


## Caring for Women's Words and Women's Bodies. A Field Note on Palmo and her "Demoness Welfare Association for Women"

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n a warm afternoon in August, I asked Palmo (dPal mo),<sup>1</sup> "What kind of people do you recruit to work with you at the 'Demoness Association'?" We were in the empty apartment of her relatives in Xining where she was staying temporarily. She crouched down next to me, holding my hand, and said:

First, women. Not just that, but warm (*sha tsha*) and respectful (*rtsis bkur*) women. With ethics (*kun spyod*). Women who are not afraid to take other women's hands, as I am doing now with you, to listen to them, however uneducated they are. When we go out to the field, we cook with these women, we laugh with them, we share their lives. We don't stay at fancy hotels. Sophisticated women, proud women, and of course women who cannot speak fluent Tibetan cannot work with us. We also need women doctors, of course. And women in good health, because we go out to the fields in the winter, we carry heavy stuff, we travel long distances over uncomfortable roads and we stay in places that are Spartan at best. And we still have to be fit for the few days we are in the fields. Women who have health problems, women who have problems with their husbands, or mothers with newborn children—we cannot hire them, I am sorry to say. We need women who can dedicate one hundred percent of their time to our activities, when we are out in the field.

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<sup>1</sup> In Amdo dialect, her name is pronounced Huamo; but I keep it here in the standard Tibetan transcription, Palmo.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this article, I use abbreviated terms, such as "Demoness Association" (*Srin mo tshogs pa*) for its complete name "Demoness Welfare Association for Women" (*Srin mo bud med rogs skyor tshogs pa*).

These may be demanding requirements for recruitment, but Palmo has managed to form a core group of committed Tibetan women who each take their turn to carry out voluntary women-focused activities under the umbrella of the Demoness Welfare Association for Women, founded by Palmo in 2009. While the combination of women's health and women's literacy is a common feature of public health agendas world-wide, the interests of this association reflect those of the founder. Her specialisation and interests lie in two apparently unrelated fields and make up the core of this grass-roots association—women's writings and women's health. This short field note will briefly introduce Palmo and the three specific fields of actions of her association: women's literature, rural women's health and nuns' health.



Fig. 1. Palmo in Xining. Photo: Françoise Robin, 2015.

Palmo is a modern female intellectual, a professor of Tibetan literature in the Tibetan Studies department of the Northwest Nationalities University (Tib. Nub byang mi rigs slob grwa chen mo, Ch. Xibei Minzu Daxue) in Lanzhou (Gansu Province). She was born in 1968 into a community of pastoralists north of Kokonor lake (mTsho sngon po) as the daughter of an active woman cadre and an unassuming father. In our conversations over the years, Palmo repeatedly expressed her admiration for sacred women from Tibetan history, such as Machig Labdroen (Ma gcig lab sgron, 1055-1149). She has also great admiration for Sera Khandro (Se ra mkha' 'gro kun bzang bde skyong dbang mo, 1892-1940) and is familiar with her writings. Presently, she is about to publish—in Tibetan—one of the

rare autobiographies written by a woman, Orgyan Chokyi (O rgyan chos skyid, 1675-1729). She had come to know about this text through the work of a western scholar, Kurtis Schaeffer, who published an English translation of Orgyan Chokyi's autobiography in 2004.<sup>3</sup>

### 1. Words and Literacy

The Demoness Association was founded in 2009. The name “demoness” (*srin mo*)—familiar to Tibetans (and Tibetan specialists)—sometime invokes ambivalence, while at other times it is seen as provocative. Yet it was consciously chosen by Palmo to signify women and strength,<sup>4</sup> indicating a will to work for women's empowerment.<sup>5</sup> From its inception, the association and its board, which currently has 13 members, have been active in two fields, targeting two widely differing groups of women on the Tibetan plateau: pastoralists and farmers in rural areas whose access to health is highly limited and often problematic, and at the other end of the spectrum, highly literate, well educated and usually urban women who face problems and discrimination concerning access to the Tibetan language literary scene. This seemingly odd duality of focus clearly reflects Palmo's own training, personality and ideals, and also reveals the uneasy space occupied by Tibetan women in the Amdo (A mdo) part of Tibet.

A poet and writer herself, Palmo experienced firsthand the dearth of opportunities for women writers. The world of Tibetan language

<sup>3</sup> Schaeffer 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Two important demonesses are attested to in Tibetan mythology: one is the formidable “supine demoness” or ogress (*srin mo*) believed to be located under the land of Tibet. That demoness had to be pinned down via temples and stupas built on her joints, for Buddhism to be able to spread in Tibet and further beyond in the Himalayas. For details, see Gyatso 1987, and Mills 2007 for a geomantic reassessment of Gyatso's feminist reading of the myth. Another demoness is the alleged and mythical mother of the Tibetan people: this “mother demoness from the rocks” (*ma brag srin mo*) mated with a monkey, an emanation of the Bodhisattva of Compassion, Avalokiteśvara (*sPyan ras gzigs*), engendering offspring who are considered to be the ancestors of the Tibetan people. According to this legend, Tibetans inherited compassion from their father and aggressiveness from their mother. It is not clear from which demoness the association takes its name, although the latter seems more likely.

<sup>5</sup> Not everyone seems to appreciate the association's name. Some men express puzzlement and even dislike at a name that they associate with hostility and aggressiveness. As Gyatso has shown, the demoness can be considered the symbol of an ignorant pre-Buddhist Tibet that has to be tamed by Buddhism. By claiming to restore the demoness, and to assert its feminine identity, Palmo might have wished to challenge the sometimes negative Tibetan Buddhist images of women's “lower birth” (*skye dman*) associated with this formidable creature.

literature differs little from similar fields elsewhere and can be described as being undoubtedly androcentric. According to my estimate, writings by women have accounted for only two to eight percent of all published literary material in Tibet since 1980s.<sup>6</sup> This can be explained only partly by the comparatively low percentage of women attending school in the 1980s up until the mid-1990s, at least in most Amdo areas. The few literate women who were bold enough to submit their writings to editors and publishers faced numerous hurdles until the early 2010s before their works would see publication.

In literary journals, sending a piece of literature signed by one's name (names are often gendered in Tibet) meant being classified according to one's gender. In the case of women, this often meant being put on hold by a journal editor, usually a man, who would wait until he had enough material to insert a special "women's writing section" in an issue. In publishing houses, the problem is largely financial, as most books published in Tibetan language have to be self-financed by their author, even if printed by an official publishing house. With an inferior level of education, and hence with lower wages and less financial independence, women are less likely than men to meet the financial criteria imposed by publishers.<sup>7</sup> As a consequence, few women writers reach the stage of publication, often keeping their writings for themselves and never seeing them in print.

Palmo, aware of this critical situation, strove to change it through her Demoneess Association. She started publishing books and collections of texts by women authors only, beginning with an anthology of women's poetry,<sup>8</sup> for which she obtained support from a New York-based development organisation, the Trace Foundation. In 2011, she launched a four-volume collection covering diverse literary genres written by Tibetan women writers only (fiction, poetry, essays and poetic prose).<sup>9</sup> In 2014, this time with support

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<sup>6</sup> Robin 2015. This figure is valid for publications that are mixed in terms of the gender of the authors (magazines, anthologies). Still, from the year 2000 onwards, women have started publishing women-only books and anthologies, a change which can be attributed in good part to Palmo's actions, as will be seen in the present article. For a general survey of 25 years of Tibetan women poetry, see Robin 2010.

<sup>7</sup> According to Palmo this difference of treatment is also at work in the salary received by the authors: a male author receives 100 yuan for 1000 characters, but a woman author is only paid 80 yuan.

<sup>8</sup> dPal mo 2005a.

<sup>9</sup> See dPal mo 2011.

from the state, she edited a collection of five single-author volumes.<sup>10</sup> Another five-volume set is planned for 2015 and a third for 2016.

Palmo is presently preparing a trilingual encyclopaedia (Tibetan, English, Chinese) of famous women in Tibetan civilisation and a collection of writings by famous women in Tibetan history. She had launched a woman's journal (Tib. *Gangs can skyes ma'i tshags par*, "Journal of Women from the Land of Snow") in 2009 but it was temporarily halted by the authorities, who regarded its content as being problematic. She has organised two women-only literary competitions: one for adult writers, and one at the privately run "Girl School of the Grassland" (*rTswa thang bu mo slob grwa*, 500 pupils), founded by the monk Jigme Gyaltzen ('Jigs med rgyal mtshan) from Ragya (Ra rgya) monastery (Qinghai Province).

As she recalled in 2015, although she had already proved that Tibetan women writers are as worthy of publishing their literary works as men are, she still had to face discriminatory behaviour on the part of male literature professionals. In one instance, a male editor at a publishing house declined to attend the launching ceremony for one of her collections. In another case, a publisher was reluctant to print what he considered to be too many copies of one of her anthologies, but in fact, the initial print run of 3,000 copies was sold out in seven days. Palmo and her Demoness Association have also promoted a more unusual initiative: book fairs by female students. These are held at the university where she teaches. Through these endeavours, Palmo demonstrates that women writers exist and produce interesting literature in Tibet, nurturing a field of women's literature and defusing a common prejudice about the impossibility of women being on a par with men in the field of literary achievement. In itself, this active involvement with literature is noteworthy, as she is the sole Tibetan writer I know of who has no institutional support but has actively launched such important social activities in the field of literature.

## 2. Rural women's bodies

However passionate Palmo may be about literature, words, and the fate of Tibetan language, she is a woman above all, and a woman who claims her feminine identity with pride. In her poem "I am a woman", she enumerates and claims for herself the different parts of her womanly body. Rather than lament what is commonly a subject

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<sup>10</sup> mTsho 2014; Tshe ring dbyangs skyid 2014; Kha ba lha mo 2014; rTogs sad lha mo 2014; dPal mo 2014.

of shame in traditional Tibetan society, on the contrary, she boasts about it.<sup>11</sup> She finds the miserable health condition of many rural women of her age and older (that is, above 45) distressing; she had tears in her eyes when we were talking about it in August 2015. How come, she thought, that she was still in a good shape while women of the same age as her but living in rural areas age quickly and suffer countless health problems? This assessment led her to diversify the activities of the Demoness Association. From women already quite privileged, endowed with high educational and social capital, and little physical disabilities, the efforts were directed towards the other end of the female spectrum, that of uneducated, illiterate Tibetan women, and their relationship to their body.

Palmo believes that adult rural Tibetan women, i.e. most of the women of her generation, suffer from hastily implemented and badly adapted birth control policies starting in the early 1980s and going on for 15 to 16 years. According to her observations, they have often undergone sterilisation after their first or second child, perhaps not under constraint, but with certainly very limited information, scant instructions in terms of hygiene and self care, and hardly any possibility to confide to their husbands. Here, Palmo's analysis agrees with Mona Schrepf's formula: such birth control policies have left these women "*scarred by, and scared of, the state's facilities associated with birth and birth control*".<sup>12</sup> In the Mongolian Autonomous district of Sogdzong (Sog rdzong, Chin. Henan, rMa lho Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai), according to Palmo's own findings, seven out of ten women above 40 years of age had been sterilised. "Contrary to city women and Han women," she said, "Tibetan women as well as most women from a minority rural background had not been informed of alternative contraceptives (coil, condom) back in the 1980s and 1990s, and underwent sterilisation in massive numbers for want of a better method—hence the current problems."

Speaking no Chinese, having no personal savings, isolated in the countryside, surrounded by women as undereducated as them, having internalised the shame associated with women's status and diseases, living in a world where power and knowledge holders (village leaders, lamas, doctors) are overwhelmingly male, these women had often to keep silent about their sickness, being deprived

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<sup>11</sup> dPal mo 2005b. See Robin 2013 for a partial translation of this poem and for a discussion of the topic of the literary relationship of today's Tibetan women poets to their bodies.

<sup>12</sup> Schrepf 2011: 342; my emphasis. Schrepf also stresses the often limited medical skill or even malpractice, especially during former, occasionally practiced mass-sterilisation campaigns.

of any possibility to ask even basic questions. Moreover, their education has hardly encouraged them to take time to reflect upon themselves and their feelings, be they physical or psychological.<sup>13</sup>

Thus began the aim of members of the Demoness Association to work in the ambit of Tibetan women's health, temporarily putting a halt to its literary-focused activities. I asked Palmo in what way the implications of the work of the Demoness Association in a field like women's health collide or interfere with that of the omnipresent and powerful state-run All-China Women's Federation (Chin. *Quanguo funu lianhe hui*), with its many local branches and subbranches covering the whole country.<sup>14</sup> In what way could the Demoness Association differentiate itself? Palmo's findings also reveal that in rural areas state-run health organisations invite more suspicion than trust on the part of Tibetan women.<sup>15</sup> First, it consists mainly of Han Chinese women with little cultural sensitivity and no knowledge of Tibetan language and culture, and little material in Tibetan language, a problematic barrier when one is to communicate with and establish trust-based relations with women patients whose mastery of Chinese is at best paltry.

Also, according to Palmo's contacts in the field, members of All-China's Women Federation are seen as perfunctory bureaucrats whose main role consists in monitoring women's reproductive affairs, as well as ensuring that top-down campaigns are implemented with as few efforts as possible, demonstrating limited genuine interest in their job and in the targeted audience. "Whether they do something or nothing, it's all the same," summarised one of Palmo's co-workers. Moreover, in the sensitive field of Sino-Tibetan interaction, the Chinese state's "benevolence" and "care" are in fact often perceived with suspicion as the invisible hand of the state, even by the few politically savvy yet illiterate women for whom the state's interference in their reproductive capacity is met with reluctance and mistrust.

Between 2009 and 2013, the Demoness Association organised 13

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<sup>13</sup> When visiting a rural village in Dobi (rDo sbis, Xunhua district, Qinghai province), ten years ago, leisurely sipping a cup of tea with the male members of the family I was staying with, I was told by my young male Tibetan friend that it was common to frown upon a woman who pauses to drink between meals, as it implies that she privileges her own comfort over what are conventionally considered more pressing domestic tasks.

<sup>14</sup> In fact the same question could have been asked regarding the Demoness Association's literary activities. The dearth of women on the literary scene was noticed by Hartley 2005 and Gyatso & Havnevik 2005.

<sup>15</sup> This coincides with Mona Schrempf's research findings on contraception, women's reproductive health and health-seeking behaviour (Schrempf 2011).

field trips to Amdo-speaking parts of Qinghai and Gansu provinces.<sup>16</sup> Most trips lasted for three or four days, and an average of 130 women attended the training sessions. These were arranged in agreement with local leaders and go-betweens, thanks to the intervention of members of the Association who hail from different parts of Amdo and enjoy good connections with local leaders.<sup>17</sup> Field trips take place during a holiday when the members of the Association are free,<sup>18</sup> on a voluntary basis, and consist of a team of four to six women in general. There has to be at least one woman doctor who specialises in gynaecology (literally “women’s diseases”, *mo nad*), ideally two, as well as a few accompanying women. All are Tibetans as Tibetan language is mandatory, lack of access to health for rural women being often due, among others, to the cultural and language barriers experienced by illiterate and monolingual women patients facing Han male doctors. The Demoness Association asks the local leaders to publicise the visit of the voluntary team, and to have a location arranged for them that can host as many women as possible in the villages visited. During the first two years (2009, 2010), women did not dare (or bother) to attend, and women above 35 were too ashamed to stay and watch, for example, pictures of male sexual organs. Now, Palmo and the doctors demonstrate the use of protection by using bananas, otherwise women would run away before the end of the presentation. In other words, the Association adapted a more pragmatic audience-oriented strategy.



Fig. 2. First evening of the field trip in Xunhua District (Qinghai Province).  
Photo: Courtesy of Demoness Association, 2011.

<sup>16</sup> The activities were stopped in 2014 and, in 2015, nuns were targeted, as will be seen below.

<sup>17</sup> The importance of not being a stranger for this kind of initiative to be successful is also stressed by Schrempf (2011: 339).

<sup>18</sup> Either in the summer or in one of the “golden weeks” of China, i.e. around May 1<sup>st</sup> and October 1<sup>st</sup>.



Palmo says with a sigh:

Human beings are greedy, it is their nature. So now we announce that we will distribute little presents for free, at the end of the presentation, to make sure these women stay till the end.

Presents consist of women's underwear, a novelty for many women above 50, as well as towels, contraceptive ovules and cream. Once everyone (up to 100 women, no men) is gathered, a now well-conceived 45-minute video-presentation is shown on a wall or on a makeshift screen.<sup>19</sup> Palmo begins with a 10-minute general introduction, deflating suspicion by making clear she is not sent by the state (*gzhung gis btang ni ma red*) but that she has come as a voluntary member of a Tibetan women's association, with a pure heart (*lhag bsam*). This preliminary session confirms the significance of the trust factor, as already noted by Schrempf.<sup>20</sup> She tells her female audience that they should not feel shy about buying sanitary towels, and she explains how to use them. She encourages them to compare the necessary and useful purchase of sanitary towels every month, representing a maximum of ten yuan, to the price of cigarettes spent by their husbands—a not only useless but also harmful as well as expensive purchase, since the budget dedicated to cigarettes can run up to 300 yuan per month. She is then followed by a female doctor, wearing a white coat to indicate that she has the credentials to speak with authority.<sup>21</sup> The latter talks about birth control, reproduction, hygiene, and maternal care, while presenting on a screen tailor-made bilingual (Chinese-Tibetan) pictures and photographs to her audience. Women can also individually consult doctors who then take careful notes of their medical records.

Soon after the first trainings started, women felt that their husbands needed to be educated too about male and female health and sex-related diseases, and requested that the presentation be given to them as well. Even the otherwise audacious Palmo felt too shy for that. However, a female doctor volunteered to take up the task, gathering men separately to teach them about reproduction and

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<sup>19</sup> Palmo explained that they have developed three different types of presentation according to the targeted audience: farmers, herders and students (in the latter case they insist on birth control and contraception, but not so much on hygiene, which is a familiar topic to them).

<sup>20</sup> See Schrempf 2011: 333 ff.

<sup>21</sup> The use of a white coat can be double edged: it may also lead to an ethnic misidentification, i.e. being associated with Chinese doctors more than with being a Tibetan (see Schrempf 2011: 335 for an example).

health. This woman doctor, Palmo added with satisfaction, has given such a talk in front of a total of 10,000 persons, including men: “She is really brave!”<sup>22</sup> In a world where women rarely speak in public (the only public arena where they are conspicuous is the singing scene), a woman speaking about private health problems to men is indeed rare enough, and thus important to mention in this context.



Fig. 3. A Tibetan woman doctor showing a picture of a foetus on a makeshift screen during a field trip, Xunhua District (Qinghai Province).

Photo: Courtesy of Demoness Association, 2011.

Things did not go smoothly at the start. Apart from initial reluctance and shyness shown by rural women, among men negative comments could also be heard. Audiences in the male-only training sessions would crack dirty jokes at the female doctor, but Palmo intervened and said she would not allow this to happen any longer. The fact that Palmo is herself divorced with no children, an unusual and frowned upon situation in traditional Tibetan society, invited many derogatory comments on the internet, where Palmo regularly presents the Demoness Association’s work. These comments heavily attacked her private life. Initially disturbed by such misplaced comments, she decided not to read them any longer and deterred her colleagues from reading them too, urging them to carry on instead with their work. However, from 2012 onwards there has been a shift, she said, and now the Association receives so many invitations for workshops in remote rural areas that they are unable to take them all up.

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<sup>22</sup> *sPobs pa chen po*.

### 3. Nun's bodies

Encouraging literary practice among women with high cultural capital and improving health among women with low economic and cultural capital could be seen as covering the whole range of most women problems. What were the plans of Palmo's Association for the future? Palmo replied that younger women, even in the countryside, now have much better access to education than their mothers. They are more educated in terms of hygiene, contraception, and childcare. As a consequence, health, birth control and mother-child related education developed by the Demoness Association will hopefully become a thing of the past within 10 years, she estimates.<sup>23</sup>

Yet, Palmo found that there is still one category of women who has escaped her Association's attention: nuns. The idea occurred to Palmo when in 2013 two of her female students invited the Demoness Association to two nunneries, located not far from their own homelands in Amdo and Khams, in today's Ngaba (rNga ba) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province: Jogoen Yishin Khachoeing (Jo dgon yid bzhin mkha' spyod gling), which hosts 500 nuns (175 were present at the workshop), and then Khyungchue Jogoen (Khyung mchu'i jo dgon, 200 nuns). The two students told Palmo that, through their nun relatives currently living there, they have heard of urgent health problems that needed to be addressed. When Palmo put forward the idea to the board members of her association—a team of committed, urban, educated Tibetan women—for approval, it was met with surprise and disbelief. Why focus on nuns' health? Having (in theory) no sexual activity, they do not need any information about birth control or sexually transmitted diseases. But Palmo retorted that nuns have health problems like everyone else (she listed stomach, kidney and liver conditions; menstruation as well as breast-related problems).<sup>24</sup> They also tend to neglect or be shy about hygiene (or cleanliness, *gtsang phra*). More specifically, said Palmo, their meditational practice (*mtshams*) leads to specific problems "as they sit for too long on the ground."<sup>25</sup> Of course, they have no one to confide in, being particularly shy (*bag khums*) about their body and these problems.

So it was agreed to establish contact with and visit these two

<sup>23</sup> Again, this coincides with Schrempf's findings (2011: 344).

<sup>24</sup> On the topic of nun's diseases, see the very informative article by Schneider 2012.

<sup>25</sup> According to Nicola Schneider, in the 1990s, a Chinese physician from Belgium started medical consultation with nuns at Serthar (gSer thar) monastery. It was found out that they had a very specific problem: their womb was literally "rotten" due to long meditative sessions sitting on an often cold and moist ground, with little protection (personal communication, Paris, 18 October 2015).

nunneries. Palmo hired two drivers and teamed up with three women doctors from Qinghai (among whom a gynaecologist was able to discreetly borrow an ultrasound machine from her hospital over the weekend, bringing it back at the end of her field trip). Between April 10<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup>, 2015, they visited these two nunneries next to Larung Gar (Bla rung sgar), after a very long car ride. At first, Palmo said, like everywhere else, nuns would look down and stay mute; they were too “embarrassed” (*bag khums*) to ask questions or even to admit interest in what the Demoness team had to tell them. Yet, as time went on, they became more daring and open. The doctors also distributed medicine. The work with nuns is only beginning. Through Choephel Zangpo (Chos 'phel bzang po), a committed activist fighting Aids in Qinghai, and his association “All-Loving Volunteers for the Prevention of Aids” (Kun brtse e 'gog rang 'dun pa), whom Palmo met in 2012 in Chengdu, the Demoness Association is now deploying its two-pronged activity once more in the direction of another nunnery: the main nunnery (*jo mo dgon pa*) in Larung Gar, which houses up to 5,000 nuns according to Palmo's own estimate. Having met two female masters of studies (*mkhan mo*) there last year, and under the supervision of Khenpo Tsultrim Lodroe (mKhan po Tshul khirms blo gros), they have jointly produced two books about women's health, as well as three series of books about the writings of famous Tibetan religious women,<sup>26</sup> thus showing concerns that converge with those of Palmo and her association.

#### 4. Dissenting voices

This brief note would be incomplete if dissenting voices were not granted space. I will leave aside men's doubts about and disagreement with the Association's actions and, perhaps more accurately, about Palmo as a person herself, and focus on critiques from Tibetan women who know her activities well and sometimes even work for her. Critiques are rather minor but they show that the educated feminine ground in Amdo today does not speak with a single voice. The first critique I heard came from a rather well established woman writer: to her mind, Palmo and the general approach of her association is too aggressive and confrontational, and this could turn out to be more counterproductive than beneficial for the women's cause. The woman writer claimed that in its present

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<sup>26</sup> In one interview, Palmo mentioned 16 books in that collection, but it appears that the collection contains 15 titles altogether.

state, Tibetan society needs a gentler approach if it is to succeed in raising women's rights and literacy level. Moreover, in terms of women's health, she thought that the All-China Women's Federation was reasonably efficient and responsible, having been herself a member of a local section of the All-China Women's Federation; thus she passed milder judgement on this state-run organisation.

The other critique that I heard came from a woman who is closer to Palmo but who, out of respect to her and her hard work, and in regards of their respective hierarchical stance, did not dare voice her remarks too openly, adding that Palmo was so dedicated that it would seem ungrateful or unfair to criticise her. This literature-loving woman confided that the focus on literature appears now to be anachronistic: "We don't need to nurture women writers now. We are in a new age." This statement does not imply disillusion or a lack of interest in literature, but testifies to this woman's pragmatic observation of a shift in intellectual practices in Tibet today. At the time of this writer's teenage years and young adulthood, literature was one of the only fields where one could operate as an educated Tibetan woman (or man) outside of the Party. Today, new entrepreneurs are mushrooming and videos and films have replaced short stories and poems as markers of ethnic identity; social activism has become a viable option.

### 5. *New directions*

Palmo is somehow aware of this modern shift: for the fourth literary prize awarded to girls schooled at the "Snowland Girls' School" (*Gangs can bu mo slob grwa*), poetic composition was forbidden and only short literary essays (*lhug rtsom*) were accepted.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, Palmo has started to organise workshops at her university to empower educated women and encourage them to be able to compete on the job market with their male counterparts. The latter are often more daring than women students who are expected to be quiet, self-effacing and obedient. It is also important to note that the Demoness Association's activities extend beyond women's literature and health: in 2011, an ex-student of Palmo, who was then working in Shanghai, secured support from 10 Han Chinese sponsors for the Association. They came as tourists to Kangtse (rKang tsha) and

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<sup>27</sup> I was lucky to be in Xining at the time of deliberation and to be included in the jury, a team of five adult readers (four women, one man). 50 short pieces were competing, most dealing with teachers' and parents' kindness or missing one's family and homeland. Few demonstrated any literary skill, although the jury agreed that spelling and syntax were generally good.

pledged to help children in need (boys and girls alike), from Tsochang (mTsho byang), Chabcha (Chab cha), and Chentsa (gCan tsha), for two to three years of schooling.

Still, literature features prominently for Palmo. She has set up a WeChat conversation group, called “Kitchen” (Thab tshang), with over 50 members, in which news about women’s literature is shared. She hopes that after solving women’s health matters, she will be able to return to literature, her original focus and locus of interest. But she adds upon reflection that there is yet another direction in which she would like to extend the association’s activity: legal counselling for women. Wife beating is not uncommon in Tibetan rural areas, but most women do not know that they would have the law on their side if they reported the abuse.<sup>28</sup>

The phone rings again. It is the editor from the Sichuan People’s Press calling to urge her to submit all manuscripts in time for next year’s publication—Palmo later stresses that this publishing house has never published any text in Tibetan language: their collection will thus be the first one. Palmo promises and hastily calls her writer female friends telling them not to waste this opportunity. The new collection benefits from a grant and authors will be paid for their books, reversing the usual trend of self-financing. Moreover, a combination of quality and quantity (*rgyu spus dang grangs ka*) will definitely install women’s writing in the Tibetan literary scene, she hopes. And so goes the busy life of Palmo, professor, writer, poet, health counsellor, team leader, a dedicated defender of Tibetan language and literature, a committed lay social activist engaged in providing health care for women and nuns and striving for more gender equality in Amdo.

## Bibliography

### *Works in Tibetan Language*

Kha ba lha mo

*Kha ba’i rna cha. dMangs phan rig mdzod. Bud med rtsom pa po’i dpe tshogs* (Snow Earring. Treasury of Knowledge for the Benefit of the

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<sup>28</sup> This objective may indicate a new direction for the defence and promotion of women’s rights in Tibetan areas. Rajan (2015) has shown that Tibetan women’s empowerment activists tend to overlook domestic violence in Amdo (and in exile as well). She links this silencing with the commonly-held imperative among Tibetans, at a time of ethnic and cultural survival anxiety, to “maintain a dignified stance” to the outside world, thus denying any major flaw in Tibetan society.

People. Collection of Women Writers), Zi ling, mTsho sngon mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 2014.

dPal mo

- *dPyid kyi dpal mo. dMangs phan rig mdzod. Bud med rtsom pa po'i dpe tshogs* (The Beauty of Spring. Treasury of Knowledge for the Benefit of the People. A Collection of Women Writers' Works), Zi ling, mTsho sngon mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 2014.
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dPal mo (ed.)

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