

Literature Review of English and Chinese Research on Machik Labdrön and Tibetan Buddhist Chöd Tradition

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Abstract: The Chöd was founded in the 11th century by the Tibetan female tantric master Machik Labdrön, and is the only school in Tibetan Buddhist history founded by a woman. The teachings of Chöd have been passed down through other schools and have become an important method for practitioners. At present, the study of Machik Labdrön and the Chöd by Chinese academia is still in its early stages, while the foreign academic community has a variety of approaches and fruitful results, but there is a lack of comprehensive articles that summarize the research. At the same time, there is limited communication between Chinese and foreign academics in this field. This paper uses the methods of literature research and comparative research to sort out the research results of Chinese and foreign scholars on Machik Labdrön and the Chöd, build a bridge between Chinese and foreign research, and propose suggestions for future research directions, laying a foundation for further promoting the research on Machik Labdrön and the Chöd.

Keywords: Tibetan Buddhism, Machik Labdrön, Chöd, comparison between China and the West

1. Introduction

Machik Labdrön (1049-1144) was a famous female tantric master of the later period of Tibetan Buddhism. She founded Chöd in the 11th century, which not only had a profound impact on various schools of Tibetan Buddhism and Tibetan society, but also laid the foundation for the formation and development of Tibetan Buddhist female monastic communities. Chöd practice has been passed down among the majority of monastic and believers, and have been introduced to various parts of the world. This article reviews and summarizes the current research status of Machik Labdrön and Chöd by combining published Chinese and English academic papers and monographs. Through academic reflection and summary, it looks to the future direction of research, with a view to promoting in-depth research into Machik Labdrön and Chöd.

2. Chinese studies on Machik Labdrön and Chöd

Among Tibetan Buddhist nuns, there are many great yoginis who have widely propagated the teachings of their respective sects, forming a unique regional culture. However, the research conducted by Chinese academics on the Tibetan Buddhist nuns is limited. At present, the focus of research is mainly on the life and achievements of Machik Labdrön, as well as the content of Chöd

ritual practice. Although there are many journal articles and dissertations, which reflect the appeal of this field to the new generation, overall, it still lacks in-depth exploration.

In China, the leading researcher on Machik Labdrön and Chöd is Deji Zhuoma, a researcher at the China Tibetology Research Center. Deji Zhuoma has long been engaged in the field of research on Tibetan Buddhist nuns. Through years of field research and reference to historical documents, she has written *A Study of Tibetan Buddhist Women in Monasticism* [1], which is the first comprehensive exploration of the issue of Tibetan Buddhist nuns. She is also one of the leading scholars in the study of the Chöd in China, and has written two monographs: *General Introduction to the Chöd of Tibetan Buddhism: A School Founded by a Tibetan Woman* [2] and *An Exploration of Chöd of Tibetan Buddhism* [3]. Therefore, the summary of Chinese literature mainly bases on the research results of Deji Zhuoma, and is divided into three aspects: the life of Machik Labdrön, her influence and the teaching and practice of Chöd. Due to the author's inability to read Tibetan, this research summary focuses on existing Chinese literature, supplemented by a list of some important Tibetan literature.

2.1. Biographical study of Machik Labdrön

The history of Machik Labdrön is covered in both Tibetan and Chinese literature. The biography of Machik Labdrön is discussed in Tibetan Buddhist history such as *Blue Annals*, and studies of Tibetan nuns [4-8]. Among the representative works in special studies is the book *The Biography of Phadampa Sangye and Machik Labdrön* by Chos khyi seng ge and Gang pa [9], which details the biography of Machik Labdrön. Deji Zhuoma's *A Study of Tibetan Buddhist Women in Monasticism* [1] is an important work in the field of Tibetan female Buddhist studies. It systematically sorts out the history of the Tibetan Buddhist female monastic community and studies Machik Labdrön and Chöd from the perspective of nuns. It provides a detailed introduction to the life and practice of Machik Labdrön. In addition, the author, Deji Zhuoma, also analyzes the nuns and nuns' religious organizations of the Nyingma, Kadam, and Sakya schools, and discusses in detail the various types of Tibetan Buddhist yoginis. It is a panoramic study of Tibetan Buddhist nuns. In terms of thesis, Ciren Pingcuo's master thesis *A Tentative Discussion of Machik Labdrön and Her Literary Works* [10] analyzes and studies Machik Labdrön and her works. It adopts a combination of folk legends, historical documents and field research to conduct a study of Machik Labdrön's former residence, birth and death date, and discusses her works and characteristics as well as her influence. Deji Yangzong's master's thesis *A Brief Analysis of Ancient Tibetan Women and Tibetan Buddhism: Taking Yeshe Tsogyel and Machik Labdrön as Examples* [11] studies the contributions of Machik Labdrön and expounds the influence of Tibetan Buddhism on Tibetan women. Now, this paper will summarize the research on the transliteration of name, birth and death years, and biographical events of Machik Labdrön.

2.1.1. Translation of name

There are multiple versions of the translation of Machik Labdrön in Chinese literature, and there is no unified version yet. This article uses the translation “Majiu lazhong” (in Pinyin) in the work by Deji zhuoma, and the different versions are counted as follows:

Table 1: Statistics on the translation of Machik Labdrön

Serial number	Translation (in Pinyin)	Author	Source
1	Majiu lazhong	Deji Zhuoma; Tazhou; Zhang yujiao	<i>A Brief Account of the Majura Zhongjue Domain Text;</i>

Table 1: (continued).

			<i>On the Ideological Origins of Sky Burial and Its Impact on Tibetan Society, etc.</i>
2	Maji lazhun	Tsiden Tashi, Tünla	<i>Ten Famous Women in Tibetan History; On the Special Status of Magyi Lhadrun, the Founder of joyu Sect, in Tibetan Buddhism</i>
3	Majila(Zunma)	Fang jianchang	<i>Tibetan Buddhist nuns</i>
4	Lao zhunma	Wang furen	<i>A Brief History of Tibetan Buddhism</i>
5	Maji lazhen	Wanma, Deji yangzong	<i>A brief discussion of the Tibetan Buddhist history of the female tantric master Machik Labdrön and Chöd; A Brief Analysis of Ancient Tibetan Women and Tibetan Buddhism: Taking Yeshe Tsogyel and Machik Labdrön as Examples</i>
6	Majiu lazhen	Dazangjia	<i>Tantra: Tibetan Buddhism's esoteric culture</i>
7	Maji naozhun	Chen jianmin	<i>The Complete Works of Qu Hongzhai, Book 5: Machik Labdrön</i>

2.1.2. Birth and death years

There are different opinions among various documents and scholars about the birth and death years of Machik Labdrön. In most of the articles by Deji Zhuoma, the birth and death years of Machik Labdrön are considered to be 1049-1144, and she lived to be 95 years old. This view is also the most popular one in English literature, so this article adopts Deji Zhuoma's view. In addition, there are scholars who believe that her birth and death years were 1103–1201, 1031–1129, 1055–1145, 1043–1142, etc. For details, see the statistics in Table 2.

In article *Study about the Date of Birth and Achievements of Machik Labdrön* published in the Journal of Tibet University, Caiwang Lamu, of the Central University for Nationalities, provides a detailed analysis of the specific years of Machik Labdrön's birth and death. The author believes that she was born in 1055 and died in 1153, at the age of 98.

Tsiden Tashi, Tünla[12]also study the date of birth of Machik Labdrön and refute the two views of 1103-1201 and 1049-1144. Phadampa Sangye, the India yogin and teacher of Machik Labdrön, entered Tibet for the last time in 1113 AD. Therefore, if Machik Labdrön was born in 1103, she would have been 10 years old that year, had not yet left her hometown, and would not have been able to meet Padampa Sangye to seek the true transmission. In addition, *The Biography of Phadampa Sangye and Machik Labdrön* records that she was born in the year of the sheep and died in the year of the rooster, and 1049 was the Tibetan calendar's third year of Rao Jiong Earth Snake. Therefore, according to the biography, her birth and death years should be 1031-1129 AD.

Table 2: Statistics of birth and death years of Machik Labdrön

Serial number	Birth and death year	Age	Author	Source
1	1031-1129	98	Tsiden Tashi, Tünla	<i>Ten Famous Women in Tibetan History; On the Special Status of Magyi Lhadrun, the Founder of joyu Sect, in Tibetan Buddhism</i>
2	1043-1142	99	Deji Zhuoma	<i>Founder, Dakini and Gcod—yul—Tibet an Women Inheritance System</i>

Table 2: (continued).

3	1049-1144	95	Deji Zhuoma, Dazangjia	<i>Research on Tibetan Buddhist female monastics</i>
4	1055-1145	90	Fang ianchnag	<i>Tibetan Buddhist nuns</i>
5	1055-1153	98	Caiwang Lamu	<i>On the Date of Birth and Merits of Machik Labdrön (in Tibetan)</i>
6	1103-1201	98	Dunduo	<i>A Brief Introduction to Historical Figures from the Snowy Region (in Tibetan)</i>

2.1.3. Biographical events

According to the biography and related research, Machik Labdrön is considered to be the incarnation of Vajravarahi (Rdo rje phag mo) and the reincarnation of Yeshe Tsogyel, the first female Tibetan tantric master. She was born in Shannan, Tibet in 1049 and received a good education from an early age. She began studying Tibetan at the age of 5 and was already known for her intelligence at the age of 8, when she could recite the Prajna Paramita Sutra twice in one day.

Between the ages of 13 and 20, Machik Labdrön experienced the successive deaths of her mother, father and sister, but this only strengthened her Buddhist pursuits. Machik Labdrön successively took as her teachers such famous scholars as Lama Sonam Drapa and Phadampa Sangye, systematically studying Buddhist classics while also receiving tantric initiations from various masters. As a result, she quickly mastered the Mahayana Buddhist thought of prajna-emptiness, laying the theoretical foundation for the creation of the Chöd's ideological system.

Machik Labdrön studied the philosophical ideas of peacemaking (Zhi-byed) school with Phadampa Sangye and had unique insights into them. At the same time, she traveled to holy places of tranquility for cultivation, achieved great success in tantric practice, and formed his own unique tantric cultivation method. Soon, Machik Labdrön took on many disciples, proclaimed her own Buddhist doctrine, and founded the Chöd, which combined the exoteric and esoteric schools and also conformed to the Mahayana Buddhism. It received a quick welcome of the monastic community.

Machik Labdrön died in 1144 at the age of 95. As an outstanding representative of Tibetan women, she was worshipped by the monastic community as the incarnation of the wise Dakinis and enjoys an irreplaceable and special position in the history of Tibetan Buddhism.

2.2. Studies of Chöd

The Chöd is the only Tibetan Buddhist school founded by a woman. Research literature in Chinese on its the teachings and practices can be divided into Tibetan Buddhist history[13-18], monographs[2][3], as well as journals[19][12]and dissertations[20-22].

Deji Zhuoma is the leading scholar in China who systematically studies the Chöd. She has written many research articles such as “The Unique Tibetan Buddhist Chöd Nun” and “A Brief Account of the Machik Labdrön’s Chöd Texts”. The related results are mainly included in two monographs on the Chöd: *General Introduction to the Chöd of Tibetan Buddhism: A School Founded by a Tibetan Woman* [2]and *An Exploration of Chöd of Tibetan Buddhism* [3]. The book bring together the original documents and field survey materials that she has collected over the years, filling the academic gap in the study of Chöd in China, which is considered “extinct” by the academic community. They are currently the most in-depth and systematic works on the study of Chöd.

Unfortunately, the study of Chöd is still in beginning. Although the academic community has affirmed its role and influence in the history of Tibetan Buddhism, research efforts are somewhat

weak. In addition to the two monographs by Deji Zhuoma, Chöd is only briefly introduced in Tibetan Buddhist historical texts. Journals and dissertations mainly provide a summary of its rise, lineage and characteristics, and the opinions put forward do not go beyond the scope of Deji Zhuoma's monographs.

2.2.1. Historical origins

With regard to the historical origins of Chöd, scholars agree that it is a continuation and development of the Buddhist philosophy of the South Indian monk Phadampa Sangye. Scholars agree that Chöd Buddhist philosophy is a continuation and development of the Buddhist philosophy of Phadampa Sangye. Phadampa Sangye's tantric teachings are strongly characterized by Hinduism, and he entered Tibet in the 12th century to create the peacemaking school (Zhi-byed). His teachings in Tibet formed "Pho Chöd " ("Male Chöd") and Mo Chöd " ("Female Chöd"). The former is mainly to break the disease and other troubles for the doctrine and its dissemination is not wide. The latter refers to Machik Labdrön's Chöd, a combination of Buddhist doctrine and tantric practice methods. It is because of its affinity with Phadampa Sangye that some scholars regard Chöd as a branch of Zhi-byed[23][14]. For example, Fang Jianchang refers to Machik Labdrön as the founder of gcod (cutting off) of Zhi-byed[5].

2.2.2. Teachings and doctrines

It is widely recognized that Chöd takes the Prajna Paramita as the basic theory of its teachings and combines it with the Mahamudra Tantra practice, and that the roots of its teachings come from the Prajna Sutra of the three texts, namely the Extensive, Medium and Brief Prajnāpāramitā texts.

In *A General Commentary on Chöd of Tibetan Buddhism*, Deji Zhuoma discusses in detail about practice, teaching rituals and characteristics of Chöd. Its system can be divided into four parts: the Prajna Sutra and teachings of Chöd, the basic idea of Mahamudra, the doctrine of "four demons theory", and ghosts and ethics. Deji Zhuoma also summarizes the center of Chöd teachings: to eliminate self-interest through compassion, mercy, and bodhicitta, and develop egolessness through Prajnaparamita emptiness wisdom.

In addition, some scholars have also studied the relationship between the teachings of Chöd and the nature of the mind. For example, Wanma believes that Machik Labdrön "shows us a realm of human-Buddha unity, where all dharmas of birth, death, and nirvana exist in the human heart. The human heart is the Buddha-nature, and the Buddha-nature is the human heart." [19] This is the earliest paper to propose the relationship between Machik Labdrön's system of thought and nature of mind. Deji Zhuoma's *The Four Demons Theory: A Woman's Doctrine of Mind-Nature* [24] summarizes the four demons (fear, aggression, temptation, ignorance) and explains their relationship with mind. Shen Liying's *The Study on the Mind-Nature Theory of Machig Labdrön's Chöd* [20] analysis the theory from the aspects of theoretical construction, ideological characteristics, and practice.

2.2.3. Methods of practice

The practice of Chöd is unique in that it rarely builds temples, but rather focuses on traveling and asceticism, practicing in cemeteries, graveyards, and uninhabited places. Meditation is used to experience the meaning of prajna emptiness, and the process is accompanied by rhythmic sounds and mantras. In *General Introduction to the Chöd of Tibetan Buddhism: A School Founded by a Tibetan Woman* [2], Deji Zhuoma describes in detail Chöd's distinctive practice of "offering body". It is not about destroying or subduing demons, but about satisfying the needs of all sentient beings, and is a self-sacrifice of wisdom and compassion. It emphasizes the cultivation of bodhicitta, the complete

eradication of craving for oneself, and to achieve the “no-self”. Therefore, the noble personality of “no-self” and the compassionate spirit of “offering the body” provided the theoretical roots for the sky burial. Zhou ta in *The Ideological Origins and Influence to the Tibetan Society of Celestial Burial*[25]also holds the same view.

2.3. Influence of Machik Labdrön

The research of Machik Labdrön’s influence are mainly from two books by Deji Zhuoma, *An Exploration of Chöd of Tibetan Buddhism*[3]and *A Study of Tibetan Buddhist Women in Monasticism*[1]. In different dharma lineages, Chöd of Machik Labdrön has been practiced by many female monastic and lay practitioners, promoting the development and prosperity of Tibetan Buddhist culture. She has also set a proud example of Tibetan religious women through her religious identities as a guru and a Dakini.

2.3.1. Influence on Tibetan Buddhist schools

Chöd was a relatively small sect in the history of Tibetan Buddhism. Wang Furen, in his *A Brief History of Tibetan Buddhism*, suggests that Chöd “lacked a strong economic support and was loosely organized, so it did not flourish and was gradually lost after the 15th century” [16]. Wang Sen expressed a similar view, arguing that “Chöd had heirs up to the 15th century, but they were even less prominent. Further on, we have yet to see any record of them.”[17]

However, in the early 1990s, when Deji Zhuoma went to Nyingma Monastery, she witnessed Chöd rituals. According to Deji Zhuoma, the view that Chöd ceased to exist in the 15th century, which has long been held by academics, is wrong. Founded in the 11th century, Chöd gradually influenced various sects of Tibetan Buddhism. For example, its influence on the Gelugpa school is manifested not only in the formation of the far-reaching dgav ldan snyan brgyud, but also in unique teachings of the classics and dharma rituals. In addition, the commonly held view that the Shambhala Kagyu has disappeared is also erroneous. Field research shows that it is still alive and have formed thang rgyal snyan brgyud lineage. Chöd is also an important part of the Bön tradition, established a regular Dharma ritual and practice in Bön monasteries.

2.3.2. Influence on Tibetan Buddhist women

According to Deji Zhuoma, Machik Labdrön played a great role in improving the education level and status of Tibetan Buddhist nuns. As a sect founded by Tibetan women, Chöd has received more attention from female practitioners. In monasteries, it has become part of the dharma rituals of nuns. In Tibetan folk culture, it is practiced by female lay practitioners. Although the number of them are not very large, those nuns and lay practitioners play a valuable function in carrying the Dharma lineage of Chöd.

2.3.3. Influence on Dakini

At the end of the 19th century, with the spread of Tibetan Buddhism in the West, the study of Dakini has gradually become popular in the West. Differently, there are not many Chinese studies on it. Main works include the related studies of Deji Zhuoma, Suolang Zhuoma and La Maocuo[26-31].

Yeshe Tsogyel was a famous Dakini of the Nyingma school, and there are very many biographies about her, among which one of the more representative ones is the Biography found by the 17th-century gter ston, stag sham nus ldan rdo rje [32]. Deji Zhuoma's research found that Dakini occupies a prominent place in Chöd. Machik Labdrön Majura Zhong is also an incarnation of dakinī. Her dakinī system is characterized by both reincarnated incarnations that form a system, such as Gongrika

Zhuoma and independent individuals, such as Renzeng Zhuoma. As the lineage holders of Chöd, they inherited and spread Chöd teachings as dakinis in the incarnation of Machik Labdrön [3].

3. English studies on Machik Labdrön and Chöd

In the West, Machik Labdrön is one of the most prestigious female Tibetan Buddhist figures. Since the mid-to-late 19th century, Western scholars have paid attention to the unique Chöd ritual, and have since continued to study Machik Labdrön and the teachings of Chöd, covering various aspects such as Machik Labdrön's biography and translations of Chöd texts, sources of doctrine, ritual procedures, practical applications, etc. Sorting out and analyzing overseas research can give us an understanding of the rich achievements of Western researchers in different cultural and academic contexts. It can also uncover academic issues that have been overlooked by Chinese scholars and broaden our research perspective.

3.1. Early research from the mid-to-late 19th century to the early 20th century

Western scholars' research on Machik Labdrön and Chöd has evolved from early curiosity-driven narratives to contemporary academic research. The Western world's earliest knowledge of Chöd ritual came from ethnographic travel narratives in the mid-to-late 19th century. In the early stages of research, scholars simplified Chöd as the offering of one's body to demons, and described its ritual as a goddess wielding a sword cutting open the practitioner's body, full of sensational details and mystery. This superficial observation also influenced later scholars such as Blofeld, Tucci, and Eliade in their studies of Chöd[33-35]. Tucci's famous book *The Religions of Tibet* describes the Chöd's practice, methods, venues, and the four stages of the ritual. Tucci mentions that during the ritual, “in the course of the recitation of the mantras, gods and demons apparently appear before the retreatant... Followers of Chöd are accustomed to praying to those gods that inspire fear: yaksas, ghosts, and monsters. They appear in their terrifying, bloody, and ferocious forms.”[34]

3.1.1. Rituals of Chöd

Buddhism in Tibet, published by Emil Schlaginweit in 1863, is the earliest known work to mention Chöd[36]. Besides, In book *The Buddhism in Tibet, or Lamaism*, Lawrence Austine Waddell briefly lists ritual implements used in the Chöd practice, such as the skull drum, bone trumpet and other ritual instruments. He also mentions that Phadampa Sangye entered Tibet several times to preach[37]. Alexandra David-Neel, based on first-hand field research, gives a more detailed description of Chöd in her book *Magic and Mystery in Tibet*, describing it as “the dreadful mystic banquet”. Although she did not go beyond considering Chöd as a mystical performance, she objectively evaluated it as having a noble purpose: to free people from fear, awaken compassion, and ultimately achieve spiritual enlightenment[38].

Tibetan Yoga and Secret Doctrines, a work compiled by Evans-Wentz [39] in 1935, contains the text Ye shes mkha' 'gro ma, translated by Lama Kazi Dawa-Samdup. The text is the work by the Nyingma scholar Longchenpa (Klong chen Rab 'byams pa, 1308-1363), discovered by Jigmé Lingpa ('Jigs med gling pa, 1729/30-1798). This is the first translation of a Chöd practice text and includes the complete Chöd ritual [40-44].

3.1.2. Chöd and shamanism

The misinterpretation of Chöd as a form of exorcism led a group of scholars to associate its origins with shamanism. The first scholar to classify the characteristics of Chöd as a form of shamanism was comparative religion theorist Mircea Eliade. Eliade mentioned Chöd in his monograph on shamanism

[35]. Unlike Alexandra David-Neel, Eliade did not conduct field research, but mainly referred to Bleichsteiner's description of the Shamanic ritual which is full of mysticism [45]. Although Eliade did not demonstrate a connection between Chöd and the shamanic element of ecstasy or any shamanic terminology, his views nevertheless influenced later researchers. In Charles Van Tuyl's journal article *Mi-la-ras -pa and the gCod Ritual* [46], the author not only hinted at the connection between Chöd and shamanism, but also suggested that Chöd ritual was relatively close to the "primitive form" of the rituals used by Eskimos and other people and this ancient ritual can be traced back to prehistoric times. But the statement is not supported by corresponding textual analysis. In addition, Fokke Sierksma's book *Tibet's Terrifying Deities: Sex and Aggression in Religious Accommodation* pointed out the psychological importance of Chöd, but his observations of the rituals were superficial and exaggerated, and he still classified Chöd as shamanism and mysticism[47].

In general, early Western researchers became acquainted with Chöd mainly through ethnographic travelogues, focusing on its mysterious practice rituals rather than the religious background and meaning. A considerable number of books and papers lack first-hand information and rigorous arguments. The reason for this is that, as Edou says in his monograph *Machig Labdron and the Foundations of Chöd*, Western researchers believe that the ritual practices of Chöd imply cannibalism and need to be rejected in the name of moral exhortation. In addition, the mystery surrounding Chöd has led researchers to believe that some parts of the world are still in a state of ignorance and superstition, which has re-established the superiority of the West [48].

3.2. Contemporary research since the mid-to-late 20th century

Since the mid-to-late 20th century, represented by Janet Gyatso's important research paper *The Development of Gcod Tradition* [49], contemporary Western scholars' research on Machik Labdrön and Chöd has entered a new stage. Janet Gyatso is a professor at Harvard University's Divinity School. Using methods of textual research and biographical research, she has published many works on the subject of Yeshe Tsogyel. In her paper, she defines Chöd as a traditional meditation technique used to sever attachment to the self, recounts the story of the previous life of Machik Labdrön, and discusses the shamanic characteristics of Chöd in addition to Mahayana Buddhism and Tantric Buddhism, as well as the four Indian sources of its teachings. The significance of this article lies in its systematic description of various original texts of Chöd, and for the first time, it provides a detailed historical study of its transmission, its theoretical roots and ritual practices.

Unlike earlier studies, which relied solely on preliminary field surveys or secondary sources, the importance of texts has been emphasized in contemporary research. Western scholars have translated the available biographies of Machik Labdrön and important Chöd texts. In addition, the focus has expanded from rituals to the historical origins, doctrinal teachings, and practical applications. There have been detailed discussions of Chöd's Bon roots and the idea of "four demons theory". The life of Machik Labdrön have been interpreted from new perspectives such as feminism and psychology. The meditation methods of Chöd tradition have also been applied to the treatment of depression and anxiety disorders, with good results. Contemporary research can be divided into two main categories: one is research on the biography of Machik Labdrön and Chöd texts, such as the translation and annotation of literature; the other is research on a specific aspect of Chöd.

3.2.1. Biography of Machik Labdrön and Chöd texts

3.2.1.1. Biography of Machik Labdrön

Tsultrim Allione translated the biography of Machik Labdrön from Pungpo Zangkur Gyi Namshe Chodkyi Don Sal in her book *Women of Wisdom* [50]. It was written by Jamgon Kongtrul Lodro Taye in the 19th century at the request of Choje Kunga Jamyang, and is presumably a composite version

of several biographies. The main content is about the Indian previous life of Machik Labdrön, his apprenticeship under Phadampa Sangye, and the transmission of teachings from Tibet to India. In addition to translating the biography, the author also provides a detailed analysis of Chöd's "four demons theory" in the preface to the book.

Jérôme Edou's *Machig Labdron and the Foundations of Chöd* [48] is a biographical study. The book is divided into two parts. The first part is a discussion of Chöd, including its philosophical foundations such as Prajñāpāramitā and Mahāmudrā, lineage transmissions, etc. The second part is a translation of the first two chapters of Machik Labdrön's biography from the text named "An Exposition of Transforming the Aggregates into an Offering of Food, Illuminating the Meaning of Chod". Edou has three versions of the biography: 1. The translation of this book. 2. An expanded version of the translation of this book: The Concise Life Story of Machik Labdrön. 3. An anonymous, unpublished biography: "A Biography of Machig", which is said to be very different from the first two versions. In the first part, Edou compares the similarities and differences between the three versions of Machik Labdrön's biography that he has. Unfortunately, he did not choose to translate the last two versions that only he had, but chose the version that Allione had already translated in 1984.

Both Kollmar-Paulenz and Hermann-Pfandt interpret the biography of Machik Labdrön from a feminist perspective. In *Ma gcig lab sgron ma: The Life of a Tibetan Woman Mystic Between Adaption and Rebellion* [51], Kollmar-Paulenz sorts out the different versions of Machik Labdrön's biography and places it in the socio-cultural context of Tibet, analysing the suppression of women in Tibetan society at both the religious and social levels by a male-dominated and strictly patriarchal society. The author believes that whether Chöd was founded by Phadampa Sangye or Machik Labdrön is a question worth exploring. Identifying Phadampa Sangye as the founder reflects a strategy to legitimise the teachings. First, India is the country of the Buddha and the origin of Buddhist teachings. Phadampa Sangye's status as an Indian lama helped to prove the consistency of Chöd with the teachings of Buddha. Second, compared to women, Phadampa Sangye's male identity could bring more social prestige to the new teachings of Chöd, which played an important role in the acceptance of Chöd in Tibetan Buddhism.

In the journal article *On a Previous Birth Story of Ma gcig Lab sgron ma* [52], Hermann Pfandt analyzes the meaning of Machik Labdrön's previous life as male from the perspective of Buddhist female views. According to the biography, Machik Labdrön was born in India as the son of the King of Dangbang phyug 'phags pa (Kapilavastu) and was named sMon lam grub. Through the revelation of Dakinis, he was reborn in Tibet as Machik Labdrön. The author analyzes in detail the symbolic meaning of sexual transformation as a theme in Buddhist literature. He argues the fact that Machik Labdrön was male in the enlightenment stage of his previous life and female in the stage of completion of his practice after reincarnation, which is contrary to the traditional Mahayana Buddhist story. This setting is deliberate and intended to reflect the different attitude of Tantra towards women.

In addition, Azzato [53] translated and annotated the biography of Machik Labdrön in his master's thesis. This is a poem entitled "The Spiritual Evolution of Ma-cig in Fifteen Acts," which introduces the life story of Machik in beautiful language.

3.2.1.2. Chöd text

Sara Harding's *Machik's Complete Explanations: Clarifying the Meaning of Chod* [54] is a good study of the translation of a document. Sarah Harding is a professor at Naropa University in the United States and a disciple of Kalu Rinpoche of the Shangpa Kagyu school. She was invited by Kalu Rinpoche to translate this book. This book is a compilation of materials from various sources. The main form is Machik Labdrön's dialogues with his children and followers, and the content is very rich, covering the Chöd practice, Mahamudra teachings, dream interpretation, predictions of the future, etc. Among them, Chapter 4 discusses the "four demons theory" and Machik's views on

demons. Chapter 5 describes the seven steps of the practice of Chöd, which is the most important part of the book.

Another Sara Harding's translation is *Chod: The Sacred Teachings on Severance* [55]. This book is one of the eight charioteers' teachings compiled by Jamgön Kongtrül Lodro. It includes original texts and brief commentaries, practice guides, and instructions.

In addition, other western scholars have also translated many important texts of Chöd. For example, Giacomella Orofino translated an abridged version of the Great Speech Chapter in article *The Great Wisdom Mother and the Chöd Tradition* [56]. Michael Azzato [53] also translated this chapter in his master's thesis and compared it with the teachings of the Indian master Āryadeva, analyzing the roles of Machik Labdrön and Āryadeva in the formation and spread of Chöd. Michelle Sorensen [57] translated The Great Speech Chapter, The Supplementary Chapter, The Quintessential Chapter and The Supplementary Sections in her doctoral thesis, the latter three being translated into English for the first time. Carol Savvas [58] also translated a number of Chöd text from the Gelug tradition in her doctoral thesis.

Overall, Western scholars have translated many of Machik Labdrön's biographies and Chöd texts. However, many of these translations focus on the same topics or editions, and there are still a large number of Chöd texts that have not been translated. In addition, given that documents such as *Machik's Complete Explanations: Clarifying the Meaning of Chod* were compiled in the 19th century, a long time after Machik Labdrön's death, it will be necessary in the future to critically examine their content.

3.2.2. Thematic research in Chöd

3.2.2.1. Sources of doctrine: Chöd, shamanism and Bon

Influenced by the shamanistic elements of Chöd ritual, which is pointed out by early researchers, one of the characteristics of contemporary Chöd studies is its association with shamanism. In the article *Offering the Body: The Practice of Gcod in Tibetan Buddhism* [59], David Scott briefly reviews the history and theoretical foundation of Chöd, citing Eliade's view that Chöd is "clearly shamanic in structure" and that the meditation technique of "opening the door of the sky" (nam-mkha'i sgo-byed) bears a striking resemblance to the "soul journey" of Siberian shamans. In addition, Geoffrey Samuel's book *Civilized Shamans: Buddhism in Tibetan Societies* [60] emphasizes the shamanic characteristics of Tibetan Buddhism, suggesting that Tibetan religion can be divided into two models: clerical Buddhism and shamanic Buddhism. Some aspects of tantra show shamanic elements.

Western scholars have also studied the relationship between Chöd and Bon. Donatella Rossi's article *An Introduction to the 'mKha' 'gro gsang gcod' Teachings of Bon* [61] introduces the teachings of the Chöd in the Bon tradition. Lucy Jones's PhD thesis [62] studies an untranslated 14th century text on Chöd practice in the Bon tradition. Alejandro Chaoul's book *Chöd Practice in the Bön Tradition* [63] discusses the Buddhist and Bon origins of Chöd, using the dialogical approach of the Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin. It is the first time that the Buddhist and Bon origins of Chöd have been compared, and it shows that the similarities outweigh the differences.

Western scholars have discussed the relationship between Chöd, Shamanism and Bon based on the ritual characteristics observed in Chöd. However, excessive focus on shamanistic elements could lead to neglect of the Buddhist foundation of Chöd. Discussion of Chöd teachings needs to be placed in a historical and cultural context, and its transmission lineage should be studied systematically and comprehensively.

3.2.2.2. Ritual of Chöd: the fear of being "cut off"

The rituals of Chöd have attracted the attention of many scholars, and "fear" is one of the topics often discussed. Georgios Halkias describes the meditation practices of Chöd in article *Buddhist Meditation*

in Tibet: Exoteric and Esoteric Orientations [64]. Chöd fits in well with the wandering lifestyle of yogis, and is usually practiced in desolate and frightening places such as caves, graveyards or temple ruins rather than monasteries. It requires music played on instruments such as bells, drums and thigh horns. Meditators perform a series of mental and physical exercises and imagine that cut their bodies into pieces as a symbolic feast for gods and demons. The aim is to cut off attachment to the body and the deep-rooted fear of death, and to counter them by recognizing our “demonic tendencies” as projections of our dualistic mind. Overall, Western scholars believe that Chöd practitioners actively seek terrifying experiences, using fear to stimulate the visualization of physical sacrifice, which symbolizes cutting off the self. By facing, challenging, and overcoming fear, wisdom is ultimately gained, that is, fear is a tool that leads the practitioner to enlightenment.

In recent years, Western scholars have begun to interpret the rituals of Chöd from a psychological perspective. In the article *Severing the Source of Fear: Contemplative Dynamics of the Tibetan Buddhist gCod Tradition* [65], Michael Sheehy analyzes how Chöd views and eliminates fear from a Buddhist psychological perspective. The author selected some verses from Chöd text *The Essence of Enlightened Awareness* and examined the philosophical ideas of Mahayana Buddhism about the self and phenomena, as well as the psychological meaning of the objectification of the subject and object. He points out that the strength of Chöd comes from cutting off the concept of “otherness” that is deeply embedded in the core of awareness, rather than the manifestation of terror. He explains the philosophical and practical significance of Chöd for contemporary meditators and Buddhist thought in a modern context.

3.2.2.3. Practical application of Chöd teachings

Some Western scholars who studied Chöd were also its practitioners. They apply Chöd meditation techniques to psychology, medicine and other fields, with positive results. Representative practitioners include Tsultrim Allione and Alejandro Chaoul. Tsultrim Allione is the founder of the Taramantra Practice Center in Colorado, USA. In her book *Feeding your demons: Ancient Wisdom for Resolving Inner Conflict* [66], based on Machik Labdrön's “four demons thoery”, she proposed a meditation method called “Feeding your demons”(FYD). It is divided into five steps: identify the demons in your body, personify the demons, complete the identity switch with the demons and understand their real needs, feed the demons, and empty your mind. The FYD theory has been clinically tested [67]. 61 participants were randomly assigned to the FYD group and a waitlist control group. The results of the study found that FYD had a significant effect on reducing stress, depression and enhancing self-compassion and life satisfaction, which can improve the mental health of adults in many ways.

Alejandro Chaoul is an assistant professor at the University of Texas Center for Health, Humanities, and the Human Spirit and holds an adjunct position at the M.D. Anderson Cancer Center, where he researches the role of Tibetan Buddhist mindfulness for the treatment of cancer patients. His paper *Cancer, Cognitive Impairment, and Meditation* [68] shows that meditation can help improve cancer-related cognitive impairment and alleviate its aftereffects, and that meditation should be fully researched as an adjunct to cancer treatment. In the article *Mind-Body Practices in Cancer Care* [69], Chaoul believes that mind-body practices such as meditation, yoga, and tai chi have an impact on most of the body's immune and endocrine systems, and bring fundamental and beneficial changes to the lives of participants. They are also a good way to help cancer patients manage pain.

4. Similarities and differences between Chinese and English research and future research directions

4.1. Similarities and differences between Chinese and English research literature

In terms of textual studies, Chinese scholars mainly rely on the Tibetan handwritten and woodblock editions of the teachings of Machik Labdrön to study the content of Chöd. They have not conducted enough comparative studies of version differences of the texts. The life story of Machik Labdrön is also mainly based on the book *The Biography of Dam Pa Sangs Rgyas and Machik Labdrön* by Chos khyi Seng Ge and Gang Pa [9]. In English research, Janet Gyatso [49] and Kollmar-Paulenz [70] have both conducted detailed analyses of different Chöd texts. They are important references for studying the history of Chöd, as well as for comparing the differences between different texts, assessing the reliability of the texts, and laying a good foundation for further research. Regarding the life story of Machik Labdrön, Western scholars have various versions of her biography and have compared the similarities and differences between them. In addition, influenced by gender equality and the feminist trend, scholars have also interpreted the biography from the perspective of women's social status in Tibetan society at that time, expanding the perspective of biographical research.

In terms of Chöd teachings' origin, Chinese researchers generally believe that it can be divided into Hindu religious teachings and Tibetan religious teachings [2]. In addition, Western scholars also believe that it originated from Shamanism and Bon based on elements such as "stairway", "heaven door" and being dismembered by mythical creatures. Although this view was influenced by the mystical descriptions of Chöd rituals in early research and has been refuted by some scholars, Western scholars have paid attention to the origin of the teachings, an area that has not been discussed in depth in Chinese research. Future research should pay more attention to the doctrinal sources of Chöd and be based on a detailed analysis and critical interpretation of its historical materials and original texts.

In terms of Chöd teaching and practice, Chinese scholars represented by Deji Zhuoma have explored the ideological system of its teachings, such as the theoretical theory based on the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*, and the basic idea of *Mahāmudrā*. In contrast, Western researchers have focused primarily on the ritual of Chöd, with relatively little discussion of its philosophy and the importance of Chöd for cultivating one's mind. In addition, although "offering the body" is the core theory of Chöd, it is not equivalent to the entirety of Chöd teachings and practices. Chöd practice such as the "108 Nian Earths" and "108 Eyes of Spring Water" [2], as well as the characteristics that female deities be the main deities [2], are areas that have been less covered in Western research.

In addition, in Western research, scholars have applied the techniques of Chöd meditation in psychology to combat symptoms such as anxiety and depression, and have achieved good results through clinical experiments. This aspect of research has not yet been covered in China.

4.2. Future research

In the future research on the teachings of Machik Labdrön and Chöd, there are the following directions to be considered:

1. Textual studies. The first is to comprehensively collect and translate the biography of Machik Labdrön. At present, in both Chinese and English studies, the biographies translated from Tibetan are concentrated in a limited number of books. In addition, as hagiography, they are limited in historical information. Its role is more to help researchers understand the social culture of Tibet in the Machik era. Finding and translating more versions of the biography of Machik Labdrön and conducting comparative studies on this basis will help us to further understand her life and clarify issues that are still inconclusive in academia, such as her birth and death years. The second is to comprehensively collect and translate Chöd texts and conduct a critical study of the content. Among the currently

translated Chöd texts, some of them have misinterpretations of the timelines of historical figures and important events due to the late publication of the original materials. Future research needs to identify the origin of the texts and examine them carefully in their historical and cultural context.

2. Research on the teachings of Chöd. Conduct a systematic study of Chöd's teaching, as well as thematic research on its topics. Chöd is based on Mahayana Buddhism and has a complete system of thought. However, the current research on the doctrines of Chöd only mainly focuses on the "four demons' theory" and its practical application, which does not fully reflect Chöd's teachings. Therefore, systematic and thematic research need to be strengthened. In addition, by sorting out its historical origins, research on the teachings of Chöd can also help provide evidence for the Western academic's debate about the origin of its teachings.

3. Research on the achievements of Machik Labdrön. Machik Labdrön established Chöd, which was passed down and practiced by monastic and lay practitioners from different lineages. However, the study of Tibetan Buddhist women is still in beginning, and currently only Deji Zhuoma has conducted relevant research on the achievements and influence of Machik Labdrön. In the future, firstly, it is necessary to further explore the historical context and the influence of Machik Labdrön on various schools of Tibetan Buddhism, nuns, and the reincarnation system of female living Buddhas. Secondly, in terms of research methods, apart from feminist research methods, it is possible to make full use of methods from sociology, anthropology, and religion. The scope can also be expanded from the Amdo Tibetan area, where Deji Zhuoma conducted her research, to include practitioners and monasteries throughout the Tibetan region.

5. Conclusion

Based on the currently published Chinese and English academic papers and monographs, this article reviews, organizes, and presents the current state of research on Machik Labdrön and the teachings of the Chöd tradition. Regarding Chinese research literature, it is summarized in three aspects: the life of Machig Labdrön, the teachings of the Chöd tradition, and the influence of Machig Labdrön. Overall, Chinese research on Machik Labdrön and Chöd remains in its nascent stage. The leading researcher in this field is Deji Zhuoma, a scholar from the China Tibetology Research Center. Through years of fieldwork, she has conducted in-depth studies on Machik Labdrön's life, the doctrinal system of Chöd teachings, and their influence on various schools of Tibetan Buddhism and nuns.

In terms of English-language literature, Western scholars began paying attention to the distinctive Chöd ritual of "Offering the Body" as early as the mid-to-late 19th century through ethnographic travel narratives. However, research during this early period was primarily descriptive and sensationalist. Since the mid-20th century, contemporary Western scholars, represented by figures such as Janet Gyatso, have brought research on Machik Labdrön and the Chöd tradition into a new phase. This includes studies on Machik Labdrön's biographies, translations and annotations of Chöd texts, the origins of its doctrines, ritual practices, and practical applications.

By synthesizing Chinese and English literature, three directions for future research are proposed: 1. Collect and translate more versions of Machik Labdrön's biographies and conduct critical studies of Chöd texts. 2. Systematically examine the doctrinal framework of Chöd teachings. 3. Conduct in-depth studies on the transmission and influence of Machik Labdrön and the Chöd tradition.

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