent way of action. Therefore, she obeys her father before marriage, her husband after marriage, and her son after her husband’s death” [12]. Even after death, ancient women were unable to escape the constraints of etiquette and their subordinate status. The Confucian etiquette for the joint burial of husbands and wives stipulates that “a wife should be buried with her husband” [13]. This joint burial does not simply refer to burying the deceased husband and wife together, but rather, the wife following the husband. Even if the wife dies early and has already been buried, her coffin must still be moved to the tomb of her newly deceased husband upon his death.

It is evident from the *Book of Rites* that women in feudal society occupied a dependent and subordinate position relative to men. Given this cultural background and the inherent tendency of primitive Buddhism to demean and discriminate against women, it is not surprising that Han Chinese Buddhism accepted and integrated the feminine perspective of primitive Buddhism in its actual practice.

3.1.2. The Cultural Background of Female Worship in Tibet

The cultural background of Tibetan Buddhism differs

significantly from Han Chinese Buddhism. While Tibet is also a society under a patriarchal system, its traditional religious beliefs are dominated by Bon and other primitive religions that feature numerous distinctive and well-known female deities occupying important positions. Although the Confucian ideology in Han China also includes the concept of worshipping heaven, there are few female deities among them.

Firstly, Tibetan creation myths and origin myths abound with female deities. For instance, in the myth of “the Rock Demoness and the Monkey,” it states that “In ancient times, the Snowy Land was filled with water in the valleys. As the lakes receded, pine and cypress forests emerged, teeming with birds and wild animals. After a long time, the Monkey transformed by Avalokiteshvara and Tara, and the Rock Demoness were born. The Demoness said to the Monkey, ‘I am born as a demoness due to karmic forces, but I am attracted to you because of desire.’ They mated, and six monkeys resembling humans were born, later evolving into human forms with shorter fur and tails. From them, the six Tibetan clans of Se, Mu, Dong, Dun, Zha, and Zhu emerged.” [14] Another example is the supreme deity of Bon, Dazhi Saqir Sang, who is often referred to in Bon texts using feminine pronouns. The Bon text *Golden Key* mentions, “The Mother of Space, Saqir Sang... Her jewels are resplendent, and her heavenly palace is as beautiful as gold in golden light.” Secondly, Tibetans also worship numerous goddesses closely related to their daily social production, such as the Five Sisters of Longevity who oversee animal husbandry and Bandanlamu who embodies warlike power. This vast and intricate belief system in female deities is deeply ingrained in Tibetan life. Finally, after Buddhism spread to Tibet, it absorbed most of the divine images and functions from Tibetan traditional religions. For instance, the Twelve Danma Juni goddesses, originally deities in Bon, were later incorporated into Buddhism as protective deities by Guru Rinpoche.

Influenced by this religious background rich in vivid female deities, Tibetan Buddhism has developed a unique female perspective that is inherently Tibetan. Although Han Chinese Buddhism also absorbed some Taoist deities and philosophical ideas during its localization process, Taoism was not the mainstream ideology in Han China, and its social influence was far less than that of Confucianism. Therefore, Han Chinese Buddhism has not been able to form a Tibetan Buddhist female perspective centered on female independence and self-realization, as Tibetan Buddhism has done.

3.2. Differences in Social Backgrounds between the Two Regions

The elements of social environments include politics, economy, and the legal system. The different social divisions have led to disparities in the rights and obligations enjoyed by social groups. Women in Tibet and Han China play different roles in their respective societies, resulting in differences in the rights they enjoy. Additionally, there are also certain differences in the political structures of Tibet and Han China. These differences in social backgrounds have contributed to the divergence in the female perspectives between Tibetan Buddhism and Han Chinese Buddhism.

3.2.1. The Social Responsibility Division of “Women Inside, Men Outside” in Han China

Confucianism dominates the social ethos in Han China and

has influenced its social environment. The Book of Rites, an important Confucian classic, stipulates in detail how women should behave and live under the feudal system. The successors of Confucianism firmly shackled women with the responsibility of “domestic affairs.” “Men handle external affairs, while women handle domestic affairs. Women should not peek through the central gate without justification.”[15] This social environment of “women handling domestic affairs, men handling external affairs” has deprived Han Chinese women of the right to acquire knowledge related to the outside world. They are confined within the household, constantly worried about trivial matters within the family. “Domestic affairs” are the responsibilities they are supposed to undertake in a feudal society dominated by Confucianism. Learning cultural knowledge and pondering over national affairs are “external affairs” solely belonging to men and have nothing to do with women. The Book of Rites also imposes strict etiquette rules for unmarried women: “Men stay outside, women stay inside. The palace is deeply guarded by gatekeepers. Men do not enter, women do not leave.”[16] In this situation, unmarried women not only completely lose their autonomy in choosing a spouse, but they are also completely severed from any contact with men who handle “external affairs.” Their future depends solely on their “fathers” and “husbands,” and their understanding of the outside world is logically and reasonably zero. Han Chinese women have become, as Engels described, “slaves under the dominance of their husbands, reduced to mere tools for childbearing.”[17]

3.2.2. Social Responsibility Differentiation with Female Autonomy in Tibet

Although Tibet has situations similar to Han China, such as the “Ten Virtuous Practices” that advise “not listening to women’s words,” it does not impose detailed regulations on women’s behavior as comprehensively as The Book of Rites, nor does it stipulate that women must rely on men in daily life. Moreover, Tibetan women enjoy greater freedom of movement in society compared to Han Chinese women. Tibetan women are not completely confined to the “inner” sphere as Han Chinese women are. There is no gender discrimination in Tibetan regions when it comes to the inheritance of family properties. As recorded in Ma Hetian’s observations of the Gansu-Qinghai border regions, “Tibetan inheritance customs can be considered gender-equal. When there are no sons or sons are monks, daughters inherit. Adopted sons, illegitimate sons, and even granddaughters can inherit when there are no male grandsons or male grandsons are monks. In the absence of children and nieces, the property is donated to monasteries.”[18] Tibetan women have the same rights as men in inheriting property. Furthermore, the Tibetan people in Gansu and Qinghai regions generally have the custom of “Shang Tou” (a ritual signifying adulthood), after which Tibetan women can freely participate in social activities and interact with men.

Overall, Tibetan women possess a certain level of choice in fulfilling social obligations, enjoying social rights, and having autonomy in marriage. In such a social environment, Tibetan women enjoy a much higher social status than Han Chinese women.

3.2.3. The Political Environment of Separation of Church and State vs. Theocracy

One of the reasons for the differences in the female perspectives between Tibetan Buddhism and Han Buddhism lies in the distinct political systems between Tibet and Han

China.

In Han China, the rulers claimed to be the “Son of Heaven,” but in reality, they were merely political leaders. The religious leadership they concurrently held was often nominal, serving as a tool to justify their secular rule. High-ranking monks and sages in the religious community were often willing to offer their “crown” to the rulers in pursuit of their favor. For example, Fa Guo, the monk-general of the Northern Wei Dynasty, declared that the emperor was the present-day Tathagata Buddha. “Initially, Fa Guo often said that the Emperor was wise and fond of Taoism, and was the present-day Tathagata Buddha. Buddhist monks should offer their respects, so he often prostrated himself before the Emperor. People said, ‘Those who can promote Taoism are the rulers, and I am not bowing to the Emperor, but paying respect to the Buddha.’” [19] In addition, the laws in Han China were not formulated based on religious teachings. In summary, the political system in Han China was a separation of church and state, with religion serving politics.

However, Tibet is different. Tibetan Buddhism is divided into the Pre-Diffusion Period and the Post-Diffusion Period, marked by the Langdarma persecution of Buddhism. In the Post-Diffusion Period, Tibetan politics exhibited a theocratic form. Firstly, religious leaders held both religious and political leadership positions. The leaders of Tibet were first religious leaders and then secular rulers. Secondly, Tibetan laws were mostly dependent on religious teachings and favored monks. Religion in Tibet overshadowed politics, which is also one of the reasons why the status of nuns in Tibetan Buddhism is lower than monks but higher than secular men.

In conclusion, different social backgrounds and political systems are among the reasons for the different female perspectives between Han Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism.

3.3. Difference in Their Inherited Sects

Buddhism arrived in Tibet slightly later than in Han China, and there are also certain differences in the scriptures they adhere to.

Tibetan Buddhism did not undergo significant sectarian differentiation during the Pre-Diffusion Period. It was only after the Langdarma persecution of Buddhism that Tibetan Buddhism gradually saw sectarian differentiation in the Post-Diffusion Period. The Nyingma, Kagyu, Sakya, Kadampa, and Gelugpa sects of Tibetan Buddhism all uphold the practice of both the exoteric and esoteric teachings, giving equal importance to both the Mahayana and Hinayana paths. Therefore, the ideas in the esoteric scriptures have had a tremendous impact on Tibetan Buddhism. Esoteric Buddhism elevates the concept of gender equality to the extreme. In terms of concepts, Esoteric Buddhism believes that “women are the samadhi” and symbolize the “Prajnaparamita Mother” that is the source of Buddhist wisdom, making them an important way of practice. Furthermore, Esoteric Buddhism has a profound veneration for women. As mentioned in Mr. Zhao Guohua’s book *Theory of Reproductive Culture Worship*, the “red lotus bead” that visualizes the six-syllable mantra contains specific symbolic meanings. The petals of the red lotus resemble the shape of a woman’s vagina, hence the red lotus symbolizes the vagina.[20] Therefore, practitioners of Esoteric Buddhism need to respect women and must not demean or belittle them. In terms of precepts, Esoteric Buddhism differs from Mahayana Buddhism. Although Mahayana Buddhism pursues ultimate equality in doctrine, it

still exhibits obvious male superiority in practical practice. However, Esoteric Buddhism has incorporated respect for female practitioners into its fundamental precepts. The Three Precepts Treatise written by eminent Nyingma masters records various precepts and rituals in Esoteric Buddhism, with the most important precept being the “Fourteen Fundamental Downfalls,” which all yogis who have undergone empowerment and entered the esoteric path must uphold. The last clause of the Fourteen Fundamental Downfalls stipulates, “To ridicule women who are intelligent and virtuous in front of a quick-tempered person, totaling fourteen items.” This shows that Esoteric Buddhism considers disrespect for women as a violation of the fundamental precepts.

Han Chinese Buddhism arrived earlier and adheres to the scriptures of Mahayana Buddhism. The ideas in the Mahayana Buddhist scriptures, after absorbing the local thoughts of Han China, gave rise to eight major sects with Han Chinese characteristics: the Vijnanavada, Sanlun, Tiantai, Huayan, Zen, Pure Land, Vinaya, and Esoteric Buddhism. After the Tang Dynasty, the Zen and Pure Land sects became more prevalent. Although they generally hold a positive attitude towards women, under the dual oppression of the original Buddhist female perspective and Confucian thought, they did not engage in excessive practical struggles to improve women's status in reality. Therefore, although Han Chinese Buddhism recognizes gender equality at the level of ultimate liberation, its male superiority in practical practice has not improved significantly. Although Esoteric Buddhism was introduced to Han China during the early Tang Dynasty, due to its conflict with local culture and Confucian culture and the loss of support from the rulers, Tang Esoteric Buddhism gradually disappeared at the end of the Tang Dynasty. Therefore, the female perspective of Esoteric Buddhism did not have a significant impact on the formation of the female perspective of Han Chinese Buddhism.

4. Conclusion

During the localization process, Tibetan Buddhism and Han Chinese Buddhism have developed distinct perspectives on women. Differences in cultural background, social division of labor, political structure, and scriptures have led to contrasting fates for nuns in these two traditions. The question of how to establish a correct Buddhist perspective on women is not only a matter for Buddhism itself, but also a societal issue. Social, cultural, political, and geographical disparities not only influence Buddhist views on women, but also determine the fates of female practitioners within the religion.

The discussion on the reasons for the differences in women's perspectives between Tibetan Buddhism and Han Chinese Buddhism aims not only to clarify the development and evolution of Buddhist views on women in different societies, but also to draw lessons and seek inspiration for how to correctly establish a gender-equal perspective in the Buddhist community and the path of contemporary Sinicization of Buddhism. The interpretation of Buddhist teachings and precepts should keep pace with the times. The outdated idea of “male superiority over females” will eventually be discarded by society, and gender equality has become the mainstream of the times. Inequality towards women in both Han Chinese Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism will ultimately fade into history. With the progress of the times, nuns will no longer be constrained by historical discrimination and limitations. They will break free from the

shackles imposed by history and the “fleshly bonds” that have confined them, fulfilling their inherent missions, enjoying their rightful rights, and embarking on the path to enlightenment that belongs to them. Finally, I quote the verse of the female Zen master Dumu Jingang from the Ming Dynasty: “Once the fleshly bonds are shed, what use is left? Ask whether a male body is female or vice versa?” May all practitioners, regardless of gender, be liberated from the constraints of gender and bravely embark on their own journey to enlightenment.

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