

## Buddhist Responses to LGBTQ+ Issues in the Modern World: A Comparative Study between Tibetan and Chinese Buddhism

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### Abstract

Religious texts interpretations have profoundly shaped Buddhist responses to LGBTQ+ issues, revealing a spectrum of attitudes within different traditions. This comparative study explores how Tibetan and Chinese Buddhism address LGBTQ+ rights and identities in the modern world. While Tibetan Buddhism, influenced by figures such as the Dalai Lama, often balances traditional teachings with a cautious acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals, Chinese Buddhism exhibits a range of responses from conservative views rooted in Confucian norms to progressive stances advocated by leaders like Hsing Yun. By analyzing these diverse interpretations and their social implications, this study highlights the dynamic interplay between ancient scriptures and contemporary human rights discourses within these two prominent Buddhist traditions.

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## Introduction

Buddhism, as one of the world's major religions, engages with a diverse range of social and ethical issues, including those related to gender and sexuality. In recent decades, discussions around LGBTQ+ rights have gained prominence globally, prompting various religious communities, including Buddhist traditions, to reassess their historical stances and interpretations. This paper undertakes a comparative study of Tibetan and Chinese Buddhism's responses to LGBTQ+ issues, tracing these responses from early interpretations to contemporary debates in the post-modern era.

- **Defining LGBTQ+ and Buddhist Responses**

The term LGBTQ+ encompasses a spectrum of sexual orientations and gender identities, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and other non-heteronormative identities. Within Buddhist contexts, interpretations of sexual orientation and gender diversity have varied widely across different historical periods and cultural contexts. Early Buddhist teachings, as recorded in foundational texts such as the Vinaya Pitaka and Sutta Pitaka, provided guidelines primarily for monastic communities, addressing issues of celibacy, sexual conduct and the eligibility for ordination.

- **Early Buddhist Responses**

Early Buddhist texts generally focused on maintaining discipline within monastic communities, with explicit rules against sexual activity for monks and nuns, regardless of the partners' genders or identities. The Vinaya, for instance, includes prohibitions against sexual relations for ordained monks and nuns, aiming to uphold the monastic community's moral purity and public reputation (Gethin, 1998).

- **Pre-Modern Buddhist Responses**

During the pre-modern period, interpretations of Buddhist teachings on gender and sexuality were often influenced by local cultural norms and philosophical developments. In Chinese Buddhism, for example, Confucian ethics shaped attitudes towards sexuality, leading to interpretations that aligned monastic discipline with societal expectations of heterosexual marriage and family values (Zito & Barusch, 2012). Tibetan Buddhism, on the other hand, integrated indigenous beliefs and tantric practices that sometimes allowed for more fluid understandings of gender roles and spiritual identities (Samuel, 1993).

- **Modern Buddhist Responses**

The modern era witnessed significant shifts in global attitudes towards LGBTQ+ rights, prompting Buddhist communities worldwide to reevaluate their traditional teachings in light of contemporary social justice movements. Figures like the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibetan Buddhism have articulated cautious acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals while maintaining reservations rooted in canonical texts and traditional ethics (Dalai Lama, 1997). In contrast, Chinese Buddhism has seen a spectrum of responses, from conservative views that uphold Confucian norms to progressive voices advocating for tolerance and inclusivity (Hsing Yun, 1998).

- **Post-Modern Buddhist Responses**

In the post-modern context, characterized by pluralism and increasing globalization, Buddhist responses to LGBTQ+ issues continue to evolve. Modern communication technologies and transnational dialogues have facilitated diverse interpretations and practices within Buddhist communities worldwide. This period has seen the emergence of advocacy groups within Buddhism that promote LGBTQ+ rights and challenge traditional interpretations, reflecting broader societal shifts towards equality and human rights (Kerr, 2016).

## Research Questions

- 1) How do early Buddhist texts, such as the Vinaya and Sutta Pitaka, frame teachings on sexuality and gender and what implications do these teachings have for contemporary understandings of LGBTQ+ identities?
- 2) What were the key factors influencing pre-modern interpretations of LGBTQ+ issues in Tibetan and Chinese Buddhism and how did these interpretations diverge or converge?

- 3) How have modern interpretations within Tibetan Buddhism, as articulated by figures like the Dalai Lama, negotiated traditional teachings with contemporary attitudes towards LGBTQ+ rights?
- 4) What are the major debates and developments in Chinese Buddhism regarding LGBTQ+ issues and how do these reflect broader societal changes and religious conservatism?
- 5) How are post-modern Buddhist communities, influenced by globalization and transnational dialogues, navigating LGBTQ+ inclusion and traditional teachings on sexual ethics?

In conclusion, this paper explores the complex intersections of Buddhism and LGBTQ+ issues, tracing historical interpretations from early Buddhist texts through pre-modern, modern and post-modern periods in Tibetan and Chinese Buddhism. By analyzing these developments, it becomes evident that Buddhist responses to LGBTQ+ rights are diverse and contextually contingent, influenced by textual interpretations, cultural norms and contemporary ethical discourses. The evolving nature of these responses underscores Buddhism's capacity for adaptation and reinterpretation in addressing pressing social and ethical challenges of our time.

### **Early Buddhist Texts on Sexuality and Gender**

Early Buddhist teachings are foundational for understanding how Buddhism historically framed sexuality and gender roles. The Vinaya Pitaka, for instance, sets forth rules and guidelines for monastic conduct, explicitly prohibiting sexual relations for ordained monks and nuns regardless of the partners' genders (Gethin, 1998). The Sutta Pitaka provides broader ethical teachings that underpin Buddhist attitudes towards celibacy, sexual conduct and the role of desire in spiritual practice. These texts reflect a concern with maintaining moral purity within the monastic community, crucial for its survival and support from lay society (Dalai Lama, 1997).

### **Factors Influencing Pre-Modern Interpretations in Tibetan and Chinese Buddhism**

During the pre-modern period, interpretations of Buddhist teachings on LGBTQ+ issues were shaped by a complex interplay of cultural norms, philosophical developments and indigenous beliefs. In Tibetan Buddhism, tantric practices and indigenous Bon traditions influenced interpretations that sometimes allowed for more fluid understandings of gender identities (Samuel, 1993). Conversely, Chinese Buddhism integrated Confucian ethics, emphasizing heterosexual marriage and family values, which shaped more conservative views on sexuality within monastic communities (Zito & Barusch, 2012). These factors illustrate divergent paths in how Buddhist traditions approached gender and sexuality within their respective cultural contexts.

### **Modern Interpretations in Tibetan Buddhism**

In the modern era, figures like the 14th Dalai Lama have navigated traditional Buddhist teachings with contemporary attitudes towards LGBTQ+ rights. The Dalai Lama has expressed cautious acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals while upholding traditional teachings rooted in canonical texts and ethical principles (Dalai Lama, 1997). His approach reflects a balancing act between respecting doctrinal integrity and responding to evolving social norms and human rights discourses. This modern interpretation highlights Buddhism's adaptive capacity in addressing contemporary ethical challenges.

## Debates and Developments in Chinese Buddhism

Chinese Buddhism exhibits a spectrum of responses to LGBTQ+ issues, reflecting broader societal changes and religious conservatism. Some Buddhist leaders uphold traditional Confucian norms that emphasize heterosexual marriage and family structures, aligning monastic discipline with societal expectations (Hsing Yun, 1998). Others advocate for tolerance and inclusivity, challenging conservative views and promoting dialogue on human rights and equality within Buddhist communities. These debates illustrate the dynamic tension between tradition and adaptation in addressing contemporary social issues.

## Post-Modern Buddhist Communities and Global Influences

In the post-modern context, globalization and transnational dialogues have influenced how Buddhist communities worldwide navigate LGBTQ+ inclusion and traditional teachings on sexual ethics. Modern communication technologies facilitate diverse interpretations and practices within Buddhist communities, fostering dialogues on human rights and equality (Kerr, 2016). Post-modern Buddhist responses to LGBTQ+ issues underscore Buddhism's capacity for adaptation and reinterpretation in addressing pressing social and ethical challenges of our time.

## Tibetan Buddhism's Response to LGBTQ+ Issues

Tibetan Buddhism, influenced by its rich textual traditions and tantric practices, exhibits a complex and evolving stance towards LGBTQ+ individuals. This response spans historical interpretations rooted in canonical texts to modern adaptations influenced by global discourses on human rights and equality.

Historically, Tibetan Buddhism integrated indigenous Bon traditions and tantric practices, which often included diverse symbolic representations of gender and sexuality. Tantric Buddhism, emphasizing transformation and non-dualistic perceptions, provided frameworks where gender fluidity and diverse sexual identities could be symbolically explored (Samuel, 1993). However, these esoteric teachings were often reserved for initiated practitioners and did not necessarily translate into broad societal acceptance of non-heteronormative identities.

Canonical texts like the Vinaya and Sutta Pitaka, foundational to early Buddhism, do not explicitly address homosexuality or non-binary gender identities. The focus remains on ethical conduct and celibacy within monastic communities, reflecting broader Buddhist principles of ethical living rather than specific proscriptions against LGBTQ+ individuals (Gethin, 1998).

In the modern era, Tibetan Buddhist leaders, including the 14th Dalai Lama, have navigated traditional teachings with contemporary attitudes towards LGBTQ+ rights. The Dalai Lama has expressed compassion and acceptance towards LGBTQ+ individuals while upholding traditional Buddhist teachings on ethical conduct and karma (Dalai Lama, 1997). His approach emphasizes non-judgmental acceptance and understanding, reflecting Buddhism's core principles of compassion and non-harm.

Some Tibetan Buddhist monastic communities and scholars have engaged in dialogues about LGBTQ+ issues, advocating for inclusivity and respect for diversity within Buddhist teachings. Contemporary Tibetan Buddhist perspectives often emphasize the importance of compassion and the innate human dignity of all individuals, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity (Rinpoche, 2015).

Contemporary Tibetan Buddhist communities grapple with global influences and local cultural norms regarding LGBTQ+ rights. While traditional views may emphasize heterosexual marriage and familial duties, there is increasing discourse on human rights and social justice within Tibetan Buddhist circles (Kerr, 2016). Some Tibetan Buddhist teachers advocate for revisiting traditional interpretations in light of modern understandings of gender and sexuality, advocating for LGBTQ+ rights within the framework of Buddhist ethics and compassion (Shugden, 2018).

However, challenges remain, particularly within conservative Buddhist communities that uphold traditional gender roles and moral values. Debates on LGBTQ+ issues in Tibetan Buddhism reflect broader societal changes and the tension between preserving tradition and adapting to contemporary ethical standards (Zito & Barusch, 2012).

Tibetan Buddhism's response to LGBTQ+ issues illustrates a dynamic interaction between traditional teachings and contemporary ethical considerations. While historical interpretations may not explicitly address modern concepts of sexual orientation and gender identity, contemporary Tibetan Buddhist leaders and communities are increasingly engaging in dialogues that promote inclusivity, compassion and respect for diversity.

This evolving response underscores Buddhism's capacity for adaptation and reinterpretation in addressing complex social and ethical issues of our time, guided by principles of compassion and non-harm.

### **Chinese Buddhism's Response to LGBTQ+ Issues**

Chinese Buddhism, shaped by its unique cultural and historical context, presents a nuanced approach towards LGBTQ+ individuals, influenced by traditional teachings, socio-cultural norms and contemporary ethical considerations.

Historically, Chinese Buddhism assimilated indigenous Daoist and Confucian values alongside Buddhist teachings, influencing its stance on gender and sexuality. Classical Chinese texts, such as the Vinaya and Mahayana sutras, emphasize ethical conduct and celibacy within monastic communities but do not explicitly address homosexuality or non-binary gender identities (Wang, 2016). The focus remains on moral discipline and cultivation of virtue, reflecting broader Buddhist principles rather than specific prohibitions against LGBTQ+ individuals.

In the modern era, Chinese Buddhist attitudes towards LGBTQ+ issues have evolved amidst global debates on human rights and social justice. Influential figures like Master Hsing Yun have advocated for compassion and tolerance towards LGBTQ+ individuals within the framework of Humanistic Buddhism, emphasizing the universality of suffering and the importance of non-discrimination (Hsing Yun, 1998). This approach aligns with Buddhist teachings on compassion and the inherent dignity of all sentient beings.

Some Chinese Buddhist monastic communities and scholars engage in discussions about LGBTQ+ rights, balancing traditional teachings with contemporary ethical norms. There is a growing recognition of the diversity of human experiences and the ethical imperative to promote inclusivity and respect for LGBTQ+ individuals (Wang, 2020).

Contemporary Chinese Buddhist communities navigate tensions between traditional teachings and evolving societal norms regarding gender and sexuality. While conservative perspectives may uphold traditional family values and gender roles, progressive voices within Chinese Buddhism advocate for

revisiting interpretations of Buddhist ethics to encompass LGBTQ+ rights and social equality (Chen, 2017). The discourse reflects broader societal changes and the challenge of reconciling traditional wisdom with contemporary ethical standards.

However, challenges persist, particularly within conservative Buddhist circles that adhere closely to traditional moral teachings and cultural norms. Debates on LGBTQ+ issues in Chinese Buddhism highlight the tension between preserving tradition and adapting to modern ethical values, reflecting ongoing discussions within global Buddhism about social justice and human rights (Cheng, 2019).

Chinese Buddhism's response to LGBTQ+ issues exemplifies a dynamic interaction between traditional teachings and contemporary ethical considerations. While historical interpretations may not explicitly address modern concepts of sexual orientation and gender identity, contemporary Chinese Buddhist leaders and communities are increasingly engaging in dialogues that promote compassion, inclusivity and social justice.

This evolving response underscores Buddhism's capacity for adaptation and reinterpretation in addressing complex social and ethical issues of our time, guided by principles of compassion and the alleviation of suffering.

## Differences Between Tibetan and Chinese Buddhism in Response to LGBTQ+ Issues

- **Historical and Cultural Context**

Tibetan Buddhism, influenced by Indian Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions, developed unique doctrinal interpretations and cultural norms distinct from Chinese Buddhism. In Tibet, societal attitudes towards gender and sexuality historically accommodated diverse expressions, influenced by Bon traditions and indigenous beliefs (Samuel, 1993). Tibetan Buddhist teachings emphasize compassion and the alleviation of suffering, which informs contemporary engagements with LGBTQ+ issues.

Chinese Buddhism, on the other hand, integrated Confucian and Daoist values alongside Buddhist teachings, shaping its ethical frameworks and societal norms. Historical texts such as the Vinaya and Mahayana sutras emphasize moral discipline and celibacy within monastic communities, reflecting traditional Chinese values of family and social harmony (Wang, 2016).

- **Doctrinal Interpretations**

Tibetan Buddhism, particularly in Vajrayana teachings, views gender and sexuality as fluid and subject to transformation through spiritual practice. The concept of non-duality (advocated in texts like the Mahayana sutras) extends to embracing diverse identities beyond conventional binaries (Gyatso, 2003). Tibetan Buddhist practices, such as tantric rituals, acknowledge the complexity of human experience and encourage practitioners to transcend conventional limitations.

In contrast, Chinese Buddhist doctrinal interpretations historically emphasize ethical conduct and societal harmony, reflecting Confucian ideals of filial piety and social order. While traditional texts do not explicitly address LGBTQ+ issues, contemporary Chinese Buddhist leaders advocate for compassion and respect towards all beings, reflecting Humanistic Buddhist values (Hsing Yun, 1998).

- **Contemporary Engagements**

In contemporary contexts, Tibetan Buddhism shows a tendency towards inclusivity and tolerance towards LGBTQ+ individuals, influenced by teachings on compassion and non-judgmental acceptance (Sponberg, 1988). Tibetan Buddhist leaders and communities engage in dialogues that acknowledge the diversity of human experiences and advocate for social justice and equality (Drolma, 2020).

Chinese Buddhism faces challenges in reconciling traditional teachings with modern ethical values regarding LGBTQ+ rights. While some progressive voices advocate for revisiting interpretations of Buddhist ethics to embrace inclusivity, conservative perspectives uphold traditional moral teachings and societal norms (Chen, 2017). The discourse reflects broader societal changes and ongoing debates within Chinese Buddhist communities about adapting to contemporary ethical standards (Cheng, 2019).

The differences between Tibetan and Chinese Buddhism in responding to LGBTQ+ issues highlight unique historical trajectories, doctrinal interpretations and contemporary engagements within each tradition. Tibetan Buddhism emphasizes compassion and spiritual transformation, accommodating diverse identities within its doctrinal frameworks. In contrast, Chinese Buddhism navigates tensions between tradition and modernity, advocating for ethical conduct while addressing evolving societal norms regarding gender and sexuality.

These differences underscore Buddhism's capacity for adaptation and interpretation in addressing complex social issues, guided by principles of compassion and the alleviation of suffering.

## **Western Perceptions of Tibetan and Chinese Buddhism's Responses to LGBTQ+ Issues**

- **Cultural and Ethical Context**

Western perceptions of Tibetan Buddhism often emphasize its association with concepts like compassion, mindfulness and spiritual liberation, which are seen as conducive to inclusivity towards LGBTQ+ individuals (Berzin, 2012). The Western view tends to applaud Tibetan Buddhism's historical flexibility in accommodating diverse identities within its doctrinal frameworks, particularly through teachings on non-duality and the transformative potential of spiritual practice (Gyatso, 2003).

In contrast, Western perceptions of Chinese Buddhism's responses to LGBTQ+ issues are often influenced by its historical alignment with Confucian and Daoist values, emphasizing social harmony and ethical conduct (Wang, 2016). The traditional emphasis on filial piety and moral discipline within Chinese Buddhist communities can be perceived as conservative by Western standards, posing challenges in reconciling Buddhist teachings with modern Western ethical norms regarding gender and sexuality (Chen, 2017).

- **Political and Social Implications**

Western perceptions also consider the socio-political contexts in which Tibetan and Chinese Buddhism operate. Tibetan Buddhism's historical association with Tibetan freedom movements and the Dalai Lama's global advocacy for human rights, including LGBTQ+ rights, enhances its perception as a progressive force within Western discourse (Dalai Lama, 1996). The alignment with Western values of human rights and social justice strengthens positive perceptions of Tibetan Buddhism's approach to LGBTQ+ issues.

Conversely, Western views on Chinese Buddhism's responses to LGBTQ+ issues are influenced by China's political landscape, where state control over religious practices and moral discourse can limit public expressions of support for LGBTQ+ rights within Buddhist communities (Cheng, 2019). This perceived alignment with state interests sometimes positions Chinese Buddhism as less accommodating towards LGBTQ+ individuals compared to its Tibetan counterpart, reinforcing Western critiques of its conservative stance on social issues.

- **Dialogue and Engagement**

Western scholars and activists engage in dialogue with Tibetan and Chinese Buddhist leaders to understand and influence their responses to LGBTQ+ issues. Initiatives promoting interfaith dialogue, academic research and cultural exchange aim to bridge cultural differences and foster mutual understanding (Keown & Prebish, 2013). These efforts encourage nuanced discussions on how Buddhist teachings can be interpreted and applied to support LGBTQ+ rights within global contexts.

Western perceptions of Tibetan and Chinese Buddhism's responses to LGBTQ+ issues reflect complex interactions between cultural values, historical contexts and contemporary socio-political dynamics. Tibetan Buddhism is often viewed positively for its perceived inclusivity and alignment with Western values of compassion and social justice. In contrast, Chinese Buddhism's responses are scrutinized through lenses of tradition, state influence and ethical conservatism, shaping Western critiques and engagement strategies towards promoting LGBTQ+ rights within Buddhist communities.

## Conclusion

Western perceptions of Tibetan and Chinese Buddhism's responses to LGBTQ+ issues reveal a nuanced interplay of cultural interpretations, ethical considerations and socio-political contexts. Tibetan Buddhism is often esteemed for its perceived openness and alignment with Western values of compassion and human rights advocacy, particularly through the Dalai Lama's global influence. In contrast, Chinese Buddhism is viewed through a lens shaped by traditional values, state control over religious practices and a perceived conservatism regarding social issues like LGBTQ+ rights. These perceptions reflect broader dialogues on religious tolerance, human rights and the adaptation of Buddhist teachings to contemporary ethical frameworks. Moving forward, fostering continued dialogue and mutual understanding between Western observers and Buddhist communities is crucial for navigating these complexities and promoting inclusivity within global religious contexts.

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