


# The Discourse of Tibetan Women's Empowerment Activists<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

ince the 1980s, the discourse of *suzhi* (素质), or 'human quality,' has been pervasive in China (Kipnis, 2007; Murphy, 2004). According to this discourse, individuals' quality, or *suzhi*, is linked to the nation's strength, and is a product of the extent to which individuals are civilized and modern (Jacka, 2009; Judd, 2002; Murphy, 2004). According to *suzhi* discourse, improving one's quality requires discipline and single-minded diligence; high quality is associated with the educated, wealthy, and urban; and those with high quality are the ones who succeed in a competitive market economy (Jacka, 2009; Judd, 2002; Kipnis, 2007; Murphy, 2004). Moreover, as Kipnis states, "the notion of 'lacking quality' is used to mock or discriminate" (2007, p. 388). As Jacka further describes, "The supposed low *suzhi* of migrants...is read from their speech, clothes, and bodily comportment" (2009, p. 531).

Judd's analysis of the work of various branches of the All-China Women's Federation in the 1990s reveals the Federation officers attempted to raise the quality of rural women by providing rural women with training in vocational skills. Federation officers understood education and training, leading to "competitive entrepreneurial success," as raising women's quality (Judd, 2002, p. 44). Federation officers additionally believed that "increasing women's quality will win respect for women and thereby raise women's social status" (p. 24). Other state discourses around women's status have similarly

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asserted women's emancipation is a matter of women's own individual skills, ability, and effort. According to this notion, women must abandon "the old attitudes of subservience and doubt about their own abilities" while "self-emancipation involves women improving themselves based on their individual skills and effort." Self-confidence on the part of women as well as effort and skill, obtained via a process of "self-development through education," are thus considered necessary for women's emancipation (Leung, 2003, p. 371).

In a line of argument similar to the *suzhi* and state discourses described above, the Tibetan women's empowerment activists interviewed for the current study argue that women's empowerment is a matter of individual women's skills and professional, intellectual, or economic competence. The activists focus on improving women's education, health care, and training as prerequisites or a means to obtaining this competence. Like the Federation officers described by Judd, the women's empowerment activists of the current study believe economic and professional success will automatically improve women's standing in society. In fact, many of the activists argue this is the *only* factor that is crucial to the question of Tibetan women's social status. Like *suzhi* discourse, the women's activists of the current study elide structural and wider societal factors in oppression, preferring instead to argue that if women suffer from low status, this situation has resulted from individual women's lack of competence. The arguments of some of the activists, like many of the proponents of *suzhi* discourse, then, include a heavy dose of victim-blaming, associating poor economic success, lack of prominence in society, and powerlessness within the household with individuals' own character and competence flaws rather than with structural and power-based inequalities (Jacka, 2009; Kipnis, 2007; Murphy, 2004).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> It may be important to note that the women's empowerment activists of the current study did not use the Chinese term *suzhi*, nor did they, for the most part, use a term which might be considered its Tibetan equivalent (ཐུ་སྤྱོད་). Secondly, while there are many similarities between *suzhi* discourse and the discourse of the current study's women's empowerment activists, the activists do not hold to the priorities of the Chinese state nor are they focused on exactly the same social problems. Since *suzhi* discourse has been used as a tool to mask and promote unfair economic practices, as well as a tool to enhance citizens' acceptance of governmental policies they might otherwise resent (Jacka, 2009; Kipnis, 2007; Murphy, 2004), it should be noted that the current study's activists do not fall in line with *suzhi* discourse in these ways. Thus, rather than a wholesale appropriation of *suzhi* discourse, the women's activists have drawn on a Chinese discursive environment which emphasizes civilized, modern behavior as well as individual discipline (Jacka, 2009) to arrive at similar but not entirely identical conclusions.

Recent Chinese history has seen women's emancipation tied with both the modernity of the Chinese nation and its strength. During the late Qing dynasty, the Republican era, and the May Fourth movement, women's emancipation was deemed necessary to counteract the nation's weakness and to enhance the nation's ability to ward off colonizers and govern itself. Hershatter describes the turn of the twentieth century in China as "an atmosphere of national crisis" (2004, p. 1029). The activists of the current study express a sense of crisis for Tibetan society as well. Tibetan communities have found themselves in a rapidly modernizing world in which urbanization and Sinicization are ever-present realities. According to informants, these forces are threatening to cause the disappearance of Tibetan culture, to annihilate the basis for a distinct Tibetan identity altogether. Activists describe a social context in which Tibetans' awareness of traditional forms of knowledge is on a precipice, in danger of irreversible decline and in need of emergency protection measures.<sup>3</sup> A prevalent feeling appears to be that social change is often indicative of Sinicization, rather than indicative of development in a Tibetan way and on Tibetan terms. In this context, activists appear to believe women must join men to become professionally successful, because this will help to strengthen Tibetan society as a whole, allowing Tibetans to compete in an increasingly marketized and Han-dominated world, and thereby have the power to survive as a distinct ethnic group which preserves Tibetan culture and identity.

In the context of crisis in which Republican-era reformers found themselves, women's education was promoted, because educated women were deemed to make good mothers, and good mothers were considered necessary for a strong nation (Hershatter, 2004). Similarly, in the context of crisis in which the Tibetan activists of the current study find themselves, women's education is advocated as a means of strengthening the nationality by creating mothers who are competent in instructing the next generation. Republican-era reformers also tended to subordinate feminist priorities to those of the nation at large (Hershatter, 2004), a pattern which is found among the current study's activists as well.

The discourse of the women's empowerment activists repeatedly revolve around deep contradictions, contradictions which are at times so glaring that they involve, for example, an activist defending the very forms of women's oppression which she is trying to change. Literature on discourses prevalent in recent Chinese history also reveal deep contradictions, such as Maoist state discourse asserting

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<sup>3</sup> The disappearance of the Tibetan language is a particular point of concern that is commonly voiced by many.

women are equally competent to men coupled with “the widely shared belief that women were suited for lighter and less-skilled tasks” (Hershatter, 2004, p. 1021; Leung, 2003) or the promotion of gender equality coupled with the confinement of women to positions of lesser power (Hershatter, 2004). Claiming equality when true equality is not exactly what is promoted is likewise a common pattern found within not only the accounts of the women’s empowerment activists but the accounts of many other interviewees of the current study as well.

However, the women’s activists reveal an additional type of contradiction, one that is not as readily found in state-driven Chinese discourse. This contradiction results from activists’ attempts to improve women’s status while at the same time attempting to preserve Tibetan culture, defend Tibetan culture against accusations of backwardness, and maintain Tibetan social unity and cohesiveness. The need to preserve Tibetan culture has been discussed above. Additionally, in a world in which state discourse portrays Han as more modern, progressive, and enlightened than the more backwards societies of ethnic minorities (Barabantseva, 2009; Yi, 2005), the activists appear acutely aware that acknowledgement of Tibetan women’s low status could lend credence to notions of Tibetans as backwards and uncivilized. As a result, they tend to deny, justify, or sidestep discussion of practices within Tibetan society that create gender inequality, apparently in an attempt to maintain a dignified face of Tibetan society to outsiders. Finally, the activists’ fear of social disharmony within Tibetan communities is another reason behind their opposition to claims that Tibetan cultural practices have caused gender inequality, as such claims could instigate conflict between women and men. At a time when Tibetan culture is felt to be in decline, Tibetan political protesters have emphasized that unity among Tibetans is vital. While the activists of the current study made no political statements whatsoever, their concerns appear to mirror those of protesters in this one regard, that is, in their concern with maintaining unity within Tibetan communities.

The following discussion is organized around the principal concerns of the women’s empowerment activists, as voiced in their accounts, namely (1) Tibetan cultural preservation or a return to traditional values, (2) community unity, and (3) advancement, particularly economic and educational advancement, of Tibetan society. We shall additionally look at the contradictory pressures faced by activists, leading to tensions and contradictions in their descriptions of Tibetan women’s status.

## Methods

This paper is based on a 15-month period of fieldwork in one region of Amdo. The paper is drawn from research looking into domestic violence among Tibetan households in the study region, involving in-depth, unstructured interviews with 76 women and 24 men. Interviewees were purposively sampled for a range of age and education levels as well as both rural and urban-based residence. Not all interviewees were victims or perpetrators of domestic violence, but a significant minority of interviewees were. For ethical reasons, the research project did not focus on one particular village or township. Rather, various farming villages, nomadic settlements, and towns on the northeastern edge of the Tibetan plateau were visited.

None of the research interactions were conducted through a translator. All interviews were conducted directly in Tibetan, or in Chinese if the interviewee was more comfortable speaking Chinese. Interview recordings were also transcribed directly in their original language, so as to avoid the changes of meaning that come with translation into English.

While in-depth unstructured interviews with women and men were the core of this research, this research was additionally informed by many years of personal experience and interaction with the study region, as well as by participant observation of family life, conducted while staying with local families.

Please note that while the research giving rise to this paper is a research project focused on domestic violence, this paper is not in fact discussing the dynamics of family life or of domestic violence. Rather, while women and men were interviewed regarding their personal marital relationships and personal experience of domestic violence, an additional group of interviewees termed 'women's empowerment activists' were also interviewed. This group of interviewees have provided the data upon which the current paper is based. Women's empowerment activists are individuals who have engaged in activism to enhance gender equality or to improve women's opportunities and the prominence of women in Tibetan society.

The accounts of six women's empowerment activists are discussed within this paper. The women's empowerment activists are Tibetan women and men residing on the northeastern edge of the Tibetan plateau. They are individuals who have undertaken independent, private initiatives by which they have created spaces dedicated to women's writing and publishing, published articles on the topic of women's status, led seminars in which women university students were urged to become independent and self-reliant, given lectures on the importance of treating women well, or expanded ed-

educational opportunities for girls.<sup>4</sup> In particular, this paper looks into the activists' views on Tibetan women's rights and status, in an attempt to understand why these individuals have worked to empower women, and why violence against women has not been part of the focus of their work.

For this paper, information from participant observation and informal conversations conducted during fieldwork is drawn upon for supplementary or background information, as is information from interviews with those individuals who are not women's empowerment activists.

### **Tibetan Cultural Preservation or a Return to Traditional Values**

Activists felt that modern changes to Tibetan society have been accompanied by deeply troubling consequences. They therefore spoke of a general context in which Tibetan culture and identity are facing the prospect of disintegration. As described by one activist, "Tibetan people are deteriorating, and so is our nationality. Now everyone is thinking about how our culture is deteriorating. In general, culture is something to be developed, but now we don't even think about development. It is deteriorating" (male activist). As this activist further explained, "if people continue to deteriorate, our nationality will turn into a race only and everything else, our culture, will be common [i.e. shared or indistinct]" (male activist).<sup>5</sup> As stated by another activist:

[Many people don't pay attention to traditional Tibetan forms of knowledge because] they don't know about traditional culture. And secondly they have studied the culture which opposes traditions...Many people say that you can't send kids to school because they come back home and don't like religion or their ethnic group

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<sup>4</sup> Please note that a total of 14 women's empowerment activists were interviewed for the current study, but only the accounts of 6 of these individuals were analyzed in depth for this paper. The conclusions of this paper, however, follow a number of similarities found in the accounts of most of the 14 women's activists.

<sup>5</sup> Accounts of declining Tibetan traditions are common. According to one account, for example, an elderly traditional Tibetan medicine doctor was brought to tears by losses within the Tibetan medical tradition, whereby medical students in current times do not understand the basic values underpinning medical practice (conference entitled "The Transmission of Tibetan Medicine: Spiritual Growth, Questions of Method and Contemporary Practice," 2014). Other accounts, including those of one of the women's activists, refer to loss of language and traditional knowledge due to nomad resettlement policies.

or their traditional culture. But the students aren't to blame, because it's actually the parents' responsibility. If you send your kid to the monastery, he would turn into a religious person. If you send them to a place where they only study Tibetan knowledge, they will care about this. If you send him to a place where he will only learn Han Chinese culture, then if this culture does not become a part of his thinking, it means he didn't really study. If he comes home and says he is not interested in Tibetan traditions, it is a sign that he has studied [Han Chinese] culture. (male activist)

This negative impact of schooling was felt by this activist to accrue from both those schools which educate students primarily via lessons conducted in the Chinese language as well as from Tibetan-medium schools (male activist). External reports have also criticized education in China, including Tibetan-medium education, as giving Tibetan students "little insight into their own culture and history" (*State Department Report on Human Rights: 2013, 2014*). Likewise, one activist spoke about the younger generation's lack of awareness of Tibetan traditions, and of a decline in the morality of Tibetans' behavior. He is therefore intent on promoting a return to traditional Tibetan values.

Some of the activists in fact feared that further freedoms for women would lead women down the negative path men have already begun to travel in modern times. As modern life has caused men to drink more, gamble more, abandon their household responsibilities more, and engage more in extramarital affairs, the fear is that women will simply follow along this negative path if they are allowed more freedom and rights. Additionally, in the case of both women's activists and other interviewees, a fear that improvements in women's status might go too far or in some cases has already gone too far is apparent. This fear caused interviewees to voice worries that men may become subordinate to women, mothers-in-law may become subordinate to daughters-in-law, women may give up their family responsibilities once they become successful, women may begin believing they do not need to work hard, and women may begin to drink and gamble and fight. One informant noted a common fear is that rises in women's status will cause women to begin engaging in marital infidelity.<sup>6</sup> Other possibilities, whereby the focus shifts from controlling women's freedom to a change in community norms or practices such that more pressure is placed upon men to act responsibly and respectfully, are not voiced by the activists.

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<sup>6</sup> Some of the interviewees indicated men are far more likely to engage in marital infidelity than women, and that men's infidelity is more acceptable than women's.

We can see in the above accounts that some of the activists hold to notions that women must sacrifice by working hard for their families and should not become 'too' dominant within the household. It is not surprising, then, that the activists believe the traditional roles of women and men should not see a radical shift or equalization, a belief that appears to be built upon an inherent fear that women's rights could cause women to take on the harmful behavioral traits of men, could upset the balance and structure of Tibetan families, and could cause an unwelcome decline in behaviors by which Tibetans remain distinctly identifiable as 'Tibetan.' One activist, for example, believes patrilocal marriage, the most normative type of marriage in the study region, is more desirable than matrilineal marriage because men should not be expected to adjust to a family other than their own, while such pressures on women are acceptable and proper. Activists also argued that women's modesty and respect for others, and their ritually-sanctioned humility vis-à-vis others, must always be maintained. Some of the activists therefore emphasized that no matter how highly positioned a woman becomes professionally, she must maintain a distinctly and identifiably Tibetan mode of behavior, particularly within the home. Thus, according to one activist, "Tibetan women have their own wonderful way of doing things, and this cannot be destroyed, like taking care of guests, being respectful to your husband and the elderly...Even if you are the chairman of the country, you still can't destroy this" (female activist). Another activist likewise stated that "even if you are the president of a country, women should not change the appearance and manner they have always had" (female activist).

### **Community Unity**

The activists appear to feel a deep-seated anxiety that a feminist push for women's rights and vocal calls for a change in the treatment of women will cause cleavages and conflict, thereby causing detriment to the unity of Tibetan society. Activists' dislike of complaints around women's household labor burden likewise appears to come from a belief that such complaints will cause marital discord, thus undercutting the unity and harmony of families. As a result, the activists tended to voice a certain disregard for those who openly and vocally push for women's rights or an improvement to women's status. As one activist explained:

I like to do the work of my family and office myself, because if I do everything myself, I do not harm others a lot. I think no matter



what work you do, sincerity and good intentions are primary. Good intentions and demeanor are the key to the door of rights. There is no meaning in struggling for rights in a way such that women and men argue with jealousy towards each other. (female activist)

As stated by one activist:

When those women from my home area who have some learning argue for women's rights, they talk about how women from my area are not allowed to touch race horses and how they have to do the dishes...Riding horses is by nature men's role and women don't need to touch the horses...Doing the dishes is the work of women. Men also have their work, so it's right for women to do this work. If everyone undertakes their own responsibility, it's beneficial for the happiness of the family. Otherwise by arguing for rights you just cause conflict with your husband. (male activist)

The point is not to refrain from promoting an improvement in women's status altogether, but to promote women's rights in the correct way. The correct way, for the activists, involves maintaining social and family cohesion even whilst attempting to empower women. This maintenance of cohesion requires refraining from accusing men or pointing the finger at many specific social practices.

A number of self-immolators and political protesters in Tibetan areas have called for unity among Tibetans, or have stressed the importance of strengthening Tibetan culture and identity<sup>7</sup>. "Don't forget you are Tibetans," states a message left behind by one self-immolator<sup>8</sup>, implying in this case the self-immolator's belief that the current period is a critical juncture in Tibetan history in which the very identity of Tibetan people is in danger of disintegration. The women's activists' concerns around pre-empting any discourses that could lead to conflict in Tibetan society therefore echoes self-immolators' and protesters' concerns, and is likely derived from the notion that the strength and continued existence of Tibetan culture and identity requires unity.

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<sup>7</sup> Reference: "Hundreds of Tibetans Detained in Chamdo Over 'Unity' Campaign," 2014, *Labrang monk Jayang Jinpa reflects on his daring 2008 protest*, 2013, "Self-immolator leaves message of 'unity and solidarity' among Tibetans," 2012, "Tibetan Comedian Released from Jail in Poor Health," 2014.

<sup>8</sup> Reference: "17-year-old self-immolator's last note calls for the Dalai Lama's return and Tibet's independence," 2012.

### **Economic and Educational Advancement of Tibetan Society**

In their activities to empower women, the activists are primarily concerned with enhancing women's educational and professional attainment. Thus, the women's activists have focused their activities on projects in the sphere of women's education, women's health, writing and publishing opportunities for women, and improving women's confidence to strive towards educational and professional goals. On the one hand, activists indicated, intelligent and capable women make for intelligent and capable mothers who can raise their children to succeed. Additionally, women joining men in the sphere of professional achievement appears to be seen as a means for Tibetans to thrive, to not be left behind in an economically developing world.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, one activist made the point that women must begin achieving as much as men for the benefit of Tibetan society as a whole. She therefore stated the following:

Every couple is equal, both members of a couple have PhDs, both have knowledge, both are office workers, both are bosses, or both have the exact same status. If all families are like this then society gets better, and if society gets better so does the ethnic group. This level has not been reached yet. [We are] still far below [this]. (female activist)

This activist is saying it is no longer acceptable to allow only men to achieve in extra-domestic spheres while women do not achieve prominent positions and visible success. Rather, both men and women need to achieve equally so that Tibetan society as a whole can advance.

According to another women's activist:

To improve the capability of people, the capability of women first needs to improve...For [economically] developed places, from the time a woman is pregnant, [people from those places] have a lot of methods and knowledge regarding instructing children...The person who stays with children is the mother, and so mothers are key. Mothers' behavior, manner of speaking, and lifestyle influence their children...As the child is growing up, until he/she starts going to school, the most important person is the mother. (male activist)

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<sup>9</sup> One activist, however, focused on the importance of better religious education for nuns.

Here, women's role as mothers is a crucial site upon which to advance the entire community, not only because mothers' instruction fosters the next generation, but also because 'economically developed' communities are particularly knowledgeable about how to train children well. An inherent sense of competition, and the felt need for Tibetans to keep up in a world in which other communities are more advanced, is therefore implied.

Since modernization is the primary aim, activists have attempted to improve women's belief in their own capacities, particularly in the realm of modern economic and professional success. Activists therefore place a lot of emphasis on enhancing women's self-confidence to strive professionally and academically. For some of the activists, this means working to provide women with spaces separate from men in which they can practice or improve their academic skills or skills in writing and expression.<sup>10</sup> As stated by a Tibetan woman who was not interviewed for the current study but who produced a video promoting Tibetan women's rights, "[Women] are always lowering themselves, saying 'I can't do anything because I'm a woman.' We need to say 'I can,' and then we can help our people" ("Radio Interview with T. Drolma," 2010). One women's activist described her advice to female university students that it is important "to take initiative..., [to] study hard, and [to] reject the idea that...one should always depend on a husband or that men should support women." This activist went on to state that "women should have their own ability and competence. And on top of being a great woman, if you have compassion, then you can be of benefit to society, your ethnic group, and to human beings" (female activist). Women's confidence, independence, and achievement is therefore promoted, with concerns for the strength or benefit of Tibetan society at large never far from activists' minds.

When activists present examples of successful women, as a means of enhancing Tibetan women's self-confidence, they focus primarily on modern forms of success. Thus, a women's activist who conducts educational training programs for Tibetan girls stated the following:

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<sup>10</sup> One activist, for example, stated that women need their own space to write in order for women to get the chance to catch up to men in skill and to think that they are capable of publishing. Another activist conducts educational training programs for girls, which he conducts separately from his educational training programs for boys. He explained the reasons behind his actions as follows: "By specifically separating women,...it makes you think that girls could rival the boys in singing or leading or any way that your potential is revealed. The girls can speak courageously. They are even better than [other girls] in playing ball games. Everyone's the same and equal because boys aren't there to keep the girls down."

I brought a Tibetan at Harvard to my [area to talk to the female students attending my training program]..., and I told the students to work hard, that this woman is a Tibetan and she came from the most famous school in the world, that she is the same as my students...Then I brought the head of Motorola in Asia, and I introduced this woman to my students and told them she was the head of one of the famous companies of Asia, that even though she is a woman she has this much capability, that the only reason other women are not like her is because of a lack of opportunities and lack of study...I also invited the head of education in the American embassy, a woman with a PhD...to my [area] and told my students...she is a leader in the embassy. Nobody can go to America to study without [her] permission. When schools cooperate with each other, they have to go through her office. [She] has all that power. [I told the students] the only difference [between people like her and my students] is whether or not they study, whether or not they get opportunities, and whether or not they work hard. I told them there is no reason for them to think that they are just women, Tibetans, or nomads. (male activist)

Similarly, the above-mentioned woman who produced a video promoting Tibetan women's rights stated the following in her video: "I'd like to say that like foreign women who can even be leaders of their nations, who are independent and educated – I hope we could be like that...Our hope is all Tibetan female students will aspire to these things" (Drolma, 2010).

Given the many examples of strong Tibetan women that exist within Tibetan history, it is surprising that the activists prefer to look largely to the example of Han and Western women as proof that women can be as capable of success as men. While the activists are clearly intent on improving the self-confidence of Tibetan women, it is surprising they do not additionally choose to emphasize the great achievements of women in Tibetan history. Instead, rather than the historical achievements of Tibetan women religious masters (Allione, 2000; Diemberger, 2007), female historical figures who displayed strength in adverse family circumstances (ལྷཱེ་བཟ་རྒྱ། [GyayeTrabo], n.d.), or Tibetan women who have been involved in politics within the royal court (Diemberger, 2011), it seems the activists need successes more associated with modern educational and professional achievement to use as examples. In an article published by one of the women's activists, for example, the author emphasizes the publishing, academic, and non-profit public health activities that women have

been undertaking in recent years as evidence for her argument that women have the capacity to succeed.<sup>11</sup>

The activists' drive to economically and professionally modernize Tibetan society is not necessarily in contradiction to their concern for cultural preservation, as the two may be seen as mutually reinforcing goals rather than disparate aims. If Tibetans as a group are strong, they not only maintain a dignified face to the outside world, as a group they also gain the skills to compete economically with other ethnic groups and therefore gain the necessary strength to survive in a world in which Tibetans as a community are in danger of being consumed and subsumed by both decadent urban values and Sini-zing forces. As described above, activists spoke of the loss of Tibetan culture and decline in morality of Tibetans brought with urbanization and economic development. In this context, what we see here is a drive to modernize or change only as much as necessary to gain the strength to withstand forces that could bring about the decline of Tibet. According to the activists, therefore, women should succeed educationally and professionally, and become intelligent and competent, while at the same time holding to Buddhist values and maintaining their traditional role within the household.

### **Blaming Women for Their Own Low Status**

Activists voiced the argument that women need not struggle for rights by arguing or debating about this topic. Rather, they argued, women should simply diligently study and work, becoming successful in extra-domestic spheres, and this will automatically bring status and esteem to individual women who deserve it. The implication, then, is that women are not to attain status by calling for men's behavior to change, or by calling for norms and patterns of household or social power relations to shift. Rather, despite their heavy workload, despite socialization teaching women they will be incompetent from a young age, and despite active disparagement of women's voices and women who express strong opinions<sup>12</sup>, the activists still indicate that any problems of women's low status are the individual problems of women themselves. This argument is in part a means by which to sidestep a focus on issues that could instigate community divisions, a concern of the activists that was described above. This

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<sup>11</sup> This Tibetan language article is not cited here for the purpose of maintaining the anonymity of the interviewee.

<sup>12</sup> The gender-unequal social phenomena listed in this sentence were phenomena described by the women's activists as well as by other interviewees. The activists, however, refrained from labelling these phenomena with the term 'inequality.'

argument also serves the purpose of focusing on only those limited aspects of women's empowerment which the activists wish to focus on, so that Tibetan traditions can be maintained while the ethnic group is simultaneously strengthened. Finally, this argument is in part the result of beliefs held by the activists that are in some ways deeply conventional and therefore uninterested in altering attitudes towards women in society.

While activists referred to women's heavy burden of household labor as problematic, the significant amount of labor which women undertake for their households was not in itself deemed sufficient to entitle women to equal attention and respect as men, or equal say in household decision-making. Rather, the activists argued that women should display exceptional capacities in order to be worthy of treatment equal to that which men receive. As described by one activist:

You have to admit it when you are not competent. If you are competent, you automatically get respect. If you can do all the work and get all the money for the family, then the whole family will respect you and listen to you...For example, if you are a woman without achievement in your work, who doesn't know how to manage the family, who doesn't know how to cook well, then these women are just saying empty words if they say they need rights. Those women do not have much right to talk about rights...Women should elevate their own capacity and foster self-respect...If you can develop your own ability in study, work, family, and connections, the members of society will believe in gender equality...When this level has been reached, there won't be much necessity to struggle for rights. (female activist)

As this activist further explained, "if you have capability, needless to say you will get respect from your family, and at the same time you will get rights and equality. For example, everyone will look upon an athlete who is impressive at running and jumping...as an example to follow" (female activist). Several other activists of the current study likewise voiced the notion that rights or status is not something that can be given to women by others. Rather, they argued, women should simply work hard and become successful if they want more rights.

This argument, like *suzhi* discourse, individualizes the problem of low status to individuals' own capacities. In so doing, the activists pre-empt the potentially painful realization that broader, deep-seated problems within Tibetan society, extending to the attitudes of all community members, can harm women. The picture we are left with is one in which men automatically deserve decision-making

power<sup>13</sup> and attention within the household, while women must prove exceptional capabilities beyond the heavy burden of labor they are already undertaking in order to prove they are worthy of an improvement in the respect and attention they are given by family members.

The activists appear to have come to this conclusion in part because so many more educational and professional opportunities are extended to women currently than was the case in the recent past. As stated by one women's activist, for example, "now women are sent to school as often as men, so women should grasp this opportunity and not allow it to get lost...If you don't make use of this opportunity, then you are to blame" (female activist).

Other victim-blaming attitudes of the activists likewise follow those aspects of *suzhi* discourse that tie poor treatment or low status to individuals' own inferior characters. One activist, for example, stated, "Since women are meek, they suffer a loss when they are given away in [patrilocal] marriage. People think...even if men [marry matrilocally], they are courageous and so do not suffer a loss" (male activist). According to this activist, then, women's poor treatment in patrilocal marriage is a result of their own inferior character traits. Men, according to this activist, are treated better in matrilocal marriage because of their inherently superior characters. In another example, some activists justified men's higher status as being the natural product of men's physical or mental superiority to women.

### **Defending Tibetan Culture and Avoiding the Label of Gender Inequality**

Activists appeared acutely aware of the possibility that, if Tibetan women were labelled as suffering from low status, Tibetan society could be labelled backward and inferior to other ethnic groups. Many activists therefore denied that gender inequality is a major problem within Tibetan society. The activists stressed that women's heavy work burden or parents' tendency to send only sons to school are not mean-spirited activities undertaken in the spirit of deliberate cruelty to girls and women, but are instead the unintended products of historical circumstance. Practices in Tibetan society deemed better for women than the practices of Han or other ethnic groups were also emphasized, as was the variability of practices within families

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<sup>13</sup> The prototypical scenario in the study region, as described by both activists and other interviewees, is that men hold primary decision-making power within families.

and communities, a variability which activists argued leaves some or many Tibetan women treated well. While it is important to note that Tibetan women's treatment or standing is better in some ways than that experienced by women of other ethnic groups, activists stressed this point because it is a way to sidestep the very real problems that the activists themselves described, so as to maintain a dignified face of Tibetan society to outsiders. Thus, despite at times providing eloquent descriptions of patterns of gender-based oppression, the women's activists wanted to convey that Tibetan society is no worse than any other, and that any problematic phenomena that do exist within Tibetan society do not constitute major problems. Despite describing problematic phenomena, then, the activists were determined not to label those phenomena with the stigmatizing term 'inequality.'

Moreover, activists' descriptions of condescending or restrictive treatment of women were not followed by the indignance and opposition to these phenomena which one might typically expect from feminist discourse. For example, in his description of nuns' far fewer opportunities for religious education than the opportunities which monks receive, one activist said, "We Tibetans say people have suffered a loss, but we don't say people don't have rights" (male activist). This activist is therefore pointedly refusing to tie the situation of nuns' lack of opportunities to an indignant, critical, or vociferous call for women's rights. Even when acknowledging unfair practices or outcomes for women, he chooses to use phrases such as 'suffering a loss' so as to avoid tying the phenomenon in question to the stigmatizing terms 'lack of rights' or 'gender inequality.'

Activists also stressed that Tibetans' treatment of women does not come from a place of deliberate cruelty. For example, one women's empowerment activist stated the following:

Nowadays no group in the world spends more time working than Tibetan women...

Q: ...Is women's larger work burden a sign of gender inequality?

A: No. Each nationality is different and has its own way of doing things. So it's not that women had to do most of the work because women were [deemed to be] bad. It was because traditionally food preparation was women's work and heavy labor was men's work...When it came to difficult things like hunting animals, men had to go...This was the way of life of our ethnic group. Also, for example, in the past...you had to fight wars, and it was men who fought wars...Though [women's] work was not hard, it is work you do constantly without much time off...Some people say husbands sit around, eat food, and then go out, but this is totally untrue. It's not that husbands are sitting around to deliberately make all women work. This is an opinion that is only looking at the issue from



one angle. This is not a disparagement of women, but is rather the way of life of our ethnic group. (male activist)<sup>14</sup>

This activist is emphasizing that women's heavy burden of labor is a product of historical circumstance, and therefore not deliberately designed to discriminate against women, and that individual Tibetans are also not actively or consciously attempting to disparage women but rather following the traditional ways handed to them by previous generations. This activist's point, therefore, is to stress that Tibetan society and people are not terrible, and in so doing he feels the need to not only refrain from vocal criticism of women's heavy burden of labor, but to counteract and deny such criticisms from others as well.

In another defense of Tibetan culture, one women's empowerment activist stated the following:

Men are sent to school more often than women. This is not because parents are differentiating between men and women. In my village, there probably isn't anyone who commands a girl not to go to school. But in the past, Tibetan livelihood was based on the natural world, and...there wasn't a lot of industry or farming. Since men were better at struggling with nature, like taming wild animals and hunting, the impression that even if you send girls to school they won't be able to do anything has seeped into the character of all Tibetans. So a lot of women weren't sent to school. (female activist)

This is a rather convoluted argument which, by claiming parents did not 'command' women *not* to go to school, attempts to obfuscate the obvious fact that it is parents who decide whether or not to send their daughters to school, and to only send boys to school is an example of unequal treatment. However, this activist's point is that inequality is not the result of a deliberately mean-spirited attempt to be cruel to women and girls. Rather, it is a less conscious product of history and tradition. By emphasizing this point, she is attempting to defend the nature of Tibetans as a people.

Other activists also spoke in direct contradiction to themselves, often in convoluted ways. One activist, for example, made the following statement:

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<sup>14</sup> In his defense of women's lack of educational opportunities, this activist further stated that "if you forcibly go and look for reasons and say this [lack of opportunities] is a sign that women are scorned, there might be things to say on that front, but...it's not that women have been deliberately denigrated. It's because traditions formed that way" (male activist).

In religion, it is said that women's bodies are dirty and men's bodies are cleaner. Although at the beginning that was said to a particular person or group, I think that actually it is absolutely not the view [in religion] that women's and men's bodies have a difference in cleanliness. (male activist)

This is a curious statement, in which an assertion is directly followed by a negation of the first assertion. In this case, the activist appears to be attempting to obscure the existence of inegalitarian portrayals of women so as to defend Tibetan culture. Similarly, one women's activist said patrilocal marriage is not difficult for women because women no longer have much work to do. At another point, she said she feels sorry for rural women because they must work so hard. In this case, it appears the activist was attempting to hide her awareness of the harms caused by women's heavy burden of labor, because her aim is to sidestep and obscure the existence of this social problem.

The contradictions found within activists' accounts tend to rest on the dual but sometimes contradictory goals of women's advancement on the one hand and Tibetans' unity and cultural preservation on the other. That is, activists face the sometimes competing pressures of, on the one hand, their work to ameliorate the effects of socialization which hampers women's achievement and confidence while, on the other hand, needing to refrain from openly opposing unfair social pressures on women so as to defend Tibetan culture and maintain social cohesion (see figure below).<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> As the above-mentioned woman who has produced and distributed a video on Tibetan women's rights states, "I am only claiming rights for Tibetan women but not demanding destruction of Tibetan tradition" (Drolma, 2010). Her statement reveals the tensions and opposing forces and priorities which Tibetan women's empowerment activists must contend with.



Similarly, while this activist argued that rights derive from women's own competence and hard work, and therefore that rights cannot be given to women, she also listed the practice of polyandrous marriage, occurring in some Tibetan areas, as a positive aspect of Tibetan culture because the women in these families are 'given' rights. "So for these people there is no reason to talk about freedom and rights. Their families give it to them and they're happy," she said (female activist). Yet this activist also argued that rights are not something which can be 'given' to women at all. Thus, this statement is in direct contradiction to her earlier argument. Despite the contradiction, however, both arguments are in line with activists' goals. The first point, that women must become successful because rights cannot be given to women, argues for women's rights in a way that focuses on women's individual achievement, therefore refraining from instigating women's conflict with men or threatening men's position in society. The second point, that some Tibetan women are given all the rights they might need or want, is attempting to emphasize that Tibetan society has no problem of gender inequality, and is therefore a statement counteracting stigma for Tibetan society.

### **A Representative Example**

Let us look in some detail at one portion of an activist's account, as this account can be taken as a representative example displaying the various concerns of the women's empowerment activists. This activist spoke about King Songtsen Gampo, a revered figure in ancient Tibetan history. It is well-known that King Songtsen Gampo established a rule that women should not be listened to. The activist defended this ruling by arguing that, in ancient times, Tibetan women did not travel, stayed at home, and "had absolutely no opportunity to study or go outside [their home areas]" (female activist). As a result, she argued, women's lack of experience and travel made them short-sighted. Therefore, according to this activist, not listening to women was appropriate in ancient times, and is even sometimes appropriate today. This activist further argued that women's biology causes their mental inferiority to men, and that women prefer to be dependent on husbands because "Tibetan women have lazy thinking." Women's inferior mental capacities and women's inferior opinions are, according to this activist, a result of women's biology as well as of historical patterns by which Tibetan women relied on men to earn money. The conclusion of this activist's arguments is that women should stop 'having lazy thinking' and instead grasp the opportunities for study and professional work which they have re-

cently been given; women should therefore study hard and work hard to earn money on their own.

Thus, while this activist aims to enhance women's independence and success, she also clearly believes women to be innately inferior to men. In addition, it may be important to note that this activist's arguments are factually inaccurate. Firstly, women work incredibly hard for their households. The material welfare and prosperity of a household is largely dependent on women's work. Thus butter and cheese made by women is sold for money, women are often at least partially involved in the care of livestock, a primary source of wealth for Tibetan nomads, while in some farming areas women are considered to be better at digging for the lucrative medicinal plant known as 'caterpillar fungus,' and are therefore the individuals doing the hard labor of collecting the fungus. One might easily describe this as a situation in which household prosperity depends on women, and household men in fact depend on women. Moreover, while some of the above-mentioned activities, such as digging for caterpillar fungus, have grown increasingly common and lucrative in current times, interviewees consistently stated that certain activities, such as making butter and cheese, or weeding farming fields, have always been undertaken by women. Thus, it is rather inaccurate to claim women's material prosperity has been entirely dependent on men within Tibetan history. While men are primarily responsible for travelling to towns and cities so as to sell household products for cash, women have been significantly involved in producing those products in the first place.

Furthermore, this activist's argument that historically Tibetan women had no opportunities to study or travel appears patently false, as she herself reveals at other points in her interview. Thus, she mentioned that, in ancient times, the daughters and wives of kings and famous people had the opportunity to study. Other examples within Tibetan history of women's travel, study, involvement in politics, or even engaging in warfare are easily found. Examples of renowned female religious practitioners and teachers are many, such as A-yu Khandro, Machig Lapdron, Yeshe Tsogyal, and Nangsa Obum, some of whom studied with religious masters and also travelled widely (Allione, 2000; Diemberger, 2007; Kemmerer, 2011; Schneider, 2010). Although we must point out that many of these historical figures faced many barriers at the hands of parents, husbands, and elders who tried to restrict their freedom to undertake a religious life (Allione, 2000; Diemberger, 2007), to claim that women never had the opportunity to study or travel, and thereby learned to be lazy, intellectually weak, and dependent, is not borne out by the evidence. Moreover, women historical figures, including those alive

in the 1950s and 60s, have been involved in political intrigue and even battle, proving themselves astute and conniving in these activities, though they were not always celebrated for their feats (Diemberger, 2011; Karmay, 1998; Schneider, 2010; Van Schaik, 2011; ལྷོ་བཀའ་ལྷོ། [GyayeTrabo], n.d.). Thus, a dependent and inferior mentality has by no means been universal among Tibetan women.

We might consider the above examples to be exceptional cases of unusual or unusually positioned women. However, even in the case of more ordinary women, the above-mentioned activist's argument does not seem to hold. For example, an 84-year-old interviewee of the current study spoke about independently undertaking a long and dangerous journey of pilgrimage to Lhasa when she was 20 years old, joining a group of other pilgrims for the journey and begging for food or working for rich families along the way to earn her subsistence. This interviewee said many young women travelled the way she did at the time. Moreover, the fact that the study region has a long history of banditry, tribal rivalry, and shifting political alliances (Costello, 2008; Jabb, 2009; Nietupski, 2011; Pirie, 2007, 2012), as well as poor roads and means of transport in the recent past, suggests that young men were likely to have been away from home for extended periods of time for warfare or trade. Women, then, would have potentially been left to care for all household matters with relative independence at these times. At least around the year 1958, as older interviewees and informants revealed, in some villages only women and children were left behind after men were killed and imprisoned in the fighting of the time. This would also suggest that women undertook a lot of independent responsibility for their families' livelihoods at this time.

The reasons contradictions and inaccurate assessments exist in the above-mentioned activist's account are twofold. One, King Songtsen Gampo is a highly revered figure within Tibetan history and the interviewee likely feels it unthinkable to criticize him, as to do so would be to go against an honored and revered symbol of Tibetan civilization. Thus, she must find an argument to defend the king's rule prohibiting listening to women. Such a defense is in fact a defense of Tibetan culture and civilization. Therefore she must claim the rule is neither unfair nor unjust even though it is clearly inegalitarian. Secondly, this interviewee's adherence to beliefs that women are mentally and emotionally inferior to men is strong and therefore colors her assessment of Tibetan society and history. Such beliefs can easily reinforce the tendency, found among the other activists as well, to individualize the problem of women's low status such that a lack of rights is deemed to result from the faults of individual women rather than from larger societal structures. This activist's views, then,

are representative of the main themes emerging from the group of women's empowerment activists, in that she does not adhere to a strong feminist ethic, believes opportunities and esteem for women are a product of modern times and modern forces, blames women for their own disempowerment, is intent on defending Tibetan tradition and culture, but is also intent on promoting the value that women grasp educational and professional opportunities and become successful in these spheres.

### Conclusion

While the women's activists draw on a Chinese discursive environment to understand and respond to the problems they apprehend within Tibetan society, their objectives are not entirely unique. As described by Dawa Lokyitsang, for example, Tibetans' advocacy for women's empowerment in exile in India has until recently been characterized by a focus upon access to educational opportunities and development of skills while largely ignoring issues such as violence against women (2014). Moreover, the ideas espoused by the activists bear similarities to global discourses (often termed 'neoliberal') which frame individual economic success as contingent on the development of professional skills and flexible responses to shifting economic environments. These discourses can have the effect of masking the disadvantages of broader structural factors such as race and class, as well as the vulnerabilities brought about by a fluid and changing economic landscape (Freeman, 2007; Roberts & Mahtani, 2010).

Along the same lines, the women's empowerment activists of the current study mask the existence of broader social patterns of gender-based oppression by contending that women's status is a product of individuals' capabilities alone. They describe a social environment in which gender-based oppression is alive and well, but do not express indignance towards this context. In response to my questions, the activists described and explained problems of gender inequality inherent in social norms and practices. Yet they were not particularly concerned with dismissive or belittling treatment of women. This is not surprising, since the activists' primary aim is *not* improving the treatment of women, but rather strengthening the Tibetan nationality. For the activists, this strengthening is to be achieved by enhancing the prominence and professional success of women, while at the same time refraining from actions that may cause conflict with men, disrupt community unity, change women's household roles, or threaten men's position in society. Rather than criticize a social envi-

ronment that serves to dampen women's confidence, therefore, the activists prefer to refrain from criticizing society at large, while at the same time instructing women and girls to believe in themselves more. They therefore are active in attempts to improve the prominence, educational opportunities, and self-confidence of Tibetan women and girls, but do not support open complaint or vocal calls for change.

The late Qing and early Republican-era reformers described above were operating during a time of national crisis. The overwhelming issues at hand, for the reformers, were pressures which had "helped weaken China and expose it to the danger of enslavement by global colonizing forces" (Hershatter, 2004, p. 1029). Similarly, the women's empowerment activists of the current study express a sense of crisis in which Tibetans, as an identifiable and distinct ethnic group claiming a living culture, living traditions, and a proud history, face the danger of obliteration. Therefore, like the Chinese reformers of an earlier era, they subordinate feminist priorities in order to emphasize the task of strengthening the nationality. In the process, they draw upon state discourses of individual discipline, modernity, and civilization to argue for a conception of women's rights that individualizes women's low status, framing it as a reflection of individual women's own capacities. For the activists, the paramount objective is strengthening the nationality, rendering their conception of women's rights both limited in scope and victim-blaming in thrust.

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