



FGS

Frontiers of Global Sinology

FGS, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2026, pp.75-92.

Print ISSN: 3106-5503; Online ISSN: 3106-5511

Journal homepage: <https://www.fgsjournal.com>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.64058/fgs260108tbucd>



Tibetan Buddhism in the UK:

Cross-Cultural Dissemination, Localization and Cultural Impacts

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Abstract: As one of the core lineages of Chinese Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism embarked on its large-scale dissemination in Europe in the 1960s, with the United Kingdom emerging as the pioneering European nation to host Tibetan Buddhist centers and a pivotal cradle for the Western development of multiple Tibetan Buddhist sects. This study systematically explores the historical impetuses and social-cultural conditions that enabled Tibetan Buddhism to infiltrate and take root in British society, and conducts an in-depth analysis of the establishment processes, organizational frameworks, and doctrinal characteristics of the three major Tibetan Buddhist sects thriving in the UK—the Karma Kagyu, Gelug, and New Kadampa Tradition (NKT). It further examines the dynamic mechanisms of cultural integration between Tibetan Buddhism and British society, and unearths the innovative communication features formed by Tibetan Buddhism in the UK in organizational operation, doctrinal teaching, and operational models during its localization adaptation. The findings reveal that Tibetan Buddhism has formed a uniquely localized development model in the UK through active adaptation to the British cultural and social context, and in turn, it has exerted a lasting influence on multiple dimensions of British culture.

Keywords: Tibetan Buddhism; United Kingdom; cross-cultural dissemination; religious localization; cultural adaptation

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标题：英国藏传佛教：跨文化传播、本土化发展与文化影响

摘要：作为中国佛教的核心流派之一的藏传佛教，于20世纪60年代在欧洲开启大规模传播进程。英国是欧洲最早设立藏传佛教活动中心的国家，同时也是藏传佛教诸多教派在西方发展的重要基地。本文系统梳理了藏传佛教能够在英国社会传播并扎根的历史动因与社会文化条件，深入剖析了噶玛噶举派、格鲁派及新噶当派（NKT）三大藏传佛教教派在英国的发展历程、组织架构与教义特点，探讨了藏传佛教与英国社会之间的文化融合动力机制，揭示了藏传佛教在本土化适应过程中，在组织运作、教义阐释与实践模式等方面形成的创新性传播特征。研究表明，藏传佛教通过主动适配英国的文化与社会环境，在英国形成了独具特色的本土化发展模式，同时也对英国文化的多个维度产生了深远影响。

关键词：藏传佛教；英国；跨文化传播；宗教本土化；文化适应

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1. Introduction

Tibetan Buddhism, as one of the three major lineages of Chinese Buddhism, traces its origins to Pre-proselytizing Buddhism in ancient India. It took root and developed in Tibet in the late 10th century, and expanded to Mongolia and the Chinese mainland in the mid-13th century, evolving into a religious and cultural system with a long history and diverse sectarian traditions. By the late 20th century, this Eastern religious tradition embarked on a global dissemination journey, with Western society emerging as a key arena for its cross-cultural development. Among Western nations, the United Kingdom stands out as a pioneer: it was the first European country to host Tibetan Buddhist centers and has become a cradle for the Western development of numerous Tibetan Buddhist sects, witnessing the most systematic and in-depth localization of Tibetan Buddhism in Europe.

The cross-cultural dissemination of religion is an inherently complex process, involving the negotiation and adaptation between the imported religious tradition and the host society's cultural, religious, and social norms. For Tibetan Buddhism, its spread in the UK—a society with a deep-rooted Christian heritage, advanced modernization, and a pluralistic cultural landscape—entails multifaceted dynamics: the tension between a non-Western religious system and Britain's mainstream cultural values, the adjustment of traditional Buddhist practices to fit modern British social life, and the collision and fusion of Eastern and Western spiritual and philosophical concepts. Exploring how Tibetan Buddhism has taken root, developed, and evolved in such a

distinct cultural context is thus a topic of great academic value, shedding light on the general laws of religious cross-cultural transmission in the era of globalization.

Scholarly research on Tibetan Buddhism in Britain has accumulated rich achievements in both Western and Chinese academia, yet notable gaps and limitations remain. Western scholarship on the subject has primarily focused on five core dimensions: the historical trajectory of dissemination (Prebish & Baumann, 2002; Bluck, 2006), sect-specific studies (Dreyfus, 2003), the construction and development of Buddhist institutions (Starkey & Tomalin, 2016), doctrinal transmission, and the experiences of British Buddhist practitioners (Mukpo & Gimian, 2008; Haas, 2013). Western researchers have adopted interdisciplinary methodologies integrating religious studies, sociology, psychology, and history, providing detailed empirical analyses of the origins and current status of Tibetan Buddhism in Britain. However, these studies suffer from two key shortcomings: first, there is a lack of comprehensive academic monographs that construct a holistic general history of Tibetan Buddhism in the UK; second, sectarian research is imbalanced, with excessive attention paid to the Gelug tradition and the New Kadampa Tradition (NKT), while other important lineages such as the Kagyu—one of the earliest to establish a presence in the UK—have not received the scholarly attention they deserve.

Chinese scholarship on Tibetan Buddhism in Britain has formed a research focus distinct from that of the West, centering on Buddhist adaptability and religious conversion (Huang & Yu, 1998; Li et al., 2021; Shen, 2017), sectarian lineages and institutional studies (Liu, 2015; Chen, 1997), and the general history of Buddhist dissemination in Europe (Huang, 1992; Guang, 1998; Nima, 2006). These studies have laid a solid foundation for understanding the cross-cultural communication of Tibetan Buddhism, and their insights into religious adaptability and cultural exchange mechanisms provide valuable references for research on religious soft power and cultural output. Nevertheless, constrained by geographical distance and limited access to on-site empirical data, domestic research lacks in-depth, systematic analyses of the organizational operation, doctrinal localization, and cultural integration of specific Tibetan Buddhist sects and institutions in the UK, resulting in a relative lack of micro-level and empirical research outcomes.

Building on the existing research and addressing its aforementioned limitations, this study conducts a comprehensive and in-depth investigation into the dissemination and development of Tibetan Buddhism in the United Kingdom. Specifically, the study first examines the historical impetuses and social-cultural conditions that facilitated the infiltration of Tibetan Buddhism into British society, clarifying the internal and external factors behind its successful entry into a Western Christian society. It then systematically analyzes the establishment processes, organizational frameworks, and doctrinal characteristics of the major Tibetan Buddhist sects that have thrived in the UK—including the Kagyu, Gelug, and New Kadampa Tradition (NKT)—with a focus on their unique development paths and adaptive strategies. Furthermore, the study explores the dynamics of cultural integration between Tibetan Buddhism and British society, identifying the innovative communication characteristics that have emerged in Tibetan Buddhism's organizational structure, doctrinal teaching, and operational models during this integration process. Finally, it elucidates the multifaceted influences of Tibetan Buddhism on British society and culture, from the shaping of the “Shangri-La complex” in the British collective imagination to its applications in clinical psychological therapy and its impacts on contemporary artistic and aesthetic trends.

2. The Historical Infiltration of Tibetan Buddhism into the UK

The penetration of Tibetan Buddhism into British society is not an accidental occurrence but a complex outcome shaped by global historical trends, socio-cultural shifts, and religious adaptive dynamics. Against the backdrop of post-WWII globalization and Western society's spiritual quest, this Eastern religious tradition crossed geographical and cultural boundaries, gradually taking root in the UK—a nation with a deep Christian heritage. This part traces the historical context of its global dissemination and unpacks the core factors that enabled its successful integration into British social and cultural life.

2.1 Global Historical Background of Tibetan Buddhism's Dissemination

The global dissemination of Tibetan Buddhism is intrinsically intertwined with Westerners' evolving understanding of Tibet. Geographically isolated by the Himalayan mountain range, Tibet has long been perceived as a secluded realm, its unique history, culture, art, and religious practices igniting profound curiosity across the West. As early as the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Western academia had already witnessed the emergence of pioneering Tibetologists dedicated to studying Tibetan culture, with Tibetan Buddhism occupying a central place in their research agendas. Notable figures include the American scholar W. W. Rockhill (1854-1914), German Tibetologist Georg Huth (1867-1906), and Berthold Laufer (1874-1934)—a German-American sinologist and Tibetologist whose work laid foundational groundwork for Western understanding of Tibetan religious traditions. These early scholarly endeavors established Tibetan Buddhism as an integral component of Tibetan cultural studies, paving the way for its subsequent broader dissemination in the West (Chen, 2004).

The 1960s marked a pivotal turning point in the formal development and institutionalization of Tibetan Buddhism across Western societies. Prior to this era, Buddhism in the United Kingdom was predominantly represented by Theravada Buddhism, a tradition rooted in the Southern Buddhist lineage. The 1960s, however, witnessed a paradigm shift: Tibetan Buddhism transitioned from an obscure academic subject to a lived religious practice for growing numbers of Westerners, accompanied by the establishment of dedicated Buddhist centers and educational initiatives (Chen, 2004). A key catalyst for this shift was the political upheaval in Tibet in 1959, during which a group of Tibetan religious figures went into exile overseas amid separatist activities aimed at splitting Tibet from China. This group subsequently propagated Tibetan Buddhist teachings across Europe, the Americas, and other regions, inadvertently becoming vectors for the tradition's Western dissemination (Xiang, 2005).

Beyond the activities of exiled religious figures, the post-1960s era saw a surge in institutional support for Tibetan Buddhist studies in the West. Universities and research institutions across Europe and North America began regularly funding invitations for Tibetan monks, scholars, and religious leaders to deliver lectures, conduct workshops, and engage in academic exchanges. These initiatives not only facilitated the transfer of traditional Buddhist knowledge but also fostered direct interactions between Western audiences and Tibetan religious practitioners. As a result, the number of Westerners studying and practicing Tibetan Buddhism grew substantially, with lay practitioners, scholars, and spiritual seekers alike contributing to the tradition's gradual integration into Western cultural and religious landscapes (Lopez Jr, 2018). This confluence

of scholarly interest, institutional support, and grassroots engagement solidified the foundation for Tibetan Buddhism's sustained development in the West, with the United Kingdom emerging as one of its most dynamic hubs.

2.2 Socio-Cultural Drivers of Tibetan Buddhism's Reception in the UK

Tibetan Buddhism's successful entry and sustained development in British society can be attributed to a confluence of external contextual factors and inherent religious merits, which together rendered it compatible with the cultural and social fabric of late 20th-century Britain (Kay, 2007). On the one hand, the unique social and cultural landscape of post-war Britain created a spiritual vacuum that Tibetan Buddhism was able to fill; on the other hand, the core tenets and adaptive potential of Tibetan Buddhism itself allowed it to resonate with British societal values and intellectual trends.

In the wake of World War II, Britain experienced a period of rapid modernization and economic development, yet this progress was accompanied by profound cultural and existential challenges. The erosion of traditional cultural heritage, human-induced environmental degradation, and the rise of materialism eroded long-standing social and spiritual values, leaving many Britons feeling disoriented, anxious, and uncertain about the future (Puttick, 1993). In contrast, Tibet—geographically isolated and relatively untouched by modern industrial civilization—was imagined in Britain as a realm of ancient wisdom, where the Tibetan people's perceived acceptance of fate and unique religious traditions embodied an idealized “lost civilization”. This stark contrast made Tibetan Buddhism a compelling spiritual refuge for Britons seeking solace from the discontents of modern life, as its emphasis on inner peace, compassion, and harmony with nature aligned with their nostalgic yearnings for a more meaningful existence.

A further critical cultural precondition for Buddhism's reception in Britain was the gradual decline in the institutional authority of Christianity (Clausen, 1975). Since the Victorian era, the rise of historical criticism, rationalism, modern science, and Darwin's theory of evolution had undermined the theological and social standing of the Christian Church in British society. This intellectual shift left many Europeans disillusioned with traditional Christianity, prompting them to seek alternative sources of spiritual and philosophical inspiration (Clausen, 1975). Tibetan Buddhism emerged as a particularly attractive alternative due to its fundamental doctrinal differences from Christianity: while Christianity centers on the doctrine of original sin, positing human beings as inherently flawed, Tibetan Buddhism upholds the core tenet that all sentient beings possess an innate Buddha-nature and the potential for enlightenment (Huang, 1997). This affirmative view of human nature resonated strongly with British audiences disillusioned by the pessimism of original sin.

Beyond these external societal factors, the inherent spiritual and intellectual merits of Tibetan Buddhism were central to its successful propagation in Britain, with Western scholars and practitioners describing it as an “inspiring, nourishing, and intellectually convincing alternative” to traditional Western religions (Puttick, 1993). First, Tibetan Buddhism was perceived to share meaningful continuities with valued elements of British religious and cultural traditions, most notably the figure of a charismatic founding teacher who embodied self-sacrifice and moral exemplarity—paralleling the role of Jesus in Christianity (Clausen, 1975). This perceived continuity eased its cultural translation and made it more accessible to British audiences unfamiliar with

Eastern religious traditions. Second, Tibetan Buddhism exhibited a unique dual compatibility with both the rational-scientific and romantic intellectual outlooks that defined late 20th-century British thought (Kay, 2007). Early Western Buddhist adherents lauded Tibetan Buddhism as a “scientific and analytical religion” whose emphasis on empirical inquiry into the mind and reality did not contradict the findings of modern science (Baumann, 1997). For Western rationalists, this made it a powerful tool for critiquing the perceived dogmatism of Christianity. At the same time, for romantic thinkers and artists alienated by the dehumanizing effects of scientific rationalism and industrial modernity, Tibetan Buddhism provided a vital “source of spiritual renewal”, offering a path to inner transcendence and reconnection with the natural world (Batchelor et al., 1994). This ability to speak to two seemingly opposing intellectual currents in British society made Tibetan Buddhism a uniquely versatile and appealing spiritual tradition.

3. Institutional Development and Current Status of Major Tibetan Buddhist Sects in the UK

Tibetan Buddhism comprises a rich diversity of traditions, among which the Karma Kagyu, Gelug, and New Kadampa schools have achieved the most substantial development in the UK. The Nyingma and Sakya traditions are also present but maintain a relatively limited presence and influence. Although these major sects share some common features in their cross-cultural transmission, they differ significantly in their historical development, organizational structures, and doctrinal orientations. This part focuses on the three most influential traditions in Britain, examining their establishment, institutional operation, and doctrinal characteristics.

3.1 Karma Kagyu Lineage

The Karma Kagyu tradition was the first Tibetan Buddhist school to establish a permanent center in the United Kingdom and across Europe, with its initial foundation dating back to 1967. Its development in Britain has evolved through several representative institutions, from the early Kagyu Samye Ling Tibetan Center and Kham Tibetan House to the contemporary Diamond Way Centers, each reflecting distinct models of adaptation and expansion.

In 1967, Dr. Akong Tulku Rinpoche and Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche founded Samye Ling, the first Tibetan Buddhist monastery in the United Kingdom. The name “Samye Ling” refers to the first Buddhist monastery established in Tibet in 779 AD under the patronage of King Trisong Detsen and the guidance of the Indian master Śāntaraṅkṣita. By adopting this name, the founders deliberately emphasized their aspiration to build a genuine Buddhist hub in the Western world, mirroring the religious and cultural significance of the original Samye monastery in Tibet. In Tibetan, the term “Samye”—derived from the Sanskrit *samaya*—carries multiple meanings, including equality, commitment, awakening, and the purification of obstacles (Chen, 1997).

Samye Ling largely follows the traditional ritual and disciplinary systems of the Karma Kagyu school. The tradition places strong emphasis on Tantric teachings and oral transmission, with a central focus on the practice of Mahamudra (the Great Seal). Mahamudra practice includes both exoteric and esoteric dimensions. Exoterically, practitioners cultivate meditative concentration on emptiness by resting the mind without conceptual discrimination, investigating the nature of mind and realizing its intangibility. Esoterically,

Mahamudra involves the simultaneous cultivation of bliss and emptiness, including practices such as the Seal of Presence, Blissful Emptiness, and Luminous Seal. The esoteric path generally integrates the accumulation of merit, formal meditation, the invocation of blessings, and empowerment. The ultimate goal of Mahamudra practice is to attain profound realization through training in breath, energy channels, and mind (Huang, 1997).

In response to the social and cultural context of modern Britain, the lamas at Samye Ling have gradually adapted their teaching and dissemination methods. First, given Britain's religious pluralism, Samye Ling defined its mission as providing a pure retreat environment open to people of all backgrounds seeking spiritual renewal. Second, the traditional master-disciple oral transmission could no longer meet the needs of a large and diverse audience. Consequently, the center began recording teachings from senior lamas to support systematic group study and long-term learning (Cheney, 1997).

Following its establishment, Samye Ling expanded continuously, developing diverse facilities including pastures, woodlands, pottery workshops, candle-making studios, thangka painting centers, and a Buddhist publishing house. The resident monastic community also grew steadily, attracting individuals with diverse educational backgrounds from secondary school to postgraduate levels. The foundation of Samye Ling firmly rooted the Karma Kagyu tradition in the UK, and over the following two to three decades, it drew large numbers of lay practitioners to its courses and retreats.

Established in November 1973, Kham Tibetan House became the second major Karma Kagyu meditation center in the UK, functioning as a retreat space for practitioners to purify body and mind and withdraw from worldly distractions. As its membership expanded, Kham Tibetan House spawned affiliated institutions such as the Malpal Institute and London Kamra Choilng, providing further channels for study and practice.

Samye Ling and Kham Tibetan House represented the earliest phase of Karma Kagyu development in Britain. However, their activities remained largely UK-focused, with limited outreach to continental Europe.

From the late 1970s onward, a new expression of the Karma Kagyu tradition emerged under the leadership of the Western lama Ole Nydahl and his wife Hannah, known as the Diamond Way Buddhism. In contrast to the earlier UK-based centers, Diamond Way rapidly expanded across Europe and North America within half a century. Born in 1941 and raised in northern Copenhagen, Ole Nydahl and Hannah first encountered Tibetan Buddhism during their honeymoon in India and Nepal in 1968 (Nydahl, 1999). They received teachings and transmissions from the Kagyu lineage and subsequently dedicated themselves to spreading Tibetan Buddhism in the West.

Diamond Way centers were first established in Austria, Norway, Sweden, and Denmark before expanding to the UK and then throughout Europe. By 2024, approximately 14 Diamond Way Buddhist Centers had been founded across the United Kingdom (Diamond Way Buddhism, 2024).

Within the three vehicles of Buddhism—Hinayana, Mahayana, and Vajrayana—the Vajrayana, or Diamond Vehicle, is regarded as the most direct path to awakening. Originally, vajra denoted the thunderbolt of the Indian deity Indra, familiar in early Pali scriptures. Within Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism, however, the vajra became a symbol of the indestructible and luminous nature of enlightenment, representing the unchanging reality of the Buddha's awakening (Smart, 1998). Diamond Way practices combine mantra

recitation, mandala visualization, and symbolic hand gestures (mudras), aiming to transform body, speech, and mind through intensive meditation training.

In terms of organizational structure, Diamond Way centers departed from traditional hierarchical monastic models and adopted a governance system more compatible with European social norms. Its institutional framework includes spiritual mentors, founders, a Board of Directors, a management committee, and a supervisory board. Spiritual mentors provide teachings, perform empowerments, consecrate temples and stupas, and lead ceremonies. The Board of Directors holds decision-making power over major affairs, invites visiting lamas, and serves as core instructors. The management committee oversees daily operations, expansion, personnel, and regulations. The supervisory board, composed of regional leaders, monitors and reviews the decisions of the Board. Regular board meetings facilitate collective governance and internal accountability (Buddhism Foundation, 2005). In practice, Diamond Way centers are distinguished by their strong emphasis on meditation and direct experiential transmission from teacher to student.

In summary, the Karma Kagyu tradition represents the earliest and most widely distributed Tibetan Buddhist school in Europe, with a particularly well-established presence in the United Kingdom. Samye Ling and Kham Tibetan House laid the institutional foundation for Karma Kagyu in Britain, adapting traditional teachings to British society while developing sustainable, multi-functional communities. However, their limited geographical scope allowed the later Diamond Way centers to become the most influential branch of the Karma Kagyu in Europe. By implementing a modern, flexible organizational structure and centering their curriculum on systematic meditation training, Diamond Way effectively expanded the reach and appeal of Tibetan Buddhism among Western practitioners.

3.2 Gelug Tradition

In the United Kingdom, the development of the Gelug tradition has been predominantly shaped and advanced by the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT). Founded by Lama Thubten Yeshe in 1975 and headquartered in London, the FPMT is committed to the authentic transmission of Buddhist teachings to Western lay practitioners. Through establishing urban and rural Buddhist centers, it provides sustained opportunities for study, reflection, meditation, and practical training (Kay, 2007). This section examines the FPMT's role in the development of the Gelug tradition in the UK from four interrelated dimensions: historical origins, organizational structure, missionary characteristics, and associated social and economic activities.

The origins of the FPMT can be traced back to 1965, when two exiled Tibetan lamas, Lama Thubten Yeshe and Lama Thubten Zopa Rinpoche, met their first Western disciple, Zina Rachevsky, a Russian philanthropist with a strong interest in Eastern spirituality. In 1969, the lamas, together with Rachevsky, established the Nepal Mahayana Gompa Centre, now known as Kopan Monastery, on a hilltop near Kathmandu. Subsequently, in 1974, the International Mahayana Institute (IMI) was founded at Kopan. Recognizing that most Western students would not pursue monastic life but return to their home countries, the lamas identified an urgent need to establish dedicated Buddhist centers in the West. In late 1975, Lama Yeshe formally founded the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT), and soon began

planning centers in the United Kingdom. In 1976, the Manjushri Institute in Cumbria was officially established as a registered charity, under the spiritual direction of Lama Yeshe. Its stated mission was to promote “the Buddhist Faith and human growth, meditation and spiritual development in accordance with Buddhist principles throughout the United Kingdom.” The institute’s inaugural program was a 23-day meditation course led by several lamas (Kay, 2007).

As a geographically dispersed transnational organization, the FPMT, like the Diamond Way Buddhist centers, developed a formalized and rigorous governance structure. Following its establishment, Lama Yeshe created a coordinating framework by founding the Council for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (CPMT), composed of senior students and center directors. The council convened annually to discuss projects, review policies, and formulate guiding principles based on Lama Yeshe’s teachings. He also established a Central Office to facilitate communication between lamas and centers, coordinate activities across branches, and implement decisions made by the CPMT. By the late 1970s, the FPMT had evolved from a loose network of independent groups into a centralized organization with clear institutional governance, policy-making mechanisms, and administrative leadership (Kay, 2007).

In terms of doctrinal propagation, the FPMT displays two distinctive and influential features. First, it introduced the Geshe Studies Program at Manjushri Institute, enabling Western lay practitioners to engage with the Gelug tradition in a systematic and academic manner. The Geshe degree represents the highest scholarly qualification in Gelug monasteries, awarded to monks who complete extensive training in classical Buddhist texts. Initially, FPMT centers offered mainly short-term meditation courses. However, in 1979, Lama Yeshe launched the formal Geshe Studies Program at Manjushri Institute, appointing Geshe Jampa Tekchog to oversee its implementation (Kay, 2007). This became the first and most successful Geshe program within the FPMT network. The program spanned 10 to 12 years, closely following the traditional Gelug curriculum while being adapted and simplified for Western practitioners, including laypeople, monks, and nuns. This structure allowed Manjushri Institute to simultaneously offer short, flexible courses suitable for modern British lifestyles and maintain a rigorous, formalized academic system. Such a comprehensive educational framework remains rare within Tibetan Buddhist communities across Europe.

Second, the FPMT prioritized the direct transmission of teachings through personal visits and teachings by prominent Tibetan lamas in the West (Van Schaik, 2011). In its early years, educational activities at Manjushri Institute were supervised by an IMI nun. In 1976, Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche traveled to Mussoorie, India, to invite Geshe Kelsang Gyatso to join the institute. During his tenure, Geshe Kelsang Gyatso provided spiritual guidance, supervised the General Program of Buddhist studies, and introduced the institute’s only formal Tantric Buddhist curriculum, greatly strengthening its educational system.

In subsequent summers, the institute regularly hosted long-term visits by other eminent Tibetan lamas, including Song Rinpoche, Geshe Rabten, and Geshe Lhundup Sopa (Kay, 2007). For many British students, initial exposure to these lamas’ introductory seminars and public teachings sparked a sustained interest in Tibetan Buddhism.

In addition to formal educational programs, the Gelug centers, following the model of other Tibetan Buddhist institutions in the UK, developed a range of commercial and community initiatives to ensure financial self-sufficiency. These included operating a café, a printing press, and a mail-order bookshop, as well as renting out space for external workshops—both Buddhist-themed events and non-Buddhist activities such as yoga, natural food cooking, Tai Chi, and psychotherapy.

Lama Yeshe also placed strong emphasis on publishing. Following the first international CPMT meeting in 1978, he relocated FPMT's publishing house, Wisdom Publications, from Delhi to Ulverston, allowing it to draw on the resources, facilities, and personnel of Manjushri Institute. In the following years, numerous works by lamas and Geshe Kelsang Gyatso were produced at the Cumbria center. The publishing house not only alleviated financial pressures but also significantly promoted the scholarly and popular dissemination of Tibetan Buddhist culture (Cooper, 2001).

In summary, the Gelug tradition of Tibetan Buddhism has developed steadily in the United Kingdom through the establishment of the FPMT and its flagship institution, Manjushri Institute. After decades of institutional development, the FPMT's influence has extended far beyond the UK. It has constructed a robust transnational organizational structure capable of coordinating centers across Europe and the Americas, implemented diverse and systematic Gelug educational programs at Manjushri Institute, and achieved long-term sustainability through diversified commercial operations. At present, the FPMT manages 132 centers, projects, and service stations in 31 countries worldwide, all coordinated by the FPMT International Office¹. Within Europe, the FPMT has effectively become the primary institutional representative and public face of the Gelug tradition.

3.3 New Kadampa Tradition

The New Kadampa Tradition (NKT) is a contemporary Buddhist movement that has expanded rapidly across the United Kingdom and Europe since its formal establishment in the early 1990s. Before the emergence of the NKT, the Karma Kagyu school dominated Tibetan Buddhism in the UK, with the Gelug tradition also developing a substantial presence. However, following the founding of the NKT, its monastic and lay membership grew quickly, eventually surpassing older established sects to become one of the largest Tibetan Buddhist groups in Britain. In contrast to the sects previously discussed, the NKT is a distinctively Western-rooted movement: while its doctrinal origins lie in the Gelug lineage of Tibetan Buddhism, its institutional formation, organizational structure, and popular development have all taken shape entirely within Western societies. This section analyzes the establishment, doctrinal characteristics, social conditions for its rapid growth, and contemporary development of the NKT.

The founder of the NKT is Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, who was previously invited to serve as a senior teacher at the Manjushri Institute under the FPMT, as noted in the previous section. Geshe Kelsang officially joined the institute in 1977, and by the late 1970s, serious disagreements had emerged between him and Lama Thubten Yeshe. These tensions centered on two key issues.

¹ Dai, Q. B. M. (2019). A study on the dissemination of Karma Kagyu School of Tibetan Buddhism in Europe (Master's thesis). Lanzhou University, Lanzhou.

First, they held contrasting views on the institutional development of Tibetan Buddhism in the UK. Geshe Kelsang proposed establishing independent Buddhist centers in Yorkshire, whereas Lama Yeshe insisted that new centers should remain integrated within the FPMT network. Both Lama Yeshe and the FPMT leadership opposed Geshe Kelsang's plan, concerned that independent centers would risk fragmentation and disharmony within the organization.

Second, the two teachers differed sharply in their doctrinal and spiritual orientations. Lama Yeshe promoted an inclusive approach to Tibetan Buddhism, upholding the Gelug tradition while remaining open to teachings and practices from the Nyingma, Sakya, and Kagyu lineages. By contrast, Geshe Kelsang advocated a more exclusivist religious identity, emphasizing a return to what he regarded as the "pure" original teachings of the Gelug tradition as formulated by Je Tsongkhapa. He criticized Lama Yeshe and the FPMT for what he saw as the dilution of authentic Buddhist doctrine, occasionally arguing that the FPMT had blurred religious and political concerns (Kay, 2007).

Following Lama Yeshe's death in 1984, the internal tensions gradually subsided. In 1991, the Manjushri Institute formally separated from the FPMT, and within a year was renamed the Manjushri Mahayana Buddhist Center. It was at this point that Geshe Kelsang publicly announced the founding of the New Kadampa Tradition (NKT). From its inception, NKT centers have been committed to what the movement describes as "devotion to the pure Dharma." Under Geshe Kelsang's leadership, the NKT rose to considerable prominence in British religious life from the 1990s onward.

The defining doctrinal feature of the NKT is its strong conservative and tradition-oriented religious identity, emphasizing simplicity and purity in line with the historical Kadampa tradition from which the Gelug school emerged (Wang, 2010). The retention of the name "Kadampa" explicitly reflects this self-understanding. Geshe Kelsang's teachings remain doctrinally continuous with mainstream Gelugpa scholasticism (Waterhouse, 1995), exhibiting the conservative textual orientation, traditional institutional structure, and direct pedagogical style shaped by his rigorous training at Sera Je Monastic University.

Doctrinally, Geshe Kelsang's lineage draws heavily on two influential Gelug masters: Trijang Rinpoche and Phabongkha Rinpoche. His conservative religious stance mirrors their emphasis on preserving the strict monastic and doctrinal traditions established by Tsongkhapa in the major Gelug monasteries of Tibet, rather than adapting or innovating teachings specifically for Western practitioners (Samuel, 1993). Many of Geshe Kelsang's early published works, including *Meaningful to Behold, A Commentary to A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, and *Clear Light of Bliss*, systematically present this doctrinal orientation (Gyatso, 1980; 1992; 2000).

As a late-emerging movement, the NKT surpassed older Tibetan Buddhist sects in the UK not only due to the general appeal of Tibetan Buddhism in British society but also through specific historical and institutional factors. Fundamentally, the NKT's expansion can be attributed to Geshe Kelsang's emphasis on "pure" doctrinal authenticity and a clear-cut religious identity. The movement's rejection of perceived religious-political entanglement, promotion of modest lifestyles, and emphasis on practical ethical teachings resonated with the spiritual concerns of many British people.

In addition, public controversy surrounding the worship of the protective deity Dorje Shugden¹ in the 1990s inadvertently increased the NKT's public profile. As a teacher committed to a traditional Gelug religious identity, Geshe Kelsang regarded Dorje Shugden as an important protector deity. However, at that time, the 14th Dalai Lama expressed public concerns regarding the worship of Dorje Shugden, which led to heightened social and religious tensions within some Tibetan Buddhist communities. These disagreements attracted substantial international media attention, which extensively covered the resulting disputes and demonstrations. While such reporting was often sensationalized, it significantly increased public awareness of the NKT and contributed to its growth.

The development of the NKT after 1991 can be observed in three interrelated dimensions.

Firstly, the movement has maintained steady institutional expansion. Almost all of its members are Western converts. At present, the NKT manages approximately 200 centers in the United Kingdom, with more than 50 additional centers across the USA, Australia, Malaysia, Brazil, Mexico, and various European countries, claiming a total following of over 100,000 people (Liu, 2015). The NKT's stated goal is to establish centers in major cities throughout the UK, positioning itself as one of the largest Buddhist organizations in the West (Bai, 2016).

Secondly, the NKT has pursued an ambitious International Temple Project, which aims to build Kadampa Buddhist temples in major cities worldwide. These temples serve as public focal points for introducing NKT teachings and demonstrating Buddhist values through community and charitable activities.

Thirdly, regular Dharma assemblies have become central to the NKT's recruitment and fundraising strategies. Since the movement's founding, Geshe Kelsang has given thousands of public teachings internationally. Today, the Manjushri Meditation Center in the UK hosts three major annual Dharma assemblies. These gatherings serve dual purposes: to transmit scriptural teachings and promote the movement's traditionalist religious identity, and to solicit voluntary donations, which form an important financial base supporting the NKT's continued development.

In summary, the NKT represents a contemporary development of the doctrinal legacy extending from the ancient Kadampa tradition to the Gelug school of Tibetan Buddhism. Its most distinctive feature is the conservative, tradition-centered religious identity established by Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, which has proven highly appealing to many British practitioners. Furthermore, public controversies in the 1990s expanded its visibility and contributed to its rapid growth. At present, the NKT has evolved into a large-scale, internationally organized Tibetan Buddhist movement, with an extensive network of centers, ongoing temple construction, and regular transnational Dharma gatherings.

4 Cultural Integration of Tibetan Buddhism and British Society

Doctrinally, the major Tibetan Buddhist traditions in the UK have retained their core historical identities: the Kagyu school emphasizes tantric practice and Mahamudra; the Gelug tradition upholds the ethical and

¹ Dorje Shugden, as an entity associated with Gelug Tradition, is looked upon as a mundane protector. In Tibetan, both "Dorje" and "Shugden" mean "diamond-like", symbolizing wisdom, strength, and resilience.

meditative teachings of Atisha and Tsongkhapa, emphasizing *śamatha* and *vipaśyanā*; and the Nyingma school centers on Dzogchen, the Great Perfection. Yet, as these traditions have taken root in Britain, they have evolved considerably, generating new curriculum designs, pedagogical styles, and organizational structures.

4.1 Innovative Dissemination Characteristics of Tibetan Buddhism in the UK

Notably, the UK has witnessed the emergence of entirely new forms of Tibetan Buddhist organization established and led by Western practitioners, such as the Diamond Way Buddhist centers, and even new institutional expressions like the New Kadampa Tradition. This transformation clearly demonstrates that Tibetan Buddhism in Britain has been deeply shaped by its social and cultural environment, developing characteristics distinct from those found in its regions of origin (Kay, 2007).

First, influenced by Britain's relatively mature modern administrative and organizational models, Tibetan Buddhism in the UK has gradually constructed an extensive network of Buddhist centers as its primary nodes of transmission, allowing for large-scale institutional expansion. These British centers function in ways analogous to traditional Tibetan monasteries, yet with important structural differences. Whereas monasteries in Tibet are primarily composed of ordained monastics, British Buddhist centers maintain a far more diverse membership, usually with only a small number of resident monks or lamas, and a majority of lay practitioners (Bai, 2016). In traditional Tibetan society, lay devotees typically express their faith through rituals, offerings, and attendance at ceremonies, while systematic doctrinal learning has largely been reserved for ordained monks. In British centers, by contrast, lay practitioners are able to study Buddhist philosophy and practice meditation intensively without taking monastic vows. Beyond educational departments, these centers have also developed formal administrative sections responsible for daily operations, event planning, and inter-center coordination. All major Tibetan Buddhist traditions discussed in this study have flourished in the UK through this center-based model. Influential transnational organizations including Diamond Way Buddhism, the FPMT, and the NKT have prioritized rapid center expansion, extending their influence far beyond Europe. The large-scale networks have adopted centralized, umbrella-style governance structures, with headquarters responsible for strategic decision-making, and local centers implementing policies through hierarchical coordination. As a result, Buddhist centers have evolved from purely religious spaces into functional branches of modern transnational organizations. For instance, the governance structure of Diamond Way centers includes not only spiritual mentors but also a board of directors, a management committee, and a supervisory board composed of regional coordinators. The FPMT and NKT have similarly established formal management and administrative bodies to ensure institutional efficiency.

Second, the pedagogical style of Tibetan Buddhism in the UK has been noticeably adapted to British cultural norms. As Lama Tendzin Yignyen observed, "The Tibetan method is too slow and filled with historical allusions... Westerners need something more concrete, something they can relate to from their own experiences"¹. To suit the direct, pragmatic orientation of many British people and the fast-paced rhythm of modern society, lamas teaching in the West often abbreviate traditional contextual introductions and present teachings in a condensed, practically oriented format. Traditional monastic educational and tulku (reincarnate lama) institutions have also been significantly modified. In Tibet, a Gelug monk typically requires more than

¹Professor Du Yongbin talks about the westernization of Tibetan Buddhism [EB/OL]. https://www.tibetol.cn/11/79/6/201105/t20110516_162482.htm. (2011-05-16/2021-05-05).

20 years to complete the full exoteric and esoteric curriculum. In Western contexts, however, formal study programs are often condensed into courses lasting only a few months. Similarly, the traditional procedures for recognizing reincarnate lamas, which involve pilgrimage to sacred sites and seeking auspicious signs, are generally not practiced in the Western institutional context.

Third, the operational model of Tibetan Buddhist centers in Britain has been shaped by the commercial and pragmatic ethos of modern UK society. Traditional monasteries in Tibet have historically relied on community support and state patronage. In contrast, during the early establishment of centers in the UK, voluntary donations were often insufficient to cover costs, and Tibetan Buddhism did not immediately benefit from established religious welfare provisions. These economic challenges were largely resolved through a partial commercialization of religious practice: long-term traditional training was restructured into marketable short-term courses. Meditation courses became the most ubiquitous offering, available at nearly every center. Supplementary activities such as yoga classes, Oriental cooking workshops, and public lectures further diversified revenue streams.

This commercialized model has proven sustainable in Britain for several reasons. First, growing spiritual demand among Britons seeking alternatives to mainstream culture positioned Tibetan Buddhism as an attractive new resource, creating a viable market. Second, short, non-committal courses aligned with modern British valuing of efficiency and flexibility. For example, Samye Ling now offers a variety of Buddhist-themed courses each month, ranging from free lectures to one- or two-week specialized programs priced between £60 and £600 (Samye Ling, 2024).

In summary, Tibetan Buddhism in the UK has developed a distinctive transmission model under the influence of British social and cultural norms. Its key innovations include: a center-based institutional network as the primary platform for dissemination; curriculum and teaching styles adapted to Western intellectual and practical needs; and a flexible, partially commercialized operational mechanism that ensures both spiritual authenticity and institutional sustainability.

4.2 Socio-Cultural Impacts of Tibetan Buddhism on the UK

During its dissemination in the United Kingdom, Tibetan Buddhism has undergone considerable adaptation without being fully assimilated into mainstream British culture. Instead, as it has established its distinctive institutional and spiritual identity, Tibetan Buddhism has exerted a measurable and multifaceted influence on contemporary British society. This section examines its cultural and social impacts from three interrelated perspectives: the Shangri-La complex, mindfulness and mental well-being, and art and aesthetics.

Firstly, Tibetan Buddhism has deepened and sustained the Shangri-La complex within British cultural imagination. The idea of Shangri-La was popularized in mainstream British culture through James Hilton's novel *Lost Horizon*, which portrayed a peaceful, utopian valley hidden in the Himalayas (Hilton, 1933). Hilton's idealized vision resonated strongly with British readers, offering an escapist fantasy amid the instability of the Great Depression and the looming threat of the Second World War. Since the 1960s, Tibetan Buddhism—with its distinctive philosophy, rituals, and imagery—has become the primary cultural embodiment of Shangri-La in British society, reinforcing long-standing romantic fascination. Many core

values promoted within Tibetan Buddhism—including compassion, non-violence, mindfulness, and the pursuit of inner peace—align closely with the tranquil, harmonious way of life depicted in the Shangri-La myth. The emphasis on simplicity, contemplation, and harmony with nature inherent in Buddhist teachings corresponded closely to the psychological needs of many Britons disillusioned with modern materialism and social upheaval. Consequently, even though few British people have visited the Himalayan region, Tibetan Buddhism has preserved and intensified a collective cultural longing for an idealized spiritual sanctuary (Baumann, 1997).

Secondly, mindfulness practices rooted in Buddhist traditions have become widely mainstreamed in British society as evidence-based tools for enhancing mental health and well-being. Mindfulness-based interventions, adapted from Buddhist meditative techniques, are now extensively applied in clinical and educational settings across the UK to alleviate stress, anxiety, and depression. Among the most influential programs is Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), which integrates mindfulness meditation and body awareness to improve psychological health. MBSR has been widely adopted in British clinics, hospitals, and mental health services as a standard complementary intervention (Kabat-Zinn, 2009). Building upon MBSR, Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) combines mindfulness practices with cognitive-behavioral principles to prevent relapse in chronic depression. Developed by Zindel Segal, Mark Williams, and John Teasdale, MBCT has been formally recommended by the UK National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) and is now routinely provided through both the National Health Service (NHS) and private practitioners (Segal et al., 2002). In this way, Buddhist-derived mindfulness has been secularized and institutionalized as a legitimate component of modern British mental healthcare.

Thirdly, Tibetan Buddhism has exerted a distinct influence on British art and aesthetics, primarily through the introduction and reception of Tibetan religious art, iconography, and symbolic visual culture. Central to this transmission are thangkas—intricate painted scrolls depicting Buddhas, bodhisattvas, mandalas, and narrative scenes from Buddhist scripture. Traditionally used as meditative and ritual aids, thangkas have gained considerable popularity among British artists, scholars, and spiritual seekers (Dyer et al., 2022). Many British artists have studied traditional thangka techniques and integrated Tibetan iconography and stylistic elements into contemporary artistic practice.

Major British institutions have further legitimized this cultural appreciation. The British Museum in London houses a significant collection of thangka paintings and Tibetan Buddhist artifacts, allowing public access to Himalayan religious art and symbolism. Similarly, the Victoria and Albert Museum preserves an extensive collection of Tibetan sculptures, ritual objects, and decorative arts, including statues of Buddhas and bodhisattvas, stupas, prayer wheels, and ceremonial vessels. These works are valued both for their spiritual meaning and their artistic craftsmanship, contributing to the broader appreciation of Tibetan culture within British museum and gallery contexts. Tibetan Buddhist sculptures and ritual items are also actively collected by museums, galleries, and private individuals, further embedding Tibetan aesthetic traditions into British cultural life.

5. Conclusion

The dissemination and development of Tibetan Buddhism in the United Kingdom represents a remarkable case of cross-cultural religious adaptation in the era of globalization, shaped by a confluence of external societal conditions and the internal adaptive potential of Tibetan Buddhist traditions themselves. Externally, the rapid modernization of post-WWII British society—accompanied by the erosion of traditional cultural values, the decline of Christian institutional authority, and a widespread search for alternative spiritual meaning—created a receptive social context for Tibetan Buddhism. Internally, the inherent doctrinal richness, spiritual versatility, and institutional flexibility of Tibetan Buddhism enabled it to resonate with British cultural and social norms, laying the foundation for its successful implantation in a Western Christian society. Its initial propagation in the UK was anchored in the establishment of dedicated Buddhist centers, the development of publishing ventures for doctrinal dissemination, and the organization of large-scale religious assemblies, all of which solidified its institutional presence in British society.

The development of Tibetan Buddhism in the UK has entailed a process of reciprocal acculturation between Tibetan Buddhist culture and British mainstream culture, with the former exhibiting distinct new characteristics shaped by its host context. First, unlike traditional Tibetan monasteries, Tibetan Buddhist centers in the UK have evolved into highly organized, systematic, and scaled transnational institutional networks, with a mixed membership of small resident monastic communities and a large body of lay practitioners, and formal administrative structures to support their operation and expansion. Second, in doctrinal teaching and dissemination, all major Tibetan Buddhist sects have abandoned overly traditional, lengthy pedagogical approaches in favor of direct, condensed, and practical teaching methods tailored to the fast-paced lifestyle and pragmatic thinking of British society; traditional monastic education systems and reincarnation recognition procedures have also been simplified and adapted to Western contextual conditions. Third, Tibetan Buddhist organizations in the UK have embraced a degree of commercialization in their operational models, transforming traditional Buddhist practices and teachings into marketable short-term courses and supplementary cultural activities, which not only addresses financial sustainability but also aligns with the efficiency-oriented demands of modern British society.

In the course of its localization, Tibetan Buddhism has not only adapted to British culture but also exerted a profound and multifaceted influence on multiple dimensions of British society and culture. First, it has deepened the Shangri-La complex in the British collective imagination: the core Buddhist values of compassion, mindfulness, inner peace, and harmony with nature have become the spiritual embodiment of Hilton's utopian Shangri-La, satisfying the British public's longing for an escape from materialism and social anxiety. Second, mindfulness practices derived from Tibetan Buddhism have been secularized and institutionalized in the UK, emerging as evidence-based clinical interventions for mental health. Third, Tibetan Buddhist artistic traditions—including thangkas, religious sculptures, and ritual artifacts—have enriched British aesthetic culture, with major national museums housing significant collections of Tibetan Buddhist art, and British artists integrating Tibetan iconographic and stylistic elements into contemporary creation, fostering a broader public appreciation of Himalayan cultural and artistic heritage in the UK.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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