

Foreword:

When the Himalayas Encounter the Alps: Buddhism-Mediated Exchanges between the East and West

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Western scholarly interest in Buddhism can be traced back to the experiences of Christian missionaries in South Asia, East Asia, and Central Asia during their evangelical missions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These missionaries encountered various Buddhist traditions—Theravāda, Chinese (Mahāyāna), Tibetan (Vajrayāna), and Japanese—and came to recognize Buddhism as a well-developed religious system with rich philosophical depth. Their contact with Buddhism stimulated a curiosity within Western religious and intellectual circles, thereby initiating a wave of translation, interpretation, and academic inquiry that would eventually establish Buddhist Studies as a modern academic discipline.

Early Western scholars, most of whom were philologists and textual historians, approached Buddhism primarily through the study of classical languages such as Sanskrit, Pāli, Tibetan, and Chinese. They compiled dictionaries, translated scriptures, and conducted comparative textual analyses, laying the groundwork for the development of Buddhist Studies across various disciplines, including religious studies, philosophy, history, sociology, and anthropology. Over time, the study of Buddhism evolved from a purely academic pursuit into a

living tradition practiced by increasing numbers of Western adherents.

For much of this history, the Western understanding of Buddhism was disproportionately shaped by Theravāda and Tibetan traditions. This was largely due to the colonial engagement of the British Empire with Theravāda regions such as Sri Lanka and Burma, which facilitated the translation of Pāli texts and the establishment of meditation centers in London and other parts of Britain. Tibetan Buddhism, on the other hand, gained prominence during the 1960s and 1970s as part of the Western counterculture movement, often romanticized through the image of a ‘mystical/mystified Tibet’.

In contrast, the transmission of Chinese (Mahāyāna) Buddhism to the West has been relatively recent and more limited in scope, primarily following patterns of Chinese immigration. Its presence remains largely confined to overseas Chinese communities, with relatively little penetration into mainstream Western religious culture. Consequently, Chinese Buddhism still holds significant potential for growth in the European context.

In recent decades, however, with the rapid rise of the Chinese-speaking regions and the development of digitized Chinese Buddhist databases, international scholars of Buddhist Studies have begun to shift their focus. The traditional dominance of Theravāda, Tibetan, and Japanese Buddhism in global research is gradually being rebalanced by the inclusion of Chinese Buddhist texts, doctrines, and historical experiences. This shift not only reflects a broader availability of scholarly resources but also signals a reconfiguration of the global academic landscape in Buddhist Studies.

From a broader civilizational perspective, the transmission of Buddhism to the West mirrors a recurring pattern of cultural and religious diffusion across Eurasia. Buddhism, though originating in the Indian subcontinent, was deeply embedded within the Indo-European cultural matrix. Its classical languages—Sanskrit and Pāli—belong to the Indo-European language family, and its institutional forms, including monastic regulations, scholastic traditions, and philosophical systems, bear the imprint of early Indo-European civilization. After more than a millennium of localization and sinicization, Buddhism developed into the uniquely Chinese forms we see today.

As such, Buddhism serves not merely as a religious or philosophical system, but as a cultural conduit between East and West. It offers both a lens through which to reconstruct the historical interactions between Eurasian civilizations and a vehicle for contemporary cultural diplomacy. In an age marked by geopolitical tension and civilizational misperception, the core Buddhist values of compassion, tolerance, and wisdom could function as valuable resources for fostering mutual understanding and peace.

Looking back, it is worth noting that Buddhism was not the only Western or Middle Eastern tradition to enter the East. The so-called ‘Three Ancient Foreign Religions’ (Sanyi jiao 三夷教)—Nestorian Christianity (Jingjiao 景教), Zoroastrianism (Xiandao 祆教, or the Cult of Fire), and Manichaeism (Moni jiao 摩尼教)—all found their way into China during the Tang Dynasty and beyond, leaving enduring marks on the religious and cultural fabric of East Asia. The rise and fall of these religions in China offer profound historical lessons in pluralism, cross-cultural adaptation, and the dynamics of religious acceptance.

Therefore, the future of international Buddhist Studies requires a vision that transcends linguistic and geographical boundaries. A global, comparative, and interdisciplinary approach—encompassing textual studies, historical inquiry, and cultural analysis—will not only enrich our understanding of Buddhism itself but also contribute meaningfully to broader dialogues on East-West relations. Buddhism, as both an ancient tradition and a contemporary force, can thus serve as a catalyst for rebuilding cultural trust and promoting civilizational co-prosperity across the Eurasian continent.

In order to provide an interdisciplinary, innovative, and more balanced perspective on Buddhism-mediated exchanges between East and West, three partner universities of the Glorison Global Network for the Study of Buddhism—the University of Cambridge, Peking University, and the University of British Columbia—jointly organized an international conference titled ‘When the Himalayas Encounter the Alps: The Past, Present, and Future of Asia-Europe Buddhist and Other Religious Exchanges’ (黑海東頭望大秦——亞歐佛教、宗教交流與合作：歷史、現狀與未來如是我聞). The conference

took place from August 30 to September 2, 2024, at Magdalene College, University of Cambridge.

The event was met with enthusiastic participation from the international academic community, receiving a total of thirty paper submissions. In addition to the keynote lectures by three distinguished scholars—Professor T. H. Barrett (SOAS, University of London), Professor Elizabeth J. Harris (University of Birmingham), and Professor Eugene Wang (Harvard University)—the conference featured seven thematic panels,¹ which addressed a wide range of historical and contemporary issues concerning Buddhist and religious exchanges across Eurasia:

1. Buddhism in Europe: Philosophical and Psychological Entanglement;
2. Buddhism's Journey to the West, from Sea to Land, from Past to Present;
3. Chan/Zen;
4. Buddhism-tied Eurasia;
5. Rise of Buddhology in the Europe;
6. Central Asia and Mid-east (I);
7. Central Asia and Mid-east (II).

Each panel was characterized by lively discussions and constructive feedback, allowing presenters to refine their ideas and expand their perspectives. These intensive scholarly exchanges fostered a collaborative environment in which participants re-examined long-held assumptions and explored new directions in the study of Buddhist transmission and intercultural dialogue.

After careful selection and a rigorous editorial process of the submitted revised papers, several of these contributions were published in a special issue of the *Hualin International Journal of Buddhist Studies*.² This conference proceeding includes both previously

¹ For more detailed descriptions, see: <https://glorisunglobalnetwork.org/gs-forum-2024-schedule/>.

unpublished research and articles that have appeared in other academic outlets. Together, they represent a significant step forward in advancing scholarly dialogue on the complex history and future of Buddhist and religious exchanges between Asia and Europe.

On the occasion of the publication of this volume, the editors would like to extend their deepest respect and sincere gratitude to the Glorison Charitable Foundation and to Dr. Charles Yeung, whose generous support made both the conference and this publication possible.

² See this selection in *Hualin International Journal of Buddhist Studies* 8.1 (in English) <https://dx.doi.org/10.15239/hijbs> and its sister journal, *Hualin Guoji Foxue Xuekan* 華林國際佛學學刊 [International Journal of Buddhist Studies] (in Chinese) 8.1, <https://dx.doi.org/10.6939/hijbs>.