Introduction

The driveway to Pemayangtsé Monastery rises at a steep grade, as do most of the roads in this part of Sikkim. Off to the right, level with the bottom of the hill and just inside the driveway’s entrance, there is a stand where prayer flags flutter like leaves in the wind. Nearby sits what at first appears to be a white pile of rocks. Upon closer inspection, I notice that the dilapidated stone structure has been carefully whitewashed year after year, so that although the rocks have shifted over time, they remain fused together, encased in layers of white paint. The surrounding ground is covered with wild strawberries. There are no signs to mark this structure, which I am told is in fact a throne originally erected for the nun Mingyur Peldrön (1699–1769). It is said that when the young woman arrived here in 1718—a refugee from the Ü region of central Tibet—she was exhorted to give teachings at Pemayangtsé. Although she consented, she refused to enter the monastery itself, citing impropriety that a woman would enter the realm of celibate men. Thinking of this invitation, I look up the hill and wonder wryly if perhaps she had insisted on remaining at the bottom of the mountain to avoid the climb.

Like the stone throne, Mingyur Peldrön’s work for the Nyingma community had an influence that has persisted over centuries, even if it is not always immediately identified. Although Sikkim is where this story starts, Mingyur Peldrön only spent a few years there. She was born, educated, and later taught at Mindröling Monastery, located in modern-day Dranang, in Ü, central Tibet, some seventy miles south of Lhasa. Born to Phuntsok Pel-dzöm (17th–18th CE) and Terdak Lingpa Gyurmé Dorjé (1646–1714), she was one of seven children. As a daughter of Mindröling’s founding family, she received an unprecedented religious education, which began early on in her childhood. Terdak Lingpa and his brother, Lochen Dharmaśrī (1654–1717/18), oversaw her education until their respective deaths. Empowered with an
encyclopedic collection of teachings, she was raised with the expectation that alongside her brothers she would inhabit the role of religious teacher and carry on the new populist reframing of the Nyingma tradition that her father and uncle had established. She lived her entire adult life as a celibate nun, never marrying or having children. In her role as a religious teacher, she worked for the edification of the Mindröling community, teaching throughout her adult life and authoring works focusing on the Great Perfection (Dzogchen) praxis of the Nyingma school. As a prolific author, she wrote texts throughout her adulthood that spanned a range of genres, including Great Perfection ritual manuals and other instructive texts for her disciples that have been preserved down to the present day. Alongside the work of her brother Rinchen Namgyel (1694–1768), her role as a teacher and an author was centrally important to Mindröling’s survival in the eighteenth century.

Of the relatively small extant collection of literary works about the lives of Tibetan Buddhist women, Mingyur Peldrön’s hagiography suggests a woman who was unusual for her time and place. Unlike most other Tibetan women whose lives have filtered down to the present day, Mingyur Peldrön was born and raised in the heart of a prominent religious family at the center of the religious elite. Like Khandro Tāre Lhamo, Sera Khandro, and Chökyi Drönma, she was born into the aristocracy. Her family took the unusual step of supporting her religious pursuits and did not pressure her to marry. Her education was directed by the well-known and erudite members of her family (all men), which meant she received an education that would support her rise as a respected religious teacher in Ü. Her story defies some of our received notions of how gender has been treated as a topic in the life stories of Tibetan Buddhist women and complicates how we approach religious women’s recorded biographies—their Lives. Most significantly, the treatment of her status as a woman—and the implications of her womanhood for her own religious authority—is inconsistent throughout her hagiography. Rather than a uniform narrative about the challenges of living as a woman, her gender is at turns held up as a benefit, and in other moments it is said to hold her back. Likewise, privilege plays a dynamic role throughout her story. She was simultaneously the recipient of multiple forms of high privilege and also experienced great hardship. Different aspects of her lived experience are combined in unexpected ways in her hagiography, and learning about her life story can help us understand more about how the intersectional nature of her identity strengthened and challenged her religious path and her public persona. Her privilege and the support of her family allowed her
access to a host of social contexts that would have been otherwise inaccessible and were not even extended to all the women of her family’s generation. Meanwhile, their sectarian affiliations would lead to her persecution and exile during the 1717–18 civil war. The effects of these difficulties, and her later relationship to powerful Nyingma and Geluk Buddhist institutions, tell of a woman who was resourceful and determined to achieve soteriological and institutional progress for herself and her community.

Mingyur Peldrön is one of few women of her time and place for whom we have a long and detailed life story. Querying the factors that influenced the decision to memorialize her in a hagiography shows how her life story exemplifies the interrelated nature of privilege and authority, the multifaceted aspects of privilege, and the ways these were negotiated within a gendered context in eighteenth-century Tibet. Mingyur Peldrön's life offers an example of how these themes of gender and privilege function in the creation of the public persona of a saint who happens to be a woman, an eldest daughter, and a celibate nun.

Hagiography and Namtar

This study takes as its central source the life story of Mingyur Peldrön, which was written by her disciple Khyungpo Repa Gyurmé Ösel (b. 1715) and completed in 1782. Titled The Life of Mingyur Peldrön: A Dispeller of Distress for the Faithful (hereafter referred to as Dispeller), it is one of the extant life stories of Tibetan Buddhist women, which all told comprise about 1 percent of the approximately two thousand extant hagiographies of Tibetan Buddhist saints. The scholarship for this study is based upon three different editions of Dispeller. The version referred to in the notes as “Dispeller ms. 1” is a 237-folio edition reproduced by the National Library of Bhutan in 1984. “Dispeller ms. 2” was published in 2015 by the Sichuan Minzu Language Press as part of a multivolume series of Tibetan women's lives. Finally, “Dispeller ms. 3” consists of Mingyur Peldrön's life story as well as a collection of works (sung-bum) written by her. It was compiled by Sean Price, from texts housed at Mindrolling Monastery in Clement Town, India, with support from Eric Columbel and the Tsadra Foundation. Apart from some spelling and grammatical differences, these three versions of her story are much the same in content and organization. There are also other, shorter life narratives of her, which are referenced throughout the book and identified based on the collections in which they are found.
Understanding the life story of Mingyur Peldrön means understanding its author. We know very little about Gyurmé Ösel beyond what is found in *Dispeller*, but the text does offer some clues as to his own trajectory. In addition to composing the text, we know that he hailed from Shang, in the Tö region of Tibet. We also know that he first met Mingyur Peldrön when he was about eight years old. He became her disciple and joined her community as a child, leaving the home of his grandmother for Mindróling. He became a monk at some point, although the details of his ordination are unclear. We also know he did not finish writing *Dispeller* until some thirteen years after Mingyur Peldrön’s passing. In addition to *Dispeller*, Gyurmé Ösel is not known to have authored any other works, although he did act as scribe for at least one piece that Mingyur Peldrön wrote. This work was the result of a request he made, asking that she explain one of Terdak Lingpa’s treasures focusing on the Highest Yoga (Atiyoga) teachings of the Great Perfection. The result was her text *Elaborations on the Awareness-Empowerment Methods for the Ati Zabdön, Profound Unsurpassable Meaning of the Great Perfection.*

*Dispeller* falls into the Tibetan literary genre of namtar, a ubiquitous form of Tibetan life writing that includes a variety of narrative styles. These life stories of religious practitioners vary widely in focus, tone, and style, although they do constitute a loosely associated genre. Broadly speaking, namtar, which literally translates as “complete liberation,” portray the lives of historical and semihistorical figures and have been received as examples of successful paths to enlightenment. The ostensible purpose of these texts is to provide soteriological guidance by recounting the exemplary lives of saintly figures. The central subject of the text is often depicted in miraculous terms, and the texts include accounts of spiritual realization, visions, and thaumaturgy woven together with worldly activities and the historical accounts of mundane life. Miracles occur, deities and demons appear and interact with humans, and prophecy and revelation are par for the course. Namtars often include devotional language, references to dreams and visions, and prophecy. Engaging the Buddhist concepts of samsara and reincarnation, namtars also include accounts of the subject’s previous lives. In some cases the texts are composed by the disciples of the main subject, as is the case for *Dispeller*.

Significant work has been done to highlight the ways that the genre of namtar intersects with and diverges from the various North American and Western European genre groupings of saintly *Lives* and semihistorical narratives. While the relationship between the namtar and its potential non-Tibetan equivalents is not necessarily a one-to-one correlation, Tibetan life
narratives often reflect a similar approach to life writing, crossing the boundaries between the broadly defined genres of biography and hagiography, according to the intentions of the author. In the case of Mingyur Peldrön’s namtar, the most relevant Eurocentric genre is that of hagiography. While similar to namtar in diversity and range, generally speaking, the term hagiography refers to texts that are focused on the life of a saint. In particular, these life narratives tend to provide accounts supporting the subject’s identity as a saint that include miracles, trials overcome, and other signs of virtuous activity. In addition to proving an individual’s saintliness, they depict exemplary behavior for readers and hearers to emulate, ostensibly for the goal of soteriological benefit. Hagiography will here be loosely defined as narratives of the life of the saint, written for devotional and/or historical purposes, which include a combination of miraculous and historically traceable events.

As several European medievalist scholars have shown, hagiography is a term that encompasses a range of literary styles and approaches. It is a modern word that developed out of studies of medieval European saints and the diverse corpus of writing by and about them. As such, it has been applied to a variety of texts that contemporary medievalists argue would be more accurately differentiated into separate genres. The concept of hagiography can be approached not as a bounded category but, rather, as what scholar Anna Taylor describes as a “horizon of expectations” about style, form, and content. This corrective offers flexibility in understanding the role of narratives of saintly lives in the contexts of both European and Tibetan life writing. In the same way that hagiography can be applied to a multifaceted set of texts, namtar can apply to a broad range of Tibetan saintly Lives. Both genres can be taken as polythetic in their scope.

Much has been written on the namtar genre and its relationship to European medieval hagiography and spiritual instruction manuals, and methods for approaching this have been well established. Scholars have variously translated namtar as “biography,” “hagiography,” and the more neutral “Life” or have chosen to retain the Tibetan term rather than hazard a translation, all depending on the specific context of a given Life and the circumstances of its authorship. Hagiography is not a direct translation of namtar, so we must tread lightly and acknowledge that the overlap of the two terms will not necessarily be comprehensive. Nevertheless, using a modern English term to make sense of a long-standing Tibetan genre can be useful insofar as it helps situate namtar in a comparative intercultural context of soteriologically minded life writing about eminent religious figures. In cases like Mingyur
Peldrön's *A Dispeller of Distress for the Faithful, namtar* is best translated as “hagiography,” rather than “biography.” This is because it better describes the *Life* of the saint that is soteriologically grounded, imbued with the miraculous, and diverges from European post-Enlightenment concepts of a narrative bounded by the subject’s birth and death. Applying the term *hagiography* to Tibetan sources also helps to draw connections between the devotional textual traditions of disparate parts of the world, allowing for equivalencies to be drawn between Buddhist and Christian religious literature in ways that are useful for understanding the works of both traditions.

Hagiography is useful for differentiating Mingyur Peldrön’s life story from what we might think of as biography. While *namtar* is sometimes translated as “biography,” this term conjures up notions of European post-Enlightenment accounts of historical figures presented in an etic and allegedly objective manner, to act as a window into the lives of individual people. Whether or not such objectivity is actually possible, biography indicates a factual representation that neither claims to excessively elevate nor to apotheosize the subject. Because it suggests some modicum of objectivity and the assumption that all accounts reflect world-bound historically verifiable events, *biography* is ill suited as a term to use for some namtars, including Mingyur Peldrön’s. Referring to namtar as biography indicates that the post-Enlightenment goals of objective reporting were in place for the authors of these texts and that miraculous events, stories of previous incarnations, and so forth would be excluded. For her *Life*, and with so many other *Lives* of Tibetan heroes and saints, this is simply not the case. The term *hagiography* is a more appropriate reference than *biography* with these works because it indicates that the person will be depicted as a saint, their life serving as an example of enlightened activity with the story a lesson for soteriological benefit.

Given the similarities between Mingyur Peldrön’s namtar and the genre of hagiography (broadly defined), the two terms are used interchangeably here. Throughout this study the terms *namtar, hagiography*, and *Life* are all used to refer to the genre of miraculously imbued Tibetan life writing, specifically *Dispeller*. This is not meant to simplify the genres but, rather, to emphasize the author’s visible effort to assert the sanctity of the subject, especially as it relates to the context of her spiritual authority. In the case of *Dispeller*, the text sits squarely in the hagiographic realm, much closer to the European *Lives* of Christian saints than it is to the post-Enlightenment
biographies of the Euro-West. In contradistinction, while Dispeller contains biographical attributes, and some sections reflect the conventions of biography, in general it is not written in the European post-Enlightenment biographical tenor.

Mingyur Peldrön’s life story weaves miracle with historical occurrence and represents her life as the exemplary model of a highly realized religious practitioner. It includes miraculous accounts, stories of spiritual realization, and narrations of the extreme hardships endured by the saint along her path. Like other namtars, Dispeller also includes accounts of her previous lives. And perhaps most important, it was written by her devotee Gyurmé Ösel, whose goal appears to be elevating her in the eyes of their community. Dispeller also follows a format that is common in namtar. It begins with an opening homage to buddhas and bodhisattvas, followed by a description of the subject’s previous lives. After this discussion of her pre-lives, the text goes on to discuss her life as Mingyur Peldrön. It ends with a description of her death and closes with a colophon that gives the details of the text’s composition.

Tibetanists and European medievalists alike have explored the ways that the abundant hagiographies of these respective religious communities can be used in conjunction with other sources to better understand significant moments in religious history and, to a lesser extent, the lived experience of those who are memorialized in these works. While the historical and religious contexts are different, continued dialogue between the two fields of scholarship could help advance both. Hagiographic texts are best understood within a broader literary and historical context. Tibetan literature differentiates between these saintly Lives and actual histories (logyü), and looking at them together can be a fruitful exercise. In contrast with namtar, logyü recount specific moments in political and religious institutions, naming the actors involved, the dates of occurrence, and the outcome of these engagements.

In comparison, it is clear that namtar are not meant to be read solely as histories, but if read thoughtfully and alongside other sources, they can be beneficial in terms of how we understand the mores and historical events of a specific moment. These works are often best read alongside related texts, including histories, liturgies, songs, rituals, letters, and even other hagiographies, to get a better sense of the context of the hagiography’s creation and the world in which the author was situated. Taken alone, one text cannot offer a coherent religio-historical context but, read in conjunction with
other works, can indicate the significant religious and social implications of the material found within a given hagiography. Thus, hagiography can give some insight into the cultural and religious indicators functioning in the time and place where a text was produced. While they are not “windows” into a historical moment, when contextualized they can give clues about what was important to both author and readers in the time of the text’s creation. Taken contextually, hagiography provides a complicated source of information for meeting historical and imagined figures through literary means. Hagiography can be mined to understand society and the saint by understanding the literary and historical context in which the text was written.

Avoiding the presumption of objectivity, such an undertaking should be carefully navigated. The scholarship of European medieval scholars Patrick Geary and Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg offer helpful guidance for engaging these works. In reading hagiography, it is important to acknowledge the “propagandistic nature” of the genre and to take into account that hagiographic works have political implications beyond the literary realm. It is particularly useful to keep in mind that hagiographers’ “works were panegyrics, conscious programs of persuasion or propaganda, meant to prove the particular sanctity of their protagonists.” While these works offer unique insight into their subjects and the historical moment in which they were written, first and foremost they give the reader a sense of the author’s goals for elevating a particular historical figure, a set of approaches to religious praxis and doctrine, and the social mores of the moment in which they were writing. In thinking about the creation of the saint, hagiography also gives the reader a sense of what the author considered most important for achieving the goal of elevation to sainthood.

This is all relevant in the Tibetan literary context of the eighteenth century as well. Insofar as Gyurmé Ösel sought to present his female teacher in a saintly light, Dispeller tells us a great deal about his particular soteriological and social concerns. These works also need to be read contextually to understand how they do and do not represent the values of a given historical context. Taken together with other contemporary works, hagiography can offer insight into historically embedded ideals and proscriptions as well as some reference to historical events (even if these events are construed ahistorically in some moments in the text). As such, it is also important to note that Dispeller was completed more than a decade after Mingyur Peldrön’s death. In the colophon of the work, Gyurmé Ösel explains that he had completed it in order to support the newest generation, the future of Mindröling leadership.
As such, it is instructive to read *Dispeller* as reflective of the late-eighteenth-century concerns of the institution, sometimes diverging completely from the concerns on which Mingyur Peldrön focused during her lifetime.

The very aspects that make namtar challenging historical sources also mean that they are compelling literary works and can tell us something of the religious attitudes and conventions of the time, at least in terms of how the author and the author’s interlocutors were engaging with their social and historical context. Hagiographers can be seen following certain socially embedded stylistic themes in their literary creations, which often exemplified the social mores and soteriological anxieties of their religious and historical contexts or at the very least represented their own concerns. Especially in this context and when treated in conjunction with other works, hagiography can be helpful for learning about the socioreligious environment of both author and subject. It communicates themes and aspects of sainthood and religious praxis that were considered important to the hagiographer and may have been significant for their community as well. By looking at these works, we can learn what authors thought was ideal behavior, how they viewed the missteps and foibles of the intended audience, and their process of grappling with contemporary issues. By understanding the symbolic, doctrinal, and culturally bound significance of these literary productions, the reader can learn about the intellectual and religious environment of the period.

Incorporating both historical and literary analyses of Mingyur Peldrön and her *Life* is useful for understanding both the life she actually lived and how it was presented in literary form. Engaging both histories and hagiographies helps make sense of her position as a religious leader and practitioner who was also a woman. We can consider the ways in which she is represented in texts and work to glean from this what her lived experience might have been. The themes of gender and privilege are particularly useful for building this understanding, especially when we consider their positioning in her *Life* narrative. Taking an analogy from the fiber arts, in this book the themes of privilege and gender act as the weft. We can ask whether and how they can impact each other when laid side by side in Mingyur Peldrön’s life story. Meanwhile, the hagiography *Dispeller* acts as the warp on which these concepts hang. Privilege and gender appear in the text at different moments, impacting the narrative accounts of her experiences and her significance as a religious figure. Considered together, the warp and weft make sense of the whole.
Mingyur Peldrön's namtar includes several accounts of historical events, the result of which is a confluence of history and hagiography wherein history is presented to further the ends of the author's goal of soteriological storytelling. While Gyurmé Ösel's work is useful as an example of hagiography of the period and contributes to our knowledge about hagiographies of women, it also represents a specific historical depiction of her life and legacy. Political, social, and doctrinal clashes are woven into the work to meet the goals of the author. As a source, there is a great deal of generative potential, if the text is read responsibly. To do this, I read *Dispeller* in conjunction with histories, hagiographies, and other accounts from contemporary sources and related institutions, all of which give context to Gyurmé Ösel's presentation of her and eighteenth-century central Tibetan political and religious life. These include histories of Sikkim and Mindröling and hagiographies of her brother and grandmother. *Dispeller* offers an example of the hagiographic text as a rhetorical product. That is, it is a location in which soteriological narrative is used as a literary device to legitimate her and reinforce her goals for the Nyingma community. Gyurmé Ösel drew on and elided gendered norms at turns in his process of elevating his teacher to the level of a saint. His engagement with gender, especially in relation to other aspects of Mingyur Peldrön's identity, is considered in relation to other literary sources in order to show how we can make sense of one woman's rise to an authoritative role in the world of eighteenth-century central Tibet.

**Religion and Politics in the Long Eighteenth Century**

Historical context can tell us a great deal about the social dynamics that color individual experience. For Mingyur Peldrön the most significant influences were the regional religious and political communities associated with two religious denominations, both the Nyingma (such as her birthplace of Mindröling) and the Geluk. In particular, the religiopolitical machinations of central Tibetan organizations set the stage for the causes and conditions that altered her lived experience, literary representations of her, and her own writing. At the turn of the eighteenth century, Lhasa had become well established as a center of cultural, political, and religious power in Tibet, and there were rumblings of inter-sectarian strife that would ultimately erupt into outright war. Much scholarship has been dedicated to the mid-seventeenth-century contexts, such as the establishment and rise of the
Ganden Podrang government in Lhasa. Likewise, a great deal of work has been done to study the rise of nonsectarian (rimé) developments that later centered in nineteenth-century Kham, in eastern Tibet. I categorize the interim between these periods as the “long eighteenth century.” Less scholarship has focused on this interim period so that it remains vague in our current understanding. Mingyur Peldrön’s hagiography helps to fill this lacuna by linking the rise of the seventeenth-century Ganden Podrang with the nonsectarian developments of the nineteenth century. The long eighteenth century was a time of fluctuating sectarian factionalism, with significant tensions between the Nyingma and Geluk denominations.

In the mid-seventeenth century the Fifth Dalai Lama, Ngawang Lobzang Gyatso (1617–82), had condensed political and religious power into the aforementioned centralized government known as the Ganden Podrang. He founded the Ganden Podrang in 1642, and with it he established an inclusive and far-reaching ecumenical system of governance, which he developed in partnership with his advisor, the Desi Sangyé Gyatso (1653–1705). The sectarian underpinnings of the Fifth Dalai Lama’s background are notable in that they significantly impacted Mindröling’s beginnings. Although ostensibly a Gelukpa and the head of a predominantly Geluk institution, the Fifth Dalai Lama hailed from a Nyingma family and maintained close ties with the leadership of several Nyingma institutions in the greater Lhasa region, including Mindröling and Dorjé Drak monasteries. In line with his inter-sectarian affiliations, the Fifth Dalai Lama became a proponent of ecumenism in far-reaching political and religious affairs. The Buddhologist Jacob Dalton addresses this approach as it manifested in the treatment of ritual and sectarian division during the seventeenth century: “The Fifth Dalai Lama and Desi Sangyé Gyatso’s new ceremonies brought together (even if by force) all competing political factions beneath the banner of the Ganden Podrang. Everyone was guaranteed a place at the table, so long as they remained seated and followed the proper ceremonial procedures.” Mingyur Peldrön and her family were the direct beneficiaries of this ecumenism, at least in the early days when they founded Mindröling. Religious institutions were deeply impacted by regional relationships during the long eighteenth century, including Mindröling Monastery. The Fifth Dalai Lama supported the development and founding of Mindröling, while his ecumenical approach was also a boon for Nyingma communities in general and made way for a Nyingma resurgence in the period.
Mindröling was a Buddhist monastic and tantric community founded in the 1670s by Terdak Lingpa and Lochen Dharmaśrī. These brothers had been raised in a family that was religiously engaged, well-to-do, and highly respected. Their father, Trinlé Lhundrup (1611–62), was a descendant of the Nyö clan and a well-known non-celibate teacher, or nakpa, with Nyingma affiliations. His wife, Yangchen Drölma (b. 1624), had been born into a noble family in Yorpo.24 According to Lochen Dharmaśrī, she was the financial manager of Dargyê Chöding, which had been the family seat prior to Mindröling’s founding.25 From their own position of social and religious standing, the brothers had immediate access to patronage from aristocratic families and religious institutions, which would help their progress as they worked to establish Mindröling. The family moved among the most respected community members of the religious and governing institutions in Ü. Terdak Lingpa was an accomplished and recognized treasure revealer, or tertön, and had made a name for himself and for Mindröling through large-scale public rituals resulting in the revelation (and later dissemination) of so-called hidden treasure texts, or terma. Over the course of his adult life he would reveal three treasure collections (in 1663, 1667, and 1676), and his renown grew with each successive treasure discovery. As a non-celibate practitioner, he had seven children, several of whom would be actively involved in one way or another in carrying on the family tradition of religious community building. When Terdak Lingpa and Lochen Dharmaśrī founded Mindröling, they began a lifelong project of Nyingma development in central Tibet. While Terdak Lingpa established the foundation for a hereditary lineage system for future generations of Mindröling, Lochen Dharmaśrī began the lineage of monastic ordination at the monastery. He was an ordained monk who upheld the commitment to monastic practice and scholastic study. A prolific author and translator, he also directed the scholarly activities of the monastery.26 He wrote on a wide array of topics, from canonical exegesis and commentaries to prayers, liturgies, and poetry. He wrote several meditation and reference manuals for Mindröling and wrote down the life stories of his brother and his mother.

The brothers represent the two legitimate streams of practice that have been upheld at Mindröling since its inception. These were dual succession lineages that they established as a means to lead the monastery. Terdak Lingpa acted as the first trichen, or non-monastic throne holder.27
Lochen Dharmaśrī was the first khenchen, or lead holder of monastic vows—a role something along the lines of an abbot. The trichen and khenchen lines have been maintained and persist today. This has ensured a dual power base with foundations in both non-celibate and celibate monastic traditions and allows for generational succession within the family in both celibate and non-celibate lines.

In founding Mindröling, the brothers sought to reinvent the Nyingma tradition in an ecumenical and inclusive light. Inclusive here means that they developed a series of practice methods, rituals, and philosophical approaches that were accessible to monastic and non-monastic practitioners and laypeople. Rituals were publicized and made open to the general public, and the aristocratic sons of the Lhasa elite were invited to study religious and non-religious topics at the monastery. All of these activities resulted in Mindröling reaching a wide-ranging population. In reenvisioning the Nyingma as a “big tent” tradition, they made space for both monastic and non-monastic practitioners under the auspices of Mindröling. As they engaged this rhetoric of inclusion, they grounded it in significant historical research and a new systematization of the canon. In his analysis of the brothers’ approach, Jacob Dalton explains that “[Terdak Lingpa and Lochen Dharmaśrī] forged a more inclusive system that provided places for everyone. Together, the brothers remade the Spoken Teachings from the bottom up. They combined extensive historical research with creative innovation to provide a new ritual platform that could be shared across the Nyingma School. Their careful typologies of ritual texts, compartmentalization of ritual procedures, and unprecedented emphasis on public performance produced a Sutra initiation tradition that in many ways mirrored Sangyé Gyatso’s political project.”

The brothers were successful in rapidly elevating Mindröling to high status among religious institutions. Large-scale publicization and inclusivity were not the only philosophy of the day. For example, Dorjé Drak Monastery, just across the Tsangpo River from Mindröling, took a more exclusive approach, with only a select group gaining access to teachings. But the brothers were inclusive in their approach, which also meant that they incorporated all branches of Nyingma history and practice into their curriculum. Most notably, both the kama and terma traditions were alive and active at Mindröling.

In the Nyingma tradition, esoteric scriptures have been generally divided into these two types (kama and terma), depending on their provenance. While texts falling into these categories are not specific to the Nyingma, this
division is particularly prominent within Nyingma lineages, and it is noteworthy that Mindrölön emphasized both of them. As mentioned earlier, terma refers to religious materials (in this case, texts) that were said to have been discovered and removed from hiding by a divinely guided spiritual adept. During the tenth to twelfth centuries, terma became increasingly associated with the Nyingma, although they were also present in other traditions. These esoteric texts began to appear in the tenth century and paved the way for further scriptural innovation and development. It is believed that treasure texts had been hidden by religious adepts in ancient times so that they could be rediscovered at an appropriate moment in the future. Guru Rinpoche (Padmasambhava) and Yeshé Tsogyel figure prominently in the narratives of treasure concealment and revelation, and Mingyur Peldrön would come to be considered an incarnation of Yeshé Tsogyel—an association that would be used to reflect and emphasize Mingyur Peldrön’s religious authority. Guru Rinpoche and Yeshé Tsogyel were said to have hidden terma in the Tibetan landscape (mountains, for example), where they would remain safe until the appropriate time for their discovery and then protected until they could be used to their highest potential. Then, when the time was right, a suitable individual would reveal the text from its hiding place, translate it from ḍākinī script, and then present it to the people. This was often done with the help of ḍākinīs and a tantric consort. As a non-monastic adept (nakpa) with a consort, Terdak Lingpa was the most suitable individual in this case and revealed texts amid great fanfare through a process that established his works as authoritative in the canonical word. Between the years 1663 and 1680, he revealed three terma. These proprietary treasure texts reinforced the validity of the Mindrölön project and created the foundation for a new set of teachings to be passed on in the institution and also gave the brothers a textual focus for their specific approach to institutional organization and religious practice.

Likewise, kama refers to the texts and teachings that are said to have been transmitted from teacher to disciple, passed down from person to person throughout history. These texts are considered to be the “Buddha’s word” (Sanskrit, buddhavacana) and, according to tradition, can be traced all the way back to a specific buddha. In the Tibetan context this refers to scriptures said to have been translated during the imperial period (seventh to mid-ninth centuries CE) and passed down through direct transmission from master to disciple. At Mindrölön both kama and terma texts were valued and transmitted to students. Likewise, everything from the nominally
secular five sciences (rikné) curriculum to the most advanced Great Perfection (Dzogchen) meditative practices were available for study.

In essence the brothers were inventing—or reinventing—a tradition of ritual, praxis, and historical memory, employing methods that were similar in spirit to that of the Fifth Dalai Lama’s Ganden Podrang. Terdak Lingpa and Lochen Dharmasrī were very close to the Fifth Dalai Lama and the Desi Sangyé Gyatso. Indeed, they exchanged teachings back and forth throughout their lives, and Mindröling received support from the Fifth Dalai Lama that helped propel the monastery to its position of being recognized as an institution of learning for the Lhasa elite. With its proximity to Lhasa, Mindröling became an educational center for the sons of the central Tibetan aristocracy. The monastery grew in renown, and the brothers’ work ultimately led Mindröling to be recognized as one of the six “mother monasteries” of the Nyingma tradition. It was Terdak Lingpa and Lochen Dharmasrī who made what appears to have been the somewhat unusual decision that Mingyur Peldrön should receive an advanced religious education. Her position in this institutional context would provide her with a level of religious privilege that was unique in her milieu and fairly unusual for women prior to the twentieth century.

**Tibetan Buddhist Women’s Lives**

The majority of scholarship on early modern Tibet from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries has largely focused on the activities of men and their contributions to the political and religious institutions of the period. Significantly less has been written about the women of the day, including their engagement in powerful political and religious organizations, their soteriological and mundane concerns, or the types of agency they exercised, although correctives are being made to this imbalance. In recent years several scholars have dedicated their work to the lives of Tibetan Buddhist women, and while this has been beneficial for our understanding across a range of topics relating to these women’s lives, the work still constitutes a relatively small fraction of scholarship on Tibetan Buddhist history and literature. With this in mind, the presence of Mingyur Peldrön’s life story in the Tibetan literary canon is of great significance. Moreover, in a time and place where few women’s Lives were recorded, hers stands out as a testament to her importance at Mindröling and a means by which we might begin to explore at least one woman’s role at the religious and political center of the
Lhasa aristocracy. Mingyur Peldrön's life and work can be best understood in conversation with the life stories of other Tibetan women for whom we have Lives, whose stories range from the fourteenth to the twentieth centuries. In addition to the diverse historical and geographic regions that these women occupied, their relationships to power and religion varied widely. As their stories will be presented for the sake of comparison throughout the rest of the book, here each one will be briefly introduced.

The fourteenth-century non-monastic tantric practitioner Sönam Peldren (ca. 1328–71) is one of the earliest historical women for whom we have a Life.31 The differences between her and Mingyur Peldrön start with Sönam Peldren's lack of formal training or early contact with religious teachers.32 Where Mingyur Peldrön had early access to formal religious education, Sönam Peldren largely charted her own path and faced significant barriers to engaging in religious praxis. Unlike Mingyur Peldrön, Sönam Peldren married and never was ordained as a nun. Also, rather than growing up close to the city center of Lhasa (as Mingyur Peldrön did), Sönam Peldren lived out her adult life as part of a nomadic community. In this context she developed her own approach to Buddhist soteriology and tantric practice. The narrative of her life has persisted to the present day in the form of her multiauthored hagiography. This stands in distinction from Mingyur Peldrön's Life, whose colophon asserts that Dispeller was authored by one person.33 Sönam Peldren's Life, and the related scholarship of scholar of Tibetan Buddhism Suzanne Bessenger, serve as important points of comparison with Mingyur Peldrön, especially in terms of how authorial and subjective voice are used in these literary works.

In comparison with Mingyur Peldrön's Life, the story of the hermitess Orgyan Chökyi (1675–1729) gives a sense of the diversity of women's religious experience in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Tibetan regions. Although a near-contemporary of Mingyur Peldrön and similar in her religious affiliation and concerns, Orgyan Chökyi's story still differs dramatically in most ways. Born and raised in the region of Dolpo, in Nepal, Orgyan Chökyi's path to religious praxis was marked by suffering and the burdens of domestic responsibility. Like Mingyur Peldrön, she was a nun and a practitioner of the Great Perfection whose teachers were male and who sought the religious life and eschewed the domestic realm.34 Orgyan Chökyi's Life narrative addresses her struggles to gain access to religious training and to occupy a physical and mental space in which she could engage in rigorous practice. She was born into a family that had hoped for a son and were unhappy with
the birth of a daughter, and she was initially obliged to live the life of a herder. But she was able to take ordination and studied the Great Perfection in spite of—rather than supported by—her parents. Orgyan Chökyi lived far from the religiopolitical centers of power and gained little institutional authority during her lifetime. Although she attended public teachings by her teacher in Dolpo and was therefore active in the Dolpo religious community, it seems that she did not gain agency or recognition from these engagements.

The tone of Orgyan Chökyi’s *Life* is notably different from Mingyur Peldrön’s in part because it is not hagiography but an auto/biographical form of *Life* writing. In writing *Dispeller*, Gyurmé Ösel was interested in emphasizing his teacher’s soteriological accomplishments and community prominence and wrote from the perspective of the disciple working to elevate his teacher. Meanwhile, Orgyan Chökyi composed her own *Life* and was presumably restricted by the social norms of the time to not elevate herself overmuch. Instead, she emphasizes the themes of sorrow and suffering and the trials of the impermanent world and depicts mundane life as filled with unwanted interruptions on the path to enlightenment. Where Mingyur Peldrön is elevated, Orgyan Chöyki highlights the physical and emotional suffering that slowed her soteriological progress. Moreover, where Mingyur Peldrön had the full support of her family in pursuing a religious life, taking ordination, and acting as a representative of her family’s religious community, Orgyan Chökyi had no formal education in her youth, and her access to religious teachings in her early adulthood was hard-won. Ultimately, Orgyan Chökyi treated her status as a woman very differently from how Mingyur Peldrön’s gender is addressed in *Dispeller*. Drawing on Tibetanist Kurtis Schaeffer’s scholarship on Orgyan Chökyi, considering the two nuns’ experiences and the relationship between their status as nuns and their status as women is useful as it offers intermittent focal points for understanding Mingyur Peldrön and her context.

While Sera Khandro (1892–1940) was like Mingyur Peldrön in that she was a central Tibetan woman from an elite family and a practitioner affiliated with the Nyingma school, her access to and engagement with religion was quite different from Mingyur Peldrön’s. The trajectories of the two women show the significance of familial support for religious practice and bodily autonomy and the impact of family expectations on women’s lived experience. These women are different in terms of the paths they took toward religious study and the way that the relationships with their natal communities influenced that process. Much like Orgyan Chökyi, Sera Khandro’s
family disapproved of her longing to become a serious practitioner. For Sera Khandro the path to religious realization meant a divergence from the life of privilege in which she was raised. In the end she ran away from home, leaving the safety of her privileged Lhasa household to join a community of tantric practitioners in Kham. Both Orgyan Chökyi and Sera Khandro wrote autobiographical Lives depicting their struggles to practice, the opposition they met from their families, and the hardships they faced in the process of pursuing a religious life as women. After her early struggles to be accepted, Sera Khandro was eventually recognized as a legitimate teacher in the non-celibate community she joined. Unlike Mingyur Peldrön, she was not an ordained nun but a lay practitioner who had a consort relationship with her male teacher Drimé Özer. Tibetan studies scholar Sarah Jacoby has done extensive work on Sera Khandro and her Life, which offers an important counterpoint for understanding the breadth of possible trajectories for religious women from elite central Tibetan households.

As an ordained nun and the first abbess of Samding Nunnery, Chökyi Drönma (b. 1422–d. 1455/67) has significantly more in common with Mingyur Peldrön than the other women mentioned here. She existed at the center of her religious institution and took on a prominent leadership role within that organization. She also became a nun and used her family connections to further her religious career. While other women have overlapping similarities, including an aristocratic family of origin, a connection with the Nyingma community, familial support to study the dharma, and the decision to ordain as a nun, all of these traits together are not shared with another woman other than Chökyi Drönma. Aside from her, none of the other women for whom we have life stories reported the particular combination of elite privilege, supportive family, and monastic pursuit that were Mingyur Peldrön’s inheritance. For example, while Sera Khandro came from an aristocratic family, her religious pursuits were often at odds with her family’s expectations for her. Meanwhile, Chökyi Drönma’s family supported religious engagement and offered high social status. Moreover, her monastic inclinations closely resemble those of Mingyur Peldrön. Their positionality is similar insofar as they were born into privileged contexts and were able to develop a religious praxis and public identity while remaining within that community (Chökyi Drönma eventually became the abbess of a nunnery). The work of Tibetan studies scholar Hildegard Diemberger, which focuses on the Life of Chökyi Drönma, will be a common point of comparison when considering the life of Mingyur Peldrön.
Although separated by a century and a half, Khandro Tāre Lhamo (1938–2002) also has a great deal in common with Mingyur Peldrön. Both were born into elite religious families with fathers who were treasure revealers. As a result of their social status and supportive families, both had significant access to religious teachings and established institutions for religious study. Both women were active at the center of the Nyingma religious activities of their day, and traveled widely to exchange teachings with their Nyingma compatriots. Moreover, the reach of their privilege was not infinite, and they lived through war and hardship but survived to witness the revival of their religious communities in a postwar period. Unlike Mingyur Peldrön, Tāre Lhamo was not ordained as a nun. She married Namtrul Rinpoche, with whom she had a consort relationship. Rather than spending time in central Tibet, she lived most of her life in Golok, eastern Tibet, traveling with her husband on pilgrimage and discovering hidden treasure texts together. While Tāre Lhamo is quite like Mingyur Peldrön in several ways, Mingyur Peldrön's identity as a nun differs from Tāre Lhamo's role as a non-celibate practitioner. The scholarship on Tāre Lhamo by Holly Gayley—a scholar of Tibetan Buddhism—will be of central importance for exploring Mingyur Peldrön's life.

Comparison with these women helps illuminate the complexity of Mingyur Peldrön's relationship with authority and gender, her privileged social position, how she is represented in Dispeller, and how gender as a concept was deployed in the context of hagiography. Specifically, Dispeller offers a means for understanding the literary depictions of one woman's life at the center of a powerful institution. Studying Mingyur Peldrön's story in the context of the religiopolitical shifts of the era elucidates her positionality, the challenges she faced in her soteriological and social pursuits, and the opportunities available to her as a woman of privilege. Likewise, her namtar provides some new perspective on a less studied period of Tibetan history (that is, the long eighteenth century), its literary traditions, religious practices, institutional organization, social structure, and family life. While Dispeller is not a history, the literary treatment of Mingyur Peldrön's lived experience can tell us a great deal about how her life was narrativized and the perceptions surrounding her as a religious practitioner and leader.

Mingyur Peldrön was literally born into the religious institution in which she would rise to prominence. Empowered from within Mindröling, her assumption of authority as a teacher, author, advanced practitioner, and purveyor of the monastery’s highest teachings (in Mindröling's case, the Great
Perfection) simultaneously allowed her to pursue a religious path and perpetuate her family’s legacy. This religious position, coupled with her family’s support of her religious aspirations, makes Mingyur Peldrön distinctive among Tibetan women of her time, and even within her family, in terms of the amount of privilege she held. For example, whereas the young Sōnam Peldren, Sera Khandro, and Orgyan Chökyi had to escape the pressures of marriage in order to pursue their religious goals, Mingyur Peldrön was pushed to study and carry on her family’s tradition of religious knowledge and leadership and rejected proposals of consort relationships.

The suffering of female existence is attested in many arenas of broader Buddhist history and literature and appears in different contexts in various ways.44 Focusing specifically on the early modern and premodern Lives of Tibetan Buddhist women, a rhetoric of marginality exists across these texts that establishes women as beneath men in a hierarchy of gender that applies to both monastic and non-monastic people. It is also present to some extent in Dispeller and was applied in complex ways to Mingyur Peldrön. This rhetoric of marginality is best exemplified in the trope of the “lesser female birth,” a concept that was functioning alongside and reinforcing the gender hierarchy. The phrase lesser female birth is a translation of the Tibetan skye dman or skyelus dman and notes women’s positionality in relation to that of men.45 In eighteenth-century central Tibet there was a functioning normative gender binary that collapsed gender and sex and assumed that one was either a woman or a man. While there were different implications for how this binary impacted monastic and non-monastic people, the samsaric effects of one’s gender were assumed to exist in one or another of these two camps. Scholars of Tibetan women’s Lives have pointed to the multiple ways in which the rhetorical engagement that laments birth as a woman as worse than that of men is present frequently and in a variety of ways in these texts.46 Women are depicted as inferior to men in spiritual capability, nuns are described as beneath monks within the monastic hierarchy, and the status of being born a woman is attributed to negative past karma.47 This lesser status was directly connected with women’s bodies, bodies that in turn became representative of the round of samsara (the cyclic existence of birth, death, and rebirth).48

In this context, to pursue a life of religious practice was considered especially challenging for women and directly related to their embodiment, which was in turn correlated with assumptions that nuns were inferior to monks in their learning and in their position within the larger religious
society. This rhetorical system had real-world consequences for nuns, who in many cases would have been considered inferior “fields of merit” than their monk counterparts, making it harder for them to receive enough lay patronage to survive. Being a “lesser field of merit” meant it was likely that laypeople would donate less to nuns, believing that they would earn less merit than they would if their donations went to monks. This meant that the life of a nun was considered to be one of significant hardship, in comparison with perceptions about a monk’s life. These notions reinforced each other, exacerbating the challenges that nuns faced. A similar gendered hierarchy also existed for non-monastic women, with the exception that wealthy aristocratic laywomen sometimes acted as lay patrons for religious organizations and gained status through this patronage.

In each Tibetan woman’s Life, the question arises as to how the woman (or her hagiographer) will engage with (and potentially refute) this trope. For some it becomes a narrative divide whereby they are able to overturn the ignorant view of samsara; for others it is a means by which they are able to express their frustrations with the world and their situation.

For all her privilege, Mingyur Peldrön was still linked with other female figures through her status as a woman, and social assumptions about the lesser female birth would likewise create challenges for her lived experience and her literary depiction. No doubt her gender impacted her life in numerous ways, and they will be considered within their historical and religious context. It is noteworthy that when compared with the other women mentioned here, the lesser female birth trope scans differently onto Mingyur Peldrön’s life story. Specifically, it diverges from other women’s Lives in its representations of her gender identity as positive while continuing to engage social concerns about gender and authority and bifurcated opinions about the gendered implications of soteriological pursuits. Other women’s stories are shot through with traditional Buddhist depictions of the suffering of human existence, especially that of a life lived in a female body. Meanwhile, Mingyur Peldrön’s relationship with her gender is depicted as sometimes fraught and sometimes positive. Her status as a woman is used variably as a tool to elevate her in Dispeller, and elsewhere in the text womanhood is emphasized to underscore the woes of women. The hagiography fluctuates between positive and negative depictions of female birth, offering a complex approach to gender identity and its impact on lived experience. Like a few of the women mentioned here, she was also set apart from laywomen by virtue of being a celibate nun. Her nunhood had a significant impact on her
life, especially her role in the community outside Mindröling. When compared with previously studied women, some aspects of Mingyur Peldrön's *Life* will be very familiar. For example, her *Life* follows common stylistic patterns, describing her religious praxis and biographical details, some of the challenges she faced, moments of soteriological attainment and realization, and so forth. However, her positionality diverges from that of most other previously studied women and so offers a different perspective on women's approaches to and experiences with religious praxis.

**Themes of Privilege, Authority, Gender, and Dialogue**

Four themes are at the center of this study: privilege, authority, gender, and dialogue. It is useful to trace them throughout *Dispeller* and also to apply them to a contextualized understanding of the hagiography within its historical milieu. It is important to point out that these concepts originated in the twentieth-century Euro-West and are here being used to elucidate a context found in eighteenth-century Ü. When engaging theoretical modes in a different cultural and historical context, one must tread lightly. With this sort of cross-historical engagement, there is the danger of imparting contemporary assumptions onto a completely different historical and cultural moment. In order to avoid falling into anachronism, we must consider the ways in which assumptions that are intrinsic to or joined with these concepts in twentieth- and twenty-first-century Euro-Western contexts might impact our reading of how privilege, authority, gender, and dialogue played out in Mingyur Peldrön's milieu and consider how the concepts were actually functioning in her arena. These themes are useful for unpacking the eighteenth-century central Tibetan context at the same time that twentieth- and twenty-first-century concerns are at risk of skewing our reading. The cultural-historical tensions involved in using this terminology thus require some attention.

First, this project seeks to highlight the ways that systems of privilege and disadvantage have informed personal and public representations of women through their life stories. This project draws on the work of several scholars of privilege to better understand its roles in Mingyur Peldrön's context. As a scholar of privilege, Peggy McIntosh defines privilege as “unearned advantages with regard to race, gender or sexuality” and explains that such advantages and disadvantages are used in perpetuating systemic injustice.\(^{53}\)
Here McIntosh’s definition is deployed to reflect the eighteenth-century Tibetan context, including the unearned advantages that would have been especially salient during Mingyur Peldrön’s lifetime. These include advantages gained from birth into a wealthy household, a powerful family (regardless of whether that power is gleaned through social, political, or religious status or some combination of the three), or a community that affords other benefits through association with it. Religious affiliations could lend someone privilege (for example, being born into a family closely associated with the prominent Geluk denomination in its ascendency), as could factors of family wealth or political connections.

Sociologists B. Ethan M. Coston and Michael Kimmel treat privilege as “distributed along a range of axes” rather than a “zero-sum quantity,” such that one who might be marginalized with one status that they hold (such as gender) might have privilege with another status (wealth, for example). Rather than treating privilege as monolithic, this approach allows for a variety of personal, institutional, and social markers to impact the privilege status of a group or individual. It applies directly to Mingyur Peldrön’s context and offers a means for understanding her relationship with privilege and other aspects of how she was situated. Likewise, Eline Severs, Karen Celis, and Silvia Erzeel have adopted Kimberlé Crenshaw’s concept of intersectionality as it relates to power, privilege, and disadvantage in order to better understand the relational nature of power in contexts of uneven privilege, especially in institutional contexts. This is not meant to detract from Crenshaw’s original focus in using intersectionality to point to the ways in which Black women have been specifically oppressed in the United States justice system. Rather, their work offers a helpful entry point for tracing connections between different parts of identity at the individual and community level (including gender identity, monastic status, education, wealth, and religious authority). From here intersectionality is a salient means for parsing socially embedded privilege in historical religious institutional contexts and pointing to the ways that these contexts converge and alter individual agency at the hands of powerful institutions. This book draws on the work of these scholars in its conceptualization of privilege and its relationship to how power functions in religious institutional and social contexts.

Privilege, while important as a notion in the contemporary “West” and present throughout human society, has not been directly applied as a theoretical tool to Tibetan Buddhist history or literature. Although Tibetanists
have touched upon questions of class and social status in discussions of the lives of prominent religious figures, a more sustained focus on the phenomenon of privilege will provide a nuanced understanding of the multivalent social influences on individuals whose lives are discussed in the historical record. Mingyur Peldrön's hagiography provides a clear example in that she was born into extreme religious and social privilege, which bolstered her role as a leading figure in her community. But in spite of privilege in some areas of her life, she was decidedly unprivileged in others. These markers of privilege and non-privilege impacted her trajectory significantly, depending on the historical context in which she was working at the time. Elsewhere, scholars of women's Lives have addressed specific aspects of privilege and lack of privilege as they relate to specific women's contexts, such as a woman's birth into an elite aristocratic family (Sera Khandro), women who received religious training within their families (Tāre Lhamo), the ways that women incorporated their gendered identity into their religious personas and how that related to their privileged or unprivileged status (Sönam Peldren), and the influence of a lack of privilege on women's access to religious teachings (Orgyan Chökyi). Like some of these women, Mingyur Peldrön was born into a family that was not only elite and aristocratic but was also a family with a cache of religious power. Additionally, and perhaps most unusually when compared with other women, Mingyur Peldrön's family went so far as to urge her to adopt a role of religious leadership and allowed her to forgo marriage and become a nun.

In reading privilege back into the historical and hagiographic records, a few challenges arise. The first is whether to adhere to Tibetan usage of terms that might be translated as privilege or whether to impose the concept externally. The twenty-first-century North American renderings of the concept described earlier connect to historically situated social constructs and hierarchies that would have meant an increased ability to decide one's own educational and vocational fate in eighteenth-century Ü. Privilege is treated at the individual level and at the level of social groups, including one's position in family and larger social units based on gender, institutional affiliation, wealth, and so forth. Also, to understand privilege in a historical context, we need to point to the specific systems of power that determined which aspects of social standing would imbue an individual or group with privilege. In the context of Mingyur Peldrön's life, privilege was supported by power structures that favored high aristocratic standing, elite family membership, and monetary wealth. But it was an umbrella that also spread wider than these
advantages. Privilege was also determined by education, gender, and political connections. Religious authority was drawn from religious access, such as the ability to receive empowerments (wang) and other training, the financial ability to offer patronage to religious organizations, and the physical and social proximity to prominent religious centers. At the personal level Mingyur Peldrön’s privilege was also impacted by her birth order, her religious propensities, her bodily autonomy, her status as a nun, and her age when civil war broke out. Thinking of privilege markers with a capacious definition of privilege creates space for how we think about its many signifiers and how they influence power and authority, both separately and in concert, in Mingyur Peldrön’s lifetime. Moreover, the broader notion of privilege highlights how a variety of cultural constructs can be assigned positions of value in overarching systems of power. Reading privilege back into the historical record and into hagiography requires an investigation of the social signifiers that were indicative of a privileged or disadvantaged positionality in a specific time and place and the varied effects of positionality on individual and group experience in a specific historical moment.

There are multiple types of authority functioning in Dispeller that imply systems of social and religious power that were specific to Mingyur Peldrön’s historical context. As with most hagiographies, her Life is in part an argument in favor of her authoritative position at Mindröling, an argument that uses several forms of authority to establish her legitimacy. Three significant threads of authentication are woven throughout the Life, and all rely heavily on her privileged position. Twentieth-century definitions of authority and power are useful for elucidating the dynamic connections between public persona, gender, and types of authority that Gyurmé Ösel used to elevate Mingyur Peldrön when these concepts are developed to reflect her sociohistorical environment.

In Mingyur Peldrön’s hagiography, privilege and authority imbue her with legitimacy, and the vagaries of socialized gender dynamics influence the tone of Gyurmé Ösel’s assertions about his teacher’s authority and legitimacy. A tripartite delineation of modes of authority were present and active in Mingyur Peldrön and Gyurmé Ösel’s worlds. These modes of authentication are: emanation authority gleaned from identification with female divinities; institutional authority, which draws on institutional connections to establish legitimacy; and educational authority, which was developed through an individual’s religious training. Mingyur Peldrön’s role as a lineage holder for Mindröling meant that it was important for her to be perceived as
authoritative in her ability to pass on the monastery’s teachings. This is not to say that Dispeller is dedicated solely to the legitimation of her authority. It is a fully developed life narrative that presents her as a highly realized religious practitioner and a key contributor to the perpetuation of Mindröling. Moreover, it provides details of an important historical moment and her role in that moment and gives one example of the lived experiences of a prominent eighteenth-century female Buddhist practitioner. With that said, a key component of Gyurmé Ösel’s goals as author appears to be establishing her position as authoritative. The three ways in which he establishes this authority tells us a great deal about how authority functioned in their particular context.

The theme of gender—and Mingyur Peldrön’s identity as gendered—plays a central role in Dispeller. As with other themes, we must take care not to heedlessly impart twenty-first-century assumptions about gendered identity onto the eighteenth-century context. The treatment of gender in Dispeller follows Buddhologist Amy Langenberg’s caution that we approach the subject of gender in Buddhist historical and literary contexts with a modicum of critical self-reflexivity, to ensure that we do not impose contemporary Euro-Western concerns or assumptions where they did not exist previously.56 To avoid anachronistic assumptions, textual and historical analysis will be paired throughout my treatment of Mingyur Peldrön’s gendered position, in order to situate her in her historical context, rather than imposing twenty-first-century ideals upon her or her arena. For example, I eschew the term feminism completely while leaving room for discussions about how and where Mingyur Peldrön furthered women’s religious education and individual agency. This approach follows the work of Tibetanists Padma’tsho and Sarah Jacoby, who have sought to elucidate twenty-first-century Tibetan Buddhist nuns’ engagement with “pro-women activities” that have been established “in and on Tibetan terms” by nuns in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.57 As my focus is an eighteenth-century text reflecting the life story of a woman in that era, my goal is to avoid twenty-first-century presumptions, or the culturally contextualized implications attributed to terms such as feminism in contemporary Tibetan contexts. It is worth noting that gender and sexuality are collapsed in the text, rather than delineated as separate constructs, an approach that was normative in Mingyur Peldrön’s context. Gender plays an important role in Dispeller, and at places it overlaps, and elsewhere diverges markedly, from presentations of gendered identity in the Lives of other premodern Tibetan women. For other women, gender
is often listed as an obstacle preventing women from pursuing religious and
spiritual development, a challenge at odds with their soteriological goals
and sometimes their bodily autonomy. The topic is treated with more vari-
ation in Mingyur Peldrön’s case in such a way that Dispeller offers a more
complex reading of how gender impacted Mingyur Peldrön’s lived experi-
ence and also how gender could be conceptualized in writing about women.

Whereas Orgyan Chökyi, Sera Khandro, and Sönam Peldren all had to
fight against the gendered expectations of their families and communities,
Mingyur Peldrön’s position as a woman within her family is not recorded as
a consistent soteriological hindrance in her Life. Whereas other women’s Lives
report gender-related battles over marriage (whether or not to marry, whom
to marry, whether to choose marriage over monasticism), Mingyur Pel-
дрön’s hagiography does not report her family pushing her in one direction
or another. This suggests that she either had a higher level of bodily auton-
omy or that her hagiographer had other reasons to depict her as an autono-
mous and celibate woman. However, Mingyur Peldrön’s gender is rarely
cited by Gyurmé Ösel as an impediment to educational or religious pur-
suits; it is implied as a barrier for her sister’s freedom of choice in marriage
and thus her bodily autonomy. Nevertheless, Mingyur Peldrön’s gender still
plays a significant role in representations of her status and authority in the
community and the challenges she faced. It is clear that gender played out
differently for individual women, even within the Mindröling family. With
that said, gender remains an important piece of Mingyur Peldrön’s nar-
rative, marking moments of triumph and despair and being frequently
evoked as a means of elevating her in some places and barring her from
access in others. Notably, the gendered language that is used to refer to her
changes depending on the importance of the moment. In less significant
accounts she is named using androgynous appellations, while at highly sig-
nificant moments the language used to reference her also emphasizes her
position as a woman. Sexuality and Mingyur Peldrön’s decision to eschew
sexual relationships and adopt monastic celibacy are also significant factors
in the text. Her identity as a woman informs the proposals for consort
relationships that she received from male adepts and the difficulty she
had in rebuking these proposals, although she was ultimately able to dis-
miss them successfully.

While it was not always troublesome, in some places her womanhood is
referenced as a source of consternation for her and something to be changed
in her next life, even though it was not consistently a direct impediment to
her religious pursuits. While these moments are few in the text, they still act as reminders of the ways gender impacted her lived experience and how it continues to influence her literary representation. Rather than being fully negative or positive, her identity as a woman is one among several important factors that influenced her supposed lived experience and so is discussed prominently in her literary narrative. It served as benefit and detriment at different moments in her life. Gender is a central theme in a complex conversation written into Dispeller and is used to underscore the disparity in how Mingyur Peldrön interacted with her male and female students and the expressions of her concern about tantric and monastic forms of praxis.

Alongside these other themes, a study of the role of gender in Mingyur Peldrön’s Life reveals a rich and complex narrative about how she navigated her particular context and how this context was inherently gendered. Simultaneously working for gender equity in Nyingma religious education and praxis and arguing for the supreme role of celibacy in all religious pursuit, she viewed monastic life as the preferable way forward for a community previously known for both non-monastic and monastic paths. Although raised in a community that supported both non-celibate religious practice—as her father’s student, she indeed benefited from this in her own access to religious education—her staunch pro-monastic approach suggests a change in the religious institutional landscape of central Tibet during her lifetime, or at least in terms of her own views and those of Gyurmé Ösel.

Another recurring theme in this project is that of dialogue. As a literary work, Dispeller exemplifies the dialogic potential of hagiography. Although ostensibly authored by one person—a point that is reaffirmed frequently throughout the text—extensive quotations attributed to Mingyur Peldrön herself work to establish the text as a site of dialogical engagement in which contemporary concerns are negotiated between multiple-voiced perspectives. Dispeller can be read as a constructed dialogue between author and subject. “Voice” plays a role in hagiographic narratives, and the same elements are at play here. Moreover, the subject’s identity is developed in conversation with the world around her. Reiterating the dialogic nature of the Tibetan life story does not mean conflating the auto/biographical literary voice with the multiple “voices” found in Gyurmé Ösel’s work, although there is overlap insofar as multivocal dialogue in these texts offers a sense of the subject’s identity, her world, and the concerns of that world. With that said, Gyurmé Ösel’s Dispeller offers a literary style markedly different from
auto/biography. For example, the former often engages methods such as the “self-humbling strategies” of the first-person voice, in which the author engages in self-effacement. Meanwhile, the latter idealizes the voice of the subject in a way that perfects her presentation as an enlightened being. Mingyur Peldrön’s voice as it is represented in Dispeller has been subject to the hagiographic idealization of the devoted disciple-turned-author that is described in the latter example. The notion of hagiographic tenor and devotion in women’s Lives is useful for exploring this, in particular the ways in which female protagonists are idealized and divinized to elevate them above the faults of mere mortal women. Hagiographic tenor and devotion in women’s Lives are also relevant to the literary impact of Gyurmé Ösel’s authorial choices in giving his beloved teacher a voice in her own life story. Beyond this, hagiography can act as a ground on which contemporary anxieties and concerns are negotiated and discussed. In particular, the civil war and subsequent unrest in Ü at the beginning of the eighteenth century had a significant impact on Mingyur Peldrön’s community, shaping her lived experience as well as later representations of her activities during this time. The stresses and anxieties of this period likewise appear in the hagiography.

Given the political and religious developments of the time, Dispeller intimates a particularly fraught period for central Tibetan Nyingma practitioners. In this context it describes the views and concerns of the community through dialogic representations of specific issues and concerns (such as celibacy and women’s roles in religious institutions). The four themes of privilege, authority, gender, and dialogue are threaded throughout the book with varying degrees of frequency, intersecting in some moments and in others standing alone. They serve as a means for understanding Mingyur Peldrön’s Life as a literary creation, the historical contexts and events that she experienced, and how we might best understand their depiction in Dispeller.