

“Lamaism is Not Buddhism!”
**Public Criticism as a Catalyst for Localizing Tibetan
Buddhism in Taiwan**

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Khenpo Chönyi Döntok Rinpoché (Mkhan po chos nyid don rtogs rin po che, b. 1964), a Nyingma teacher originally from Dzachuka (Rdza chu kha) in Kham, takes a deep sip of tea and sets his cup down gently on a saucer. “So, you want to know about the [Taiwan International Tibetan Buddhism] Study Institute, right?”¹ We are sitting at a heavy wooden table in his dharma center in Taipei’s Shilin District. A wall of colorful, porcelain teapots and several shelves of carefully arranged Buddhist scriptures and gilded statues form a backdrop as Khenpo Chönyi Döntok Rinpoché leans back and begins to recall. “There were four of us founders: Khenpo Tsülnam, Tulku Thubten Norbu, Kathok Rigdzin Chenmo, and myself. The four of us [started the Taiwan International Tibetan Buddhism Study Institute] in 2009.”² Khenpo Chönyi Döntok Rinpoché takes another sip of tea before continuing,

We knew that within the general state of Taiwanese society and religion in Taiwan, the situation of Tibetan Buddhism in Taiwan was extremely acute. We knew this clearly. At that time, we were even a bit afraid. There were people publicly condemning the Outer, Inner, and Secret [Teachings], and those who said Tibetan Buddhism isn’t pure. Even among Buddhists, there were those who didn’t like [us] and wanted to stop [Tibetan Buddhism. Their opposition] here became very intense. [They were opposed] to the entirety of Tibetan Buddhism, not only to us Nyingma or the Kagyü or Sakya. They said the very existence of Tibetan Buddhism in Taiwan is

¹ “*da zhib ’jug tshogs pa’i skor ’dra po red ba!*” Khenpo Chönyi Döntok Rinpoché, interview with author, Taipei, January 6, 2023.

² “*nga tsho dang po ’go ’dzugs mkhan mi bzhi yod red/ mkhan po tshul rnam red/ sprul sku thub bstan nor bu red/ kal thog rig ’dzin chen mo red/ a nas nga red/ nga tsho mi bzhi 2009 gyi lo [’go ’dzugs pa red/]*” Khenpo Chönyi Döntok Rinpoché, interview with author, Taipei, January 6, 2023.

undesirable.

There is one organization in Taiwan called the True Enlightenment Practitioners Association. From what I understand, [they] published pieces in the press, in different newspapers, and in pamphlets [criticizing Tibetan Buddhism]. They also spoke to people all over the place. They did a lot of things like this. As a result, we were naturally hurt and strong feelings arose from the depths of our hearts.³

Khenpo Chönyi Döntok Rinpoché explained how fragmented the hundreds of independent Tibetan Buddhist centers in Taiwan were at the time. Without any organized network, individual monastics felt powerless to respond to public criticism. The four monastic teachers decided they must do something. He continued,

Then one day, around Tibetan New Year, we got together in the afternoon for tea and a meal... We're dharma friends and since we hadn't seen each other in a long time we chatted about our classes, and this and that. Then we said, 'We have some work to do,' and we started to discuss. If that person [Xiao Pingshi, the leader of True Enlightenment Practitioners Association] brings a lot of people together, he'll become pretty powerful. So, we talked back and forth about this and said we must do something. We discussed and [someone said] 'Well then, what if we start an organization? If we are going to draw attention to [Tibetan] Buddhism, to spread it, and resist them, what do we need to do?'

We discussed that although we [as individuals] were utterly

³ "spyir tha'e wan gyi spyi tshogs kyi 'gro stangs dang / khyad par du chos lugs kyi 'gro stangs/ de'i nang nas bod brgyud nang bstan tha'e wan la yod pa'i bod brgyud nang bstan gyi gnas stangs de ha canng gi dza drag zhig yin pa nga rang tshos shes kyi yod red/ gsal po zhig shes kyi yod red/ nga tsho la de'i gnas skabs na spyir gtang gi cig zhed snang zhig yong gi yod red/ phyi nang gsang gsum nas dma' 'beb byed mkhan dang / bod brgyud nang bstan 'di rnam dag ma ni ma red zer mkhan dang / nang pa rang gi nang nas bod brgyud nang bstan la mi dga' mkhan dang / dgag mkhan de nas sngon ma yod pa zhig red/ yod na yang 'di bar de la dpe dza drag cig chags pa red/ bod brgyud nang bstan spyi yongs la la red/ nga tsho rnying ma gcig po ma red/ bka' brgyud la ma red/ sa skya la ma red/ bod brgyud nang bstan zer yag 'di tha'e wan la yod pa yag po ma red zer ba red/ tha'e wan gyi tshogs pa gcig yod red ba/ Zhengjue zer gyi yod red/ khong tsho dpe/ ngas go tshod la bslebs nas gsar shog 'dra mi 'dra dang / tshags par 'dra mi 'dra dang / 'gremis shog 'dra mi 'dra la bkrams/ de nas mi ga sa ga la skad cha bshad sogs de 'dra po bzo yod red ba/ de 'dra byas yong dus nga tsho la rang shuys kyis gnod pa zhig dang sems kyi gting la tshor ba zhig gtan gtan slebs kyi yod red!" Khenpo Chönyi Döntok Rinpoché, interview with author, Taipei, January 6, 2023.

"Lamaism is Not Real Buddhism!"

powerless, if we were to start an organization and if we were to put a lot of effort in this direction, it would be beneficial to growing, publicizing, and disseminating Tibetan Buddhism in Taiwan.⁴

For the next hour, Khenpo Chönyi Döntok Rinpoché described how the Taiwan International Tibetan Buddhism Study Institute (Tib. *Tha'ewan rgyal spyi'i bod brgyud nang bstan zhib 'jug tshogs pa*, Chin. 中華民國國際藏傳佛教研究會) was structured and the range of their projects.

When we finished speaking and said our goodbyes, I headed out into the damp January air. Leaving the interview, I was struck most by the stark terms in which Khenpo Chönyi Döntok Rinpoché described ITBSI's founding impetus. This organization, which I encountered during my fifteen months of fieldwork as the largest trans-sectarian Tibetan Buddhist organization in Taiwan with several hundred monastic members, first emerged in response to vocal critics of Tibetan Buddhism. In an ironic twist, public criticism intended to halt Tibetan Buddhism locally ended up catalyzing Tibetan Buddhist monastics' collective efforts to further localize their traditions in Taiwan.

1. Introduction

Tibetan Buddhism has grown tremendously in Taiwan since its introduction to the island in 1949. Initially Tibetan Buddhism was practiced in only a modest number of semi-covert communities led by a handful of Tibetan, Mongolian, Han, and Manchu teachers. With the gradual opening of Taiwanese society in the 1980s and the end of martial law, Tibetan Buddhism started to grow rapidly in Taiwan with an influx of new Tibetan Buddhist teachers from the global Tibetan

⁴ *"de nas lo gsar skabs kyi nyi ma zhig phyi dro la 'thung ba yin/... nga tsho chos grogs red/ de nas rgyun ring po ma thug pa yin tsang skad cha 'dra mi 'dra bshad/ da nga tshos zhig 'dzin grwa zhig 'dug min 'dug skor yar mar bshad/ de nas nga tshos da nga rang tsho la las rgyu zhig yod sa red dam ces nga rang tshos gros bsdur zhig byas pa red ba/ mi zer yag de kho rang mang po zhig mnyam du 'dzoms bzhas na tog tsam nus pa thon yong gi yod red/ de nas yar mar bshad dus da nga tshos cig byed dgos sa red zer/ de 'dra zhig gros bsdur byung ba red/ da byas na da tshogs pa zhig btsugs nas nga rang tsho'i nang chos 'di la do snang byed yag zhig dang / dar spel gtong yag zhig dang / yang na khong tsho la gdong len byed dgos na gang 'dra byed dgos zer skad cha byung ba red/ da nga tshor nus pa gang yang med pa'i thog nas da nga rang tsho tshogs pa zhig 'dzugs na nga rang tsho'i bod brgyud nang bstan rang nyid sa khul 'di la yar 'phel yag khyab bsgrags dang khyab spel gtong yag dang de'i phyogs la 'bad brtson zhig byed na phan thog gi red zer nas de 'dra gros bsdur zhig byung /"* Khenpo Chönyi Döntok Rinpoché, interview with author, Taipei, January 6, 2023.

diaspora⁵ and centers being founded “like bamboo shoots after spring rain.”⁶ The number of dharma centers and Taiwanese patrons of Tibetan Buddhism increased markedly following the visits of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama to Taiwan in 1997 and 2001, leading some to declare a “Tibetan Buddhist Fever” (藏傳佛教熱) had swept across Taiwan.⁷ By the mid-2000s, there were an estimated 600,000 practitioners and more than 200 Tibetan Buddhist dharma centers across the island,⁸ an increase of more than 140 percent over one decade earlier.⁹ By the mid-2010s, this number had further increased to 473 centers,¹⁰ a 477 percent increase over the eighty-two Tibetan Buddhist communities in Taiwan in 1996.¹¹ Already by 2000, sociologist Yao Lixiang claimed that Tibetan Buddhism enjoyed such popularity that “in terms of the frequency of [Tibetan Buddhist] empowerments, Taiwan is the first in the world outside of areas where Tibetan Buddhism is endemic.”¹²

While Tibetan Buddhist traditions have experienced remarkable growth in Taiwan, particularly over the last three decades, they have also been plagued by a handful of media scandals and become subject to vocal public critiques. The most vehement and prominent voice opposing Tibetan Buddhism in Taiwan has been the True Enlightenment Practitioners Association (佛教正覺同修會) or TEPA, led by their founder Master Xiao Pingshi (蕭平實 b. 1944). By the late 2000s and early 2010s, TEPA's protests of Tibetan Buddhism and accusations that Tibetan Buddhist teachers were primarily interested in sexually and financially exploiting Taiwanese disciples had spread to cities across Taiwan and even onto the front pages of Taiwan's major newspapers.

These protests and public condemnations of Tibetan Buddhism did not go unnoticed. Besides private responses from individual Tibetan Buddhist teachers and Taiwanese disciples, and the Taipei-based Tibet Religious Foundation of His Holiness the Dalai Lama (the Central Tibetan Administration's de-facto Taiwan office), TEPA's criticisms also precipitated the formation of the Taiwan International Tibetan

⁵ Jagou 2011: 57–59; Jagou 2021: 92–107; Yao Lixiang 2008: 586–595.

⁶ “如雨後春筍” Chen Yujiao 陳玉蛟 1990: 108; Yao Lixiang 姚麗香 2000: 336; Yao Lixiang 姚麗香 2007: 316.

⁷ Wang Ying 王瑩 and Chen Miaoling 陳妙鈴 1997: 78.

⁸ Jagou 2018: 11.

⁹ Zablocki 2009: 391.

¹⁰ Weng Shijie 翁仕杰 2018: 34.

¹¹ Yao Lixiang 姚麗香 2007: 118.

¹² “以灌頂法會的頻率而言，除了藏傳佛教的跟本地之外，台灣可算是居世界之冠了。” Yao Lixiang 姚麗香 2000: 334.

“Lamaism is Not Real Buddhism!”

Buddhism Study Institute or ITBSI in 2009. As described above, ITBSI was initially the modest vision of four Taiwan-based Tibetan Buddhist teachers. Over the next fifteen years, ITBSI grew swiftly to become a leading body among the hundreds of otherwise disparate and independent Tibetan Buddhist centers and religious teachers in Taiwan. Today, ITBSI offers resources to monastics across all schools of Tibetan Buddhism, represents Tibetan Buddhism to other Buddhist and non-Buddhist religious groups in Taiwan, media outlets, civil organizations, and the Taiwanese government, and even offers educational and chaplaincy services to Taiwan’s small ethnic Tibetan community.¹³

This article examines the founding of ITBSI and the ways this organization has addressed TEPA’s public criticisms of Tibetan Buddhism. Being confronted with aggressive condemnations of their tradition, ITBSI’s founders and early leaders called for greater unity and collective action among Tibetan Buddhist monastics across sectarian traditions. Rather than engaging in direct debate, ITBSI responded indirectly to TEPA’s attacks on Tibetan Buddhism through public outreach efforts, pursuing intra- and inter-religious dialogue, and providing guidance on ethical conduct for Tibetan Buddhist teachers. Engaging with discussions of religious localization, I argue that ITBSI’s efforts to curate a space for their own public self-representation have served as a critical avenue for helping Tibetan Buddhism find a home within Taiwan’s broader religious landscape.

First, I discuss religious localization and strategies for the creation of the “local” in the context of religious traditions on the move. I then overview TEPA’s public criticisms of Tibetan Buddhism. Finally, I describe ITBSI’s founding and strategy of responding to their critics by creating spaces for their own self-representation. Through a close examination of one of ITBSI’s earliest and longest continuous public outreach efforts, their organization of public prayer ceremonies for disaster victims, I argue that ITBSI’s pursuit of alternative spaces for their members to represent Tibetan Buddhism to the Taiwanese public has contributed to the localization of Tibetan Buddhism in Taiwan. In this way, ITBSI’s activities demonstrate how responding to local critics may serve as a successful strategy for the localization of religious traditions in new contexts.

2. Creating Local Buddhisms

The concept of “localization” has been applied in numerous studies,

¹³ For further discussion of ITBSI, see: Yonnetti 2024.

yet is often left rather vaguely defined. Perhaps this lack of clarity is out of necessity or conviction, an acknowledgement that the process of how initially “foreign” phenomena become acculturated and adapted into novel settings is so tied to the specifics of what is being localized, along with where and how, that any broad definitional statement extrapolated from a particular case would inevitably prove inadequate. Additionally, in the context of our globalized world, the very idea of the “local” has come under question. As Arjun Appadurai noted nearly thirty years ago, the production of locality is occurring in a world that is increasingly deterritorialized, diasporic, and transnational.¹⁴

Although these trends have only intensified during the subsequent decades, nevertheless, Appadurai’s contention that “displaced, deterritorialized, and transient populations” continue to be “engaged in the construction of locality, as a structure of feeling, often in the face of the erosion, dispersal, and implosion of neighborhoods as coherent social formations”¹⁵ continues to warrant attention. Writing in the same period, Roland Robertson similarly noted that while contemporary realities require us to think in global terms, this does not necessitate that “all forms of locality are thus substantially homogenized.”¹⁶ In fact, he contends, globalization “has involved and increasingly involves the creation and the incorporation of locality.”¹⁷ Or, as Ludovic Lado summarizes succinctly, “there is no globalization without localization.”¹⁸ Accordingly, as critical as attending to universalizing trends within globalization is, studying the continued creation of the “local” by peoples in motion remains equally vital.

Several scholars of Buddhism have applied localization in analyses of how Buddhist traditions have moved across and established roots within new geographies and communities. The most common strategy identified for religious localization involves the adoption, either intentionally or unintentionally, of new religious, social, or cultural practices, beliefs, and norms to “localize” a religion within a new setting.¹⁹ This is often associated with instances of religious hybridity or syncretism with local forms of religious praxis.²⁰ Other localization strategies scholars have identified include translation,²¹ cooperation with local political authorities,²² and imputing new meanings onto the

¹⁴ Appadurai 1996: 188.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*: 199.

¹⁶ Robertson 1995: 31.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*: 40.

¹⁸ Lado 2009: 93–94.

¹⁹ Chia 2020: 132–152; Soucy 2014; Tan 2018: 62–82.

²⁰ Jagou 2018: 14–20.

²¹ Chia 2020: 293–298; Wang Bin 2020: 144–145.

²² Chandler 2004: 276–285; Chia 2020: 141–151.

"Lamaism is Not Real Buddhism!"

physical environment.²³ Localization can proceed diffusedly through the gradual osmosis of local cultural norms and practices or intentionally through specific agents who actively facilitate the "transplantation"²⁴ of their religion.

In the absence of a sizable heritage Tibetan Buddhist community, individual teachers have been the primary agents catalyzing the localization of Tibetan Buddhism in Taiwan by adapting how they present their traditions within the local religious, social, and linguistic environment. Through coordinating Tibetan Buddhist teachers across sectarian traditions, ITBSI has especially helped to facilitate Tibetan Buddhism's localization within Taiwan. In addition to employing some of the strategies mentioned above, ITBSI has also actively worked to localize Tibetan Buddhism through responding to local critics of Tibetan Buddhism. By finding ways to reply indirectly to criticism and create alternative spaces to promote their own image of Tibetan Buddhism, ITBSI has helped Tibetan Buddhism to move in from the edges of Taiwanese religious life and grow deeper, local roots.

3. TEPA's Opposition to Tibetan Buddhism

TEPA was founded in 1997 by the Chinese Buddhist teacher Master Xiao Pingshi and is based in Taipei's Datong District, with branches across Taiwan's major cities as well as Hong Kong and Los Angeles. TEPA became especially well known locally during the 2000s and early 2010s for distributing leaflets outside transportation hubs, hanging banners denouncing Tibetan Buddhism outside their headquarters that are clearly visible from Yuanshan Metro Station,²⁵ and organizing protests at major Tibetan Buddhist events. Their supporters often hold banners, chant slogans such as "*Lamajiao bu shi fojiao!*" (喇嘛教不是佛教! Lamaism is not Buddhism!) or "*Xiu shuangshenfa de lamajiao bu shi fojiao!*" (修雙身法的喇嘛教不是佛教! Lamaism, based on the Couple Practice Tantra, is not Buddhism!), and distribute pamphlets to dissuade passersby from engaging with

²³ Gyatso 1989: 41–44.

²⁴ Baumann 1994: 35.

²⁵ These banners have been hung since at least 2010. As of October 2023, the bilingual banners read "避免宗教性侵害,請遠離藏傳佛教喇嘛 To avoid religious sexual abuse please stay away from the lamas of Tibetan Buddhism," "喇嘛的無上瑜伽是男女交合的雙身法 The Highest Yoga Tantra cultivated by lamas is essentially a yab-yum practice of sex," and "藏傳佛教非佛教 喇嘛非佛門僧人 Tibetan Buddhism is definitely not Buddhism; the lamas are not Buddhist monks or nuns."

Tibetan Buddhism. Perhaps TEPA's most notable public demonstration occurred in 2009 when approximately 400 of their members protested outside a prayer ceremony led by the Fourteenth Dalai Lama in Kaohsiung for the victims of Typhoon Morakot. In 2011, TEPA's criticisms made literal headlines when they published half-page "advertisements" blasting Tibetan Buddhism on the cover pages of four of Taiwan's major newspapers.

The reasons for TEPA's opposition are documented extensively across more than twenty books²⁶ written by Xiao Pingshi critiquing Tibetan Buddhism. For evidence, Xiao Pingshi draws upon a variety of Tibetan Buddhist scriptures and works about Tibetan Buddhism in Chinese translation. Repeating critiques leveled against Tibetan religion by numerous Chinese Buddhists and literati since at least the Yuan Dynasty,²⁷ Xiao Pingshi condemns Tibetan Buddhism for "taking sexual practices between a man and woman as orthodox Buddhist practice."²⁸ He is convinced²⁹ that Tibetan Buddhism is based on practices of sexual yoga, places the position of the guru above the Buddha, and employs violence, alcohol, and sexual fluids in its practices. He further insists that Tibetan Buddhist teachers come to Taiwan primarily to financially and sexually exploit Taiwanese students and TEPA amplifies media coverage of several scandals involving Tibetan Buddhist monastics in Taiwan to support their critiques.³⁰

In addition to repeating many historical critiques of Tibetan Buddhism, Xiao Pingshi also condemns its promotion of Madhyamaka philosophy. He claims that Tibetan Buddhists "promote the theory of causelessness [of phenomena, which advocates] contemplating the empty nature of dependent arising and negates all the Consciousness-

²⁶ Among these, Master Xiao Pingshi's most thorough critiques are made in the four volumes of *Crazy Wisdom and True Wisdom*, the first volume of which was translated into English in 2017. Xiao Pingshi 蕭平實 2002a; 2002b; 2002c; 2002d; 2017.

An extensive library of articles and videos containing TEPA's critiques of Tibetan Buddhism in English and Chinese can be found here: True Enlightenment Education Foundation n.d.; Zhengjue jiaoyu jijinhui 正覺教育基金會 2022.

²⁷ Charleux 2002: 139–145; Shen and Wang 2008: 269–287.

²⁸ "密教以男女雙身淫合之法，作為佛法正修" Xiao Pingshi 蕭平實 2002a: 19.

²⁹ One TEPA leader told me that although Xiao Pingshi had not studied these texts with any Tibetan Buddhist teacher during this lifetime, he is reportedly able to "decode" their "true" meaning due to karmic seeds planted during a previous life when he was a reincarnate teacher in the Jonang school of Tibetan Buddhism. Focus group participant in discussion with author, Taipei, October 24, 2022.

³⁰ Zhengjue jiaoyu jijinhui 正覺教育基金會 2012.

"Lamaism is Not Real Buddhism!"

Only scriptures of the Third Turning of the Wheel of Dharma."³¹ Specifically, Xiao Pingshi objects to Tibetan Buddhists' denial of the permanence of the eighth consciousness (Tib. *kun gzhi'i rnam shes*, Chin. 藏識/阿賴耶識), a position which he maintains causes them to "fall into nihilism and causelessness."³² Xiao Pingshi attacks Tibetan and even several prominent Chinese Buddhist teachers, such as Master Yinshun (印順導師 1906–2005), for what he sees as their mistaken views regarding Buddhist theories of causality.

There is clearly an apocalyptic tone to how Master Xiao Pingshi describes the existential threat posed by Tibetan Buddhism. For example, he writes that,

It's a fact that tantra flourished and Buddhism faded in ancient Indian history.³³ The thriving of tantra inevitably led to Buddhism's decline. If it flourishes enough, [tantra] will undoubtedly replace Exoteric Buddhism³⁴ and will destroy Buddhism [again]. This is because the dharma of tantra really isn't the true buddhadharma, but [only] the superficial appearance of Buddhism.³⁵

Master Xiao Pingshi and TEPA's members follow more than half a millennia of historical precedent among numerous Chinese critics whose use of the terms *mizong* (密宗) or "tantra" and *lamajiao* (喇嘛教) or "Lamaism"³⁶ aimed at disaffiliating Tibetan religion from Buddhism.³⁷ Xiao Pingshi objects to what he sees as Tibetan Buddhists advocating "non-Buddhist" practices and worries that "Lamaism" may eclipse and ultimately replace other Buddhist traditions. If that occurs, he fears that "true" Buddhism (which presumably references the

³¹ "推廣無因論之緣起性空觀，否定第三轉法輪之唯識諸經" Xiao Pingshi 蕭平實 2002a: 18.

³² "墮於斷滅論及無因論中" Ibid.: 6 [38].

³³ A senior student of Master Xiao Pingshi explained that from their interpretation of historical events, TEPA maintains that Buddhism in India was destroyed because Muslim invaders explicitly objected to tantric practices. Focus group participant in discussion with author, Taipei, October 24, 2022.

³⁴ Xiao Pingshi considers Exoteric Buddhism (顯教) to be the "true" Buddhism (佛教) and equates tantra with heresy (外道).

³⁵ "密教興而佛教亡，是古印度之歷史事實。密教之興盛，必將導致佛法之衰落；興盛至極而完全取代顯教已，則必滅亡佛教；此因密教之法並非真正佛法，乃是外披佛教表相" Xiao Pingshi 蕭平實 2002a: 19.

³⁶ Lopez suggests the term *Lamaism* and other European language equivalents (*Lamaismus*, *Lamaïsme*, etc.), which also disconnected Tibetan religion from other forms of Buddhism, may have emerged in the late 18th or early 19th centuries influenced by the Chinese term. Lopez 1999: 19–24.

³⁷ Charleux 2002: 134–135; Shen and Wang 2008: 288–297.

Buddhism he teaches) will be lost akin to how it disappeared in India.³⁸ Viewing “Lamaism” as an existential threat, TEPA continues to invest significant resources in campaigns to dissuade the Taiwanese public from engaging with Tibetan Buddhism.

The founders of ITBSI, along with many other Tibetan Buddhists in Taiwan, have been profoundly hurt by TEPA’s multi-media campaigns. Many supporters of Tibetan Buddhism accused TEPA of receiving funding from the Chinese Communist Party, akin to other organizations that have worked to sow seeds of distrust in Tibetan Buddhism globally. This is a claim that TEPA firmly denies.³⁹ Regardless of the source of their funding, by the late 2000s TEPA had become so vocal in their criticisms of Tibetan Buddhism that the founders of ITBSI decided they must present an alternative view to the public. To do so, they needed to create spaces for Tibetan Buddhist monastics to represent their own traditions.

4. Responding to Critics of Tibetan Buddhism

ITBSI was founded in Taipei, Taiwan by four Tibetan Buddhist leaders: Tulku Thupten Norbu Rinpoché (Sprul sku thub bstan nor bu rin po che, b. 1965), a Nyingma teacher from Amdo, Kathok Rigdzin Chenmo Rinpoché (Kaḥ thog rig ’dzin chen mo rin po che, b. 1973), a Nyingma teacher from Nepal, Khenpo Tsülnam Rinpoché (Mkhan po tshul rnam rin po che, b. 1968), a Kagyü teacher from Kham, and Khenpo Chönyi Döntok Rinpoché. All four teachers had centers in Taipei and led their own communities of Taiwanese followers. In response to what they perceived as attacks on their religion, the founders decided to step out of their individual dharma centers and collectively defend Tibetan Buddhism to the Taiwanese public.

From the beginning, ITBSI’s leaders decided not to confront TEPA directly. As one of ITBSI’s early chairmen, Khenpo Tsering Tashi (Mkhan po tshe ring bkra shis, b. 1976), noted, other Tibetan Buddhist leaders had already debated TEPA to little effect. “They [TEPA] wouldn’t listen to debates with them. There were debates already. Khenpo Södargye wrote a book and Alak Dorjé Sang also wrote a book, but they [TEPA] don’t give any reasons... They just mostly continued with their aim of slandering the views of Tibetan Buddhism for the public.”⁴⁰ Another former chairman of ITBSI, Geshé Lharampa

³⁸ This belief does not recognize the continuation of Indic Buddhist traditions, most notably among the Newars of the Kathmandu Valley.

³⁹ Li Tong 李潼 2011.

⁴⁰ “*khong tsho rtsod pa rgyab nas nyan gi mi ’dug rtsod pa rgyab yod red da/ mkhan po bsod dar rgyas kyis deb bris yod red dang a lag rdo rje bzang gis deb bris yod red/ khong tsho’i*

"Lamaism is Not Real Buddhism!"

Hashen Rinpoché (Dge bshes lha ram pa ha shen rin po che, b. 1975) concurred, noting "ITBSI couldn't go and pick a fight with Xiao Pingshi in Taiwan. If I were to write a lot of books saying, 'what you've said isn't true,' then [we would just] write back and forth and back and forth. There would be no benefit from that."⁴¹ Instead of debating with TEPA directly, the founders of ITBSI sought to collectively build their own platform from which Tibetan Buddhist voices could represent their own religious tradition.

From its founding four members, ITBSI expanded participation in its projects significantly among Tibetan Buddhist teachers in Taiwan. By 2013 then-chairman Katok Rigdzin Chenmo Rinpoché reported ITBSI had more than one hundred members.⁴² Exact membership over the years is difficult to calculate as most Tibetan Buddhist teachers must frequently leave Taiwan and leadership turnover is high in many centers. In 2020, ITBSI's new chairman Khenpo Jigmé Namgyel (Mkhan po 'jigs med rnam rgyal) formalized the membership process slightly through efforts to personally reach out to monastics and invite them to join a mobile messaging group for ITBSI. As of December 2022, Khenpo Jigmé Namgyel had individually spoken with and recruited over 200 teachers from all schools of Tibetan Buddhism to this group.⁴³

Although ITBSI has not directly engaged TEPA through their projects, it would be incorrect to say that ITBSI has not responded to the critiques leveled by Master Xiao Pingshi and TEPA. One of ITBSI's early efforts to present what they saw as accurate information about Tibetan religions to the Taiwanese public was an internet-based "television" station called Taiwan Tibetan Buddhism Web TV or TTBTW (台灣藏傳佛教網路電視台). Officially launched in 2013, TTBTW aimed "to plant widely the correct knowledge and correct views of Buddhism in people's hearts, to allow each lama and virtuous teacher to collectively cooperate and spread the dharma through the unlimited world wide web... so the world can see the dharma."⁴⁴ TTBTW produced content that included teachings by Tibetan Buddhist

rgyu mtshan thog 'gro gi yod ma red da/ ... bod bryud nang bstan la lta stangs yag po med par bzo yag rang gi dmigs yul byed nas bshad bzhag 'dug ga" Khenpo Tsering Tashi, interview with author, virtual, November 10, 2022.

⁴¹ *"bod bryud nang bstan zhib 'jug tshogs pa gyis tha'e wan la Xiao Pingshi la nga tshos Xiao Pingshi la 'dzing ka 'gro gyi thub kyi yod ma red ba/ ngas khyod bshad pa bden pa ma red zer yag deb mang po 'bri na/ phar zhig 'bri tshur zhig 'bri phar zhig 'bri tshur zhig 'bri 'bri 'bri/ phan thogs yod ma red/'*" Hashen Rinpoche, interview with author, Linkou, New Taipei City, September 23, 2022.

⁴² Guoji zangchuan fojiao yanjiuhui 國際藏傳佛教研究會 2013: 1.

⁴³ Khenpo Jigmé Namgyel, interview with author, Taipei, December 16, 2022.

⁴⁴ "藏傳佛教網路電視台成立的宗旨是為了將佛法的正知正見更能夠廣植於大心，藉著網路電視的無遠弗屆，讓每一位上師和善知識們共同合作弘揚佛法...讓世界看見佛法。" Guoji zangchuan fojiao yanjiuhui 國際藏傳佛教研究會 2013: 7.

leaders, interviews, panel discussions, and public talks that were posted on their website and on YouTube.

In addition to TTBTv, ITBSI started a series of dialogues with Buddhist teachers from other traditions. In large part, these overtures seem motivated by ITBSI's hopes to gain allies among Chinese Buddhist traditions who until recently have had a rather uncertain relationship with Tibetan Buddhism. Hashen Rinpoché noted that ITBSI hopes engaging with Chinese Buddhist monastics makes a statement to the Taiwanese public.

At large Taiwanese monasteries, we participate jointly in dharma assemblies [celebration of] the Buddha's birthday, and so forth. This is because Xiao Pingshi keeps criticizing Tibetan Buddhism, saying it's not real Buddhism. We [go] and at the center of these renowned monasteries where [Chinese Buddhist] masters and their many monks are, we are wearing these [red] robes. We recite together, we eat together, and we perform rituals together. This sets an example. Why? Through these monasteries we [show] people that what Xiao Pingshi has been saying is not true. We [Tibetan and Chinese Buddhist monastics] are the same.⁴⁵

By gathering with Chinese Buddhist monastics to perform rituals, pray for the public wellbeing, and engage in dialogue, ITBSI's leaders have sought to improve the public perception of Tibetan Buddhism.

Thus, over the last fifteen years ITBSI has pursued diverse avenues to create a public image for Tibetan Buddhism of their own making in Taiwan. In addition to responding to TEPA's critiques through curating a media channel for Tibetan Buddhist teachings and partnering with the Chinese Buddhist sangha, ITBSI has also engaged the Taiwanese public through prayers for disaster victims. As I will describe in the next section, ITBSI's public prayers have proven an especially important space for both capturing public attention and for creating a public image of Tibetan Buddhism on their own terms.

⁴⁵ "tha'e wan nang gi dgon pa chen po tsho gyi tshogs 'tshogs yag de 'dra mnyam du ston pa'i 'khrungs skar la sogs pa/ de 'dra mnyam zhugs byed kyi 'dug de gyi lan zhig ga re red zer na Xiao Pingshi gyis bod brgyud nang bstan de nang pa ma red zer skyon brjod byed kyi yod red ba/ nga tsho gyis tha'e wan nang la yod pa'i dgon po skad grags chen po la bla ma mang po kho rang tsho'i grwa pa fashi mang po yod sa dkyil la/ nga tsho grwa chas 'di gyon nas mnyam du 'don pa 'don/ mnyam du kha lag za/ mnyam du tshogs pa 'tshogs/ de dpe mtshon byed kyi 'dug de ga re red zer na mi mang nang la Xiao Pingshi khyed rang tsho la lab yag de dgon pa 'di gyi thog nas de red mi 'dug nga tsho gcig pa red 'dug" Hashen Rinpoché, interview with author, Linkou, New Taipei City, September 23, 2022.

5. A Space of their Own: ITBSI's Prayers for Disaster Victims

Since 2010 ITBSI has organized prayer ceremonies led by a trans-sectarian group of their members for the victims of earthquakes, fires, and other calamities. Offering condolences and praying for the victims of these disasters is a way for ITBSI to demonstrate to the Taiwanese public their conviction that compassion and care for sentient beings lies at the heart of Tibetan Buddhism. Furthermore, these prayers are also an important way for ITBSI's members to embody locally legible practices of Buddhist monastics praying for the dead and have often attracted broader media coverage.

Some of the prayer ceremonies ITBSI has organized have been for victims of distant tragedies, such the 2010 Qinghai earthquake, the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami, and the 2015 earthquake in Nepal. Most, however, have been for the victims of local disasters in Taiwan. Since its founding, ITBSI has convened and dispatched trans-sectarian delegations to pray at disaster sites and organized dharma assemblies to pray for the victims of nearly a dozen tragedies across Taiwan. These include prayers for the victims of the 2014 Kaohsiung gas explosion, the 2014 mass killing in New Taipei City's Jiangcizui Metro Station, the 2014 and 2015 TransAsia plane crashes, the 2016 Neihu Murder, the 2017 earthquake in Tainan, the 2018 Puyuma train derailment, the 2021 Hualien train derailment, and the 2021 Kaohsiung Chengzhongcheng Building fire. Most recently, ITBSI participated in a five-day prayer ceremony for the victims of the April 2024 Hualien earthquake. As Hashen Rinpoché noted, in all these cases ITBSI's approach is quite simple: "Wherever the site of a disaster is, we will go [there] to offer prayers."⁴⁶

Some of the prayer ceremonies have been relatively modest, such as a candlelight vigil held outside Jiangcizui Metro Station for the victims of a mass killing⁴⁷ or a make-shift public memorial in Neihu for the brutally murdered "Little Lightbulb" (小燈泡).⁴⁸ Others occurred at venues ITBSI arranged, such as a large tent near the site of the 2014 Kaohsiung gas explosion.⁴⁹ Still others were held at officially designated prayer spaces, such as a prayer hall organized by Tzu Chi (慈濟) following the 2021 Hualien train crash,⁵⁰ a municipal funeral

⁴⁶ "dka' ngal sprod sa gang yin nga tsho 'don pa 'don yag 'gro yag" Hashen Rinpoché, interview with author, Linkou, New Taipei City, September 23, 2022.

⁴⁷ Tha'e wan rgyal spyi'i bod brgyud nang bstan zhib 'jug tshogs pa 2014a.

⁴⁸ Guoji zangchuan fojiao yanjiuhui 國際藏傳佛教研究會 2016.

⁴⁹ Tha'e wan rgyal spyi'i bod brgyud nang bstan zhib 'jug tshogs pa 2014b.

⁵⁰ Guoji zangchuan fojiao yanjiuhui 國際藏傳佛教研究會 2021a.

home organized by the Kaohsiung city government for victims of the 2021 fire,⁵¹ or the Hualien Municipal Funeral Home organized by the Hualien County government for the victims of the 2024 earthquake.⁵²

ITBSI recruits participants for these events from among its monastic membership. While ITBSI often gathers between twenty and forty geshés, khenpos, rinpoché, and other monastics, sometimes they have mobilized significantly more participants. For example, Khenpo Tsering Tashi recalled leading several hundred monastics to Kaohsiung in 2014.⁵³ Returning to Kaohsiung in 2021, ITBSI organized more than sixty participants to pray for the victims of the Chengzhongcheng Building fire.⁵⁴ Although ITBSI organizes its members, their participation is voluntary as monastics must bear the individual costs associated with attending these prayer ceremonies.

In many cases, ITBSI's members are mobilized and on site within twenty-four to thirty-six hours of a disaster. For example, following the train derailment in Hualien on the morning of April 2nd, 2021, ITBSI organized and dispatched a group of around twenty monastics from Taipei who arrived in Hualien in time to lead prayers at eleven in the morning of April 3rd.⁵⁵ Similarly, following an earthquake that struck Tainan in the early morning hours of February 6th, 2016, more than twenty ITBSI members departed from Taipei and arrived in Tainan that same evening, where "the many rinpoché and masters, sitting on ground strewn with rubble, and in the cold temperatures, recited sūtras and prayed [for the victims]."⁵⁶

Khenpo Jigmé Namgyel described these prayer ceremonies as a way for ITBSI to contribute to Taiwanese society. He noted,

For many years, ITBSI has [discussed] what we can do for Buddhism? What work can [we] do for Tibetan Buddhist monks in Taiwan? Similarly, [we have discussed] how can we serve Taiwanese society? For one thing, there are many earthquakes in Taiwan. Many disasters happen here. Whenever these occur, we go to offer sympathy. When a lot of buildings collapsed due to an earthquake, when a man killed a young girl, when there was a train crash, when there were plane crashes, or last year when a building burned down, and so on. Without exception,

⁵¹ Ba Sang 巴桑 2021.

⁵² Guoji zangchuan fojiao yanjiuhui 國際藏傳佛教研究會 2024.

⁵³ Khenpo Tsering Tashi, interview with author, virtual, November 10, 2022.

⁵⁴ Guoji zangchuan fojiao yanjiuhui 國際藏傳佛教研究會 2021b.

⁵⁵ Guoji zangchuan fojiao yanjiuhui 國際藏傳佛教研究會 2021a.

⁵⁶ "多為仁波切，上師席地坐於散佈瓦礫的地上，在寒流低溫中以佛經唸誦，進行祈福。" Guoji zangchuan fojiao yanjiuhui 國際藏傳佛教研究會 2017.

"Lamaism is Not Real Buddhism!"

we go to offer sympathy. We've done this many times. Our work has been a success by offering people's hearts some relief.⁵⁷

By visiting the sites of tragedies and praying for the victims, ITBSI views its expressions of sympathy as a way to "serve Taiwanese society." While ITBSI's members pray as Mahāyāna Buddhists for all sentient beings to be freed from suffering and attain happiness, their prayers for the victims of these earthquakes, floods, and traffic accidents are oriented specifically at tragedies that happen on Taiwanese soil and to Taiwanese people. In doing so, as Khenpo Tsering Tashi noted, ITBSI demonstrates that "Tibetan Buddhism offers some care to the Taiwanese people."⁵⁸

While ITBSI's disaster responses have been on a rather modest scale, their swift responses that rally sizeable groups of Tibetan Buddhist monastics have not gone unnoticed. A number Taiwanese media outlets have reported on ITBSI's public prayer events over the past decade. ITBSI's mobilization of several hundred monks following the 2014 gas explosion in Kaohsiung was covered by both television⁵⁹ and online print media.⁶⁰ Similar media coverage was given for ITBSI's prayers for "Little Lightbulb,"⁶¹ the victims of the Hualien train derailment,⁶² and the Chengzhongcheng Building fire.⁶³

These reports reveal generally favorable public feedback to ITBSI's prayer ceremonies. For example, a Taiwanese disciple who accompanied ITBSI's monastics to Kaohsiung in 2014 recalled that "when we got out of the taxi, the driver knew that we had come there

⁵⁷ *"de nas da nga tsho gyi rgyal spyi bod brgyud nang bstan zhib 'jug tshogs pas da nga tsho 'das pa'i cha la lo mang po zhig la nang pa'i chos kyi thog la ga re byed thub yag tha'e wan bod brgyud dge 'dun pa'i thog la ga re las ka las thub kyi 'dug de nang bzhin tha'e spyi tshogs la tog tsam zhabs phyi 'dra/ da gcig tha'e wan la sa yom mang po rgyug yag yod red/ skyon chag mang po slebs kyi yod red/ de ga dus yin na nga tshos kyi gdung sems mnyam skye 'gro gyi yod red/ dang po de la zhig da sa yom rgyug nas khang pa mang po ril smyong yod red/ bu mo chung chung mi gyis bsad shag chog 'dra po/ gnam gru 'dzag chog 'dra po/ de nas me 'khor brdab skyon byung yag la sogs pa/ de tsho la sogs pa da nga tsho gyi na ning khang pa me 'bar yag la sogs pa nga tsho de 'dra gcig med na ma gtogs gdung sems mnyam skyed gyi ched du nga tsho 'gro gyi yod red/ de tsho dpe mang po 'gro nas/ 'gro nas mi sems khul thebs yag 'dra po gyis las ka yag po thon yod red/"* Khenpo Jigmé Namgyel, interview with author, Taipei, December 16, 2022.

⁵⁸ *"bod brgyud nang bstan gyi zhig tha'e wan gyi mi dmangs de tsho tog tsam sems khur thebs yag"* Khenpo Tsering Tashi, interview with author, virtual, November 10, 2022.

⁵⁹ Lian Peibei 連珮貝 2014.

⁶⁰ You Hongqi 游宏琦 2014.

⁶¹ Lin Jinsheng 林金聖 2016.

⁶² Deng Wei 鄧威 2021.

⁶³ Zhong Zhipeng 鍾志鵬 2021.

to hold a dharma assembly for the disaster zone and refused to accept our payment. He said, "Thank you for coming to help. You are the first group who has held a transcendence prayer service here."⁶⁴ Additionally, in 2021 a news anchor shared a photograph of more than a dozen ITBSI members on a train to Hualien and noted how "many netizens were extremely touched by looking at this photograph" of monastics going to pray for the victims of the train derailment.⁶⁵

In addition to praise in local media, ITBSI's prayers have also been welcomed because praying for the deceased is a widely legible, expected, and lauded activity for Buddhist monastics in Taiwan. One of the cornerstone activities of Chinese Buddhist monastics historically and today is the performance of funerary rituals.⁶⁶ Indeed, for many Taiwanese who are not members of Buddhist organizations, perhaps their only interactions with Buddhist clergy occur in the context of rituals following the deaths of family and friends. Thus, by enacting rituals for the victims of tragic events, ITBSI's members perform activities that Taiwanese expect of virtuous Buddhist monastics. While it is certainly true that performing funeral rituals is an important activity for Tibetan Buddhist monastics beyond Taiwan, ITBSI's prayer ceremonies are unique in their trans-sectarian participation and very public performance that often inspires local Taiwanese to join in.⁶⁷ In this way, ITBSI's public prayers for disaster victims have contributed to overcoming TEPA's caricatures of Tibetan Buddhism as non-virtuous and non-Buddhist.

The more than a dozen prayer ceremonies ITBSI monastics have organized and participated in publicly manifest Tibetan Buddhist monastics' virtue and their "care" for the victims of these tragedies. That most victims are Taiwanese further manifests ITBSI's commitment to the spiritual wellbeing of Taiwanese people, both in this life and in future rebirths. Through these efforts, ITBSI has not only curated an alternative public image of Tibetan Buddhism for the broader Taiwanese public, but also helped to move Tibetan Buddhism in from the margins of public religious life in Taiwan. Far from TEPA's predatory image, the photos of twenty, forty, or more of ITBSI's members praying consistently show Tibetan Buddhist monks doing what the Taiwanese public expects virtuous Buddhist monastics to do: "to wish the victims might be free from suffering and obtain

⁶⁴ "下車時,當計程車司機得知我們是來這裡為災區舉行法會,堅持不收車資。他說:「謝謝你們來幫忙,你們是第一個在這裡辦超渡法會的團體。」" Li Zhenyan 李真延 2014: 61.

⁶⁵ "讓部分網友認為這一張照片看起來的確很感人" Deng Wei 鄧威 2021.

⁶⁶ Jones 1999: 30, 195, 200–205.

⁶⁷ Lin Jinsheng 林金聖 2016.

"Lamaism is Not Real Buddhism!"

happiness, be reborn in the Western Pure Land, obtain the blessings of the Three Jewels... and to console the grief in the hearts of the victims' families."⁶⁸

Conclusion

This article has traced ITBSI's origins and their strategies for overcoming criticisms and curating their own image of Tibetan Buddhism for the Taiwanese public. I have argued that what began as a response to TEPA's negative characterizations of Tibetan Buddhism ultimately became a path for ITBSI's members to further embed Tibetan Buddhism within Taiwanese religious life. In addition to a video media channel, and intra-religious dialogue, public prayer ceremonies for the victims of disasters have proven an effective pathway for ITBSI to demonstrate both the virtue and public service Tibetan Buddhist monastics provide. Through these efforts, ITBSI has transformed responding to local criticism into an avenue for the further localization of Tibetan Buddhism in Taiwan.

I conclude by considering just how successful ITBSI has been at overcoming TEPA's criticism and claiming their own space in the public eye. While it is certainly true that TEPA's anti-Tibetan Buddhism stance remains unchanged, ITBSI's activities have led to tangible changes. Some transformations have been noticed by ITBSI's members. For example, Khenpo Tsülnam Rinpoché noted the decreased use of the term "Lamaism" by Chinese Buddhists across Taiwan. "What are the accomplishments of our efforts? Earlier, among people in Taiwan very few Chinese Buddhist masters would say 'Tibetan Buddhism' is [a form of] 'Buddhism.' They called [Tibetan Buddhism] 'Lamaism'... Today there are very few people who say 'Lamaism.'"⁶⁹ Tulku Thupten Norbu Rinpoché concurred, noting "Now our relationship with Chinese Buddhists has really improved. For example, we have a great relationship with the Buddhist Association of the Republic of China's chairman and director general... We also have a good relationship with Tzu Chi... [Chinese

⁶⁸ "祝願罹難者離苦得樂，往生西方淨土，並期待借用三寶...的加持，能撫平罹難者家屬心中的哀傷" Zhong Zhipeng 鍾志鵬 2021.

⁶⁹ "nga tsho'i nus pa zhig ga 'dre don 'dug zer nal/ sngon ma tha'e wan gyi mang po nas rgya bla ma de tsho gyis Zangchuan fojiao zer yag de fojiao de dbe spyod 'don mkhan dpe nyung nyung yod red/ lamajiao zer...deng sang lamajiao zer mkhan dpe nyung nyung 'dra po yod red!" Khenpo Tsülnam Rinpoché, interview with author, Taipei, November 11, 2022.

Buddhists'] view of Tibetan Buddhism has really improved."⁷⁰ In this way, two of ITBSI's founders cite the increased use of "Tibetan Buddhism" over "Lamaism" and more friendly relations with Chinese Buddhist teachers and organizations as evidence of the greater local acceptance of Tibetan Buddhism.

Externally, there are other signs that ITBSI's efforts have borne fruit. For example, as late as 2012, the Central Tibetan Administration's former Representative Dawa Tsering (Zla ba tshe ring, b. 1963) recalled being attacked by a monk and nun representing the Buddhist Association of the Republic of China (中國佛教會) or BAROC in a meeting of religious leaders in Taiwan's Control Yuan. "[I] was surprised. As they began their speech, they said Tibetan Buddhism is not a true [form] of Buddhism. They also stated that regardless of whether or not you [Tibetan Buddhists] are a true [form] of Buddhism, it would be best if you stayed in your own place. Why do you have to come to Taiwan?" Dawa Tsering also reported these monastics presented TEPA's brochures with their critiques of Tibetan Buddhism to the meeting's conveners.⁷¹ Several years later, due ITBSI's public outreach BAROC has started to actively partner with ITBSI to host tri-tradition Buddhist forums and celebrations of the Buddha's birthday. Not only that, but BAROC's chairman has even accepted a position as head of ITBSI's Board of External Advisors and has been an invited guest and speaker at their Dharma Promotion Forums.

Accordingly, ITBSI's efforts to overcome TEPA's criticisms of Tibetan Buddhism have led to felt changes in the way Tibetan Buddhism is viewed, referenced, and interacted with by Taiwanese people and other Buddhists in Taiwan. In recent years ITBSI has been invited alongside Taiwan's most prominent Buddhist organizations, such as Tzu Chi, Dharma Drum Mountain (法鼓山), and Buddha's Light Mountain (佛光山) to attend Buddhist prayer services. In 2021, ITBSI even received direct recognition from Taiwanese President Tsai Ying-wen, who exchanged bows with ITBSI's then-chairman Khenpo Jigmé Namgyel and thanked ITBSI for their prayers for the victims of the Hualien train derailment.⁷² What began as part of ITBSI's initiative

⁷⁰ "da lta rgya brgyud dang mnyam 'brel dpe yag po chags song / dper na Zhongguo fojiaohui da lta gyi dongshizhang dang lishizhang / de 'dra 'brel ba chen po yod red /... de 'dra Ciji yang 'brel ba yag po yod red /... bod brgyud nang bstan gyi zhig lta stangs ci yag song /" Tulku Thupten Norbu Rinpoché, interview with author, Taipei, November 11, 2022.

⁷¹ "沒想到他們一開又就講西藏佛教並不是真正的佛教，期間還講不管你是不是真正的佛教，待在自己的地方就好了，為什麼要跑到我們臺灣來等" Dawa Cairén 達瓦才仁 and Suolang Duoji 索朗多吉 2020.

⁷² Guoji zangchuan fojiao yanjiuhui 國際藏傳佛教研究會 2021a.

“Lamaism is Not Real Buddhism!”

to create a counter image of Tibetan Buddhism has ultimately helped to further facilitate its integration into the local Taiwanese religious landscape. In this way, ITBSI's work demonstrates how countering local critiques can serve as a powerful strategy for the localization of a religious tradition within a new context.

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