

Gender in Tibetan medical iconography and texts

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In ancient and medieval medical texts from around the world the normative patient is male, unless there is a specific reason to discuss or illustrate a female patient. This holds true for the elite medical tradition of Tibet. My paper will focus on recent copies of a well-known set of late seventeenth century paintings that illustrate the *Vaidurya sNgon po* and were used to train Tibetan monk-doctors. The paintings were done in the Nepalese atelier of Romio Shrestha and are now part of the permanent collection of the American Museum of Natural History in New York City.

I will explore both the presence and absence of the female body in paintings that represent: (1) physical reality, as in two interrelated paintings on anatomy that present several views of the human body as a male body, with one miniscule image of a partially clothed woman to illustrate the female orifices; (2) esoteric understandings, as in a painting illustrating the subtle body in male terms; and (3) cultural practices, as in the painting of rules for sexual intercourse presented entirely from the male perspective and illustrated by images of acceptable and unacceptable female sexual partners. Furthermore, with one exception, the paintings always depict doctors as male.

A more specific ideology of gender is presented in a painting about fetal development that also illustrates the reasons one is born female or male, reasons that are related to a karmic ideology of gender illustrated in several other paintings, and to concepts of odd & even, left & right, blood & semen, that are loaded with cultural assumptions about the relative value of the sexes. Significantly, this painting ends with an illustration of a birth scene showing only female attendants – no male doctor is present.

First these images will be examined in relation to the commentary (*Vaidurya sNgon po*) and the core text (*rGyud bZhi*) they illustrate to reveal a scientific discourse of gender that codifies the secondary status of women.

Second, despite this emphasis on the male body and the male medical expert, the paintings contain many female deities as healers and protectors of the medical tradition, and the role of these deities will be explored through the biography of the semi-legendary first doctor of Tibet, Yuthog.