



Monastic Networks, Cultural Transmission, and Spiritual Lineage: Exploring the Tibetan Buddhist Connections and Legacy of Pemayangtse and Tawang Monasteries

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Abstract: This study explores the profound relationships between Tibetan Buddhist monasteries in the Himalayan region, focusing on the Mindröling-Pemayangtse and Drepung-Tawang monastic affiliations. Through a nuanced examination of their historical development, cultural exchange, and spiritual practices, this research reveals the pivotal role these monasteries have played in shaping the region's cultural, spiritual, and intellectual landscape. By investigating the transmission of doctrine, propagation of religious teachings, and artistic traditions, this study highlights the enduring legacy of Tibetan Buddhism in the Himalayas. Drawing on a rich array of primary and secondary sources, supplemented by archival materials and extensive fieldwork conducted at Tawang and Pemayangtse monasteries, this research provides a comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics between Tibetan Buddhist institutions. The findings underscore the significance of spiritual kinship and cultural exchange in fostering a deep sense of continuity and shared heritage among these monasteries. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the role of Buddhist monasteries in preserving cultural heritage, promoting spiritual and intellectual exchange, and shaping the identity of the Himalayan region. Ultimately, this research demonstrates the transformative impact of spiritual and cultural exchange on the development of Buddhist monasteries in the Himalayas. Looking forward, this study proposes a futuristic approach that integrates cultural preservation, sustainable tourism, and community engagement, offering a roadmap for the long-term conservation and revitalization of these sacred institutions, while also promoting intergenerational knowledge transmission and cultural continuity in the face of globalization and climate change.

Keywords: Mindröling, Pemayangtse, Drepung, Tawang, Nyingma, Gelug

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1. Introduction

The Himalayan region is home to numerous Buddhist monasteries that have been spiritually nurtured by Tibetan monastic institutions (Steinmann, 2003-04:145-167). Notably, Pemayangtse Monastery

in Sikkim was founded by Lhastsun Namkha Jigme in 1645 as a humble shrine called Tsangkhang, which was later re-established in 1705 under the patronage of Chagdor Namgyal, the third king of Sikkim. Similarly, Tawang Monastery, locally known as Tawang Galden Namgyal Lhatse or “Celestial Paradise,” was established by Mera Lama Lodre Gyatso. These monasteries are part of a larger network of Eastern Himalayan institutions linked to their Tibetan counterparts through a profound spiritual mother-daughter relationship. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Tibetan monasteries emerged as centers of elite education, literature, training, and rituals, paralleling the role of Western religious institutions in the training of young elites in arts, sciences, and official positions (Acharya, 1998:1-6). Mindröling Monastery, revered as a ‘mother monastery’ within the Tibetan cultural sphere, developed a distinct model of ritual worship, art practices, and curriculum that influenced other monasteries, including Pemayangtse Monastery in Sikkim. Tawang Monastery, on the other hand, was guided by Drepung Monastery in Tibet, with the Fifth Dalai Lama providing significant support through Drepung Monastery during its establishment (Reid, 1983:288). This association not only shaped the religious customs of Tawang Monastery but also forged a lasting connection between the two institutions, with the abbot of Tawang Monastery historically linked to Drepung Lo Selling Monastery in Lhasa. This rich legacy of monastic relationships underscores the profound cultural and spiritual exchange between the Himalayan region and Tibet. Tibetan Buddhist monasteries boast a rich and glorious past, with institutions like Pemayangtse and Tawang in the Eastern Himalayas serving as exemplars of Tibet’s original monastic prototypes. The historiography of Tibet has been extensively documented since the colonial period, with notable scholars contributing significantly to this narrative. Pioneers such as Russian Orientalist A.I. Vostrikov (1904-1937), Sarat Chandra Das (1849-1917), Alexander Csoma de Koros (1784-1842), Professor Giuseppe Tucci, Pandit Rahula Sankrityayana, and Dr. Lokesh Chandra have dedicated their lives to studying Tibet and related subjects. A distinct school of scholars has endeavored to map the distribution and interconnections of Buddhist monasteries and their affiliated sub-monasteries across the Himalayan region. Tibetan Buddhist monasteries function as spatial conduits for the cultural transmission of Tibetan Buddhism, leveraging natural resources to establish religious sites. As politics and religion increasingly converged, the founding of religious sites and their associated sub-monasteries became an inevitable trend. Building on their lineage systems, various Tibetan Buddhist schools institutionalised their ideologies in the Eastern Himalayas. One of the most distinctive features of Tibetan Buddhist monasteries is the *principal-subordinate monastery system*, where subordinate monasteries in the Tibetan region revolve around a central principal monastery. This principal monastery serves as the political and cultural hub for all subordinate institutions, forming a cohesive network characterised by complex hierarchical relationships and organisational structures (Li, 2024: 1-26). The activities and curricula of subordinate monasteries are inspired and sponsored by their principal counterparts. From the mid-tenth to the early thirteenth century, Tibetan Buddhism diversified into prominent sects such as Gelug, Nyingma, Kagyu, and Sakya. As these schools established their initial monasteries, affiliated smaller institutions emerged in surrounding areas, forming extensive networks. Tibetan monasteries in various Himalayan regions are integral to this network, with Pemayangtse and Tawang Monasteries being directed by parent monasteries belonging to the Nyingma and Gelug schools of Tibet, respectively. This intricate web of monastic relationships underscores the profound cultural and spiritual exchange between Tibet and the Himalayan region (Dash, 1995:34-42).

2. Area of Study

This study explores the historical and cultural significance of Tibetan Buddhist monasteries in the Himalayan region, focusing on the relationships between Mindröling and Pemayangtse, and Drepung

and Tawang monasteries, and their impact on preserving Tibetan Buddhist heritage and promoting cultural exchange.



Figure 1: Study Area

3. Review of Literature

The review of existing literature on Buddhist monasteries encompasses two primary categories. The first group focuses on conceptual issues related to the study of Buddhist monasteries. The study of Buddhist monasteries in Tibet and the Himalayas has been extensively explored by scholars such as Berthe Jansen, Paul Kocot Nietupski, H.G. Joshi, and John Powers. Jansen's seminal work focuses on the monastic organization of Tibet, highlighting the significant role monasteries played in politics, economics, culture, and society. Her research provides a comprehensive understanding of Tibetan monasticism, including the history of Tibetan and Mongolian society, Buddhist economy, and various aspects of monastic life. Other notable scholars have contributed to the field, including Michael John Walsh, who examined Chinese monasteries and their economic capital, and James A. Benn, Lori Meeks, and James Robson, who edited a work on Buddhist monasteries in medieval China and Japan. Peter Harrison's work explores Tibetan culture and architecture, while H.G. Joshi's research focuses on the history and geography of Sikkim. Matthew Kapstein and John Powers have written extensively on Tibetan Buddhist ideas, practices, and history. Powers' revised edition covers a wide range of Tibetan Buddhism's history, doctrines, practices, and festivals. Sam Van Schaik's work provides an insightful overview of Tibet's political and religious history, while Sheldon Pollock's edited volume addresses the early modern period in South Asia. The literature also includes works on the history and culture of Sikkim, such as J.R. Subba's "History Culture and Customs of Sikkim" and Pranab Kumar Jha's "History of Sikkim (1817-1904)". These studies provide valuable insights into the region's complex history, cultural transformations, and the impact of Buddhism on local communities. Key themes emerging from the literature include the significance of monasteries in Tibetan society, the

impact of colonialism and modernization, and the preservation of Tibetan culture and traditions. The edited volume “Buddhist Himalaya: Studies in Religion, History, and Culture” offers a comprehensive exploration of the region, covering historical information and cultural studies. Overall, the existing literature provides a rich and diverse understanding of Buddhist monasteries in Tibet and the Himalayas, highlighting their complex roles in shaping the region’s history, culture, and society.

The second group of sources includes religious texts, colonial records, and post-colonial scholarship. The Pemayangtse and Tawang Monasteries have been the subject of various research works and studies. Notable contributions include the “History of Sikkim” by Chogyal Thutob Namgyal and Maharani Yeshe Dolma, which provides insights into the formation, expansion, and decline of the Sikkim kingdom. Melanie Vandenhelsken’s doctoral research on Pemayangtse Monastery explores the relationship between the monastery and state power, highlighting its role in Sikkim’s political scheme. Other scholars, such as Gary Chopel, N. Dorjee, and S.N. Agnihotri, have written about Sikkimese monastic architecture, history, and culture. Niranjan Sarkar’s research on Tawang Monastery provides valuable information on its historical background, monastic system, and architecture. Additional studies on Tawang and its people include works by D.K. Dutta, Tashi Lama, and Bibhash Dhar, who explore the Monpa community and their cultural practices. Anna Balikci’s “Lamas, Shamans, and Ancestors” examines the intersection of Buddhism and local traditions in Sikkim, while Kazuharu Mizuno and Lobsang Tenpa’s “Himalayan Nature and Tibetan Buddhist Culture” focuses on the Monpa region and Tawang Monastery’s influence. Other notable works include P.N. Chopra’s “Sikkim”, which discusses pre-colonial Sikkim, and various colonial-era accounts, such as those by Joseph Dalton Hooker, C.U. Aitchison, and J.W. Edgar, which provide historical and cultural insights into Sikkim and Tibet. The Namgyal Institute of Tibetology’s collection of documents and agreements serves as a valuable resource for studying Sikkimese, Tibetan, Bhutanese, and British Indian history.

The Pemayangtse and Tawang Monasteries have been documented in various historical texts and colonial-era accounts. Notable works include:

- “hBras-ijongs-gNas-yig” or “Denjong Nay-Yig” (19th century) by Lhatsun Gyurmed Jigdel Tenzin Pawo, describing Sikkim’s geography and holy places
- “Diaries of Chogyal Sidkeong Tulku” (1900), a collection of records of the 10th Chogyal’s travels to Burma, Ceylon, and India

Early European references to Sikkim include Horace Della Penna’s letters (published in *Journal Asiatique*) and colonial-era accounts such as:

- Joseph Dalton Hooker’s “Himalayan Journals” (1855)
- C.U. Aitchison’s “Collection of Treaties, Engagements and Sanads” (1863)
- Ashley Eden’s “Political Mission to Bhutan” (1865)
- J.W. Edgar’s “Report on a visit to Sikkim and the Tibetan Frontier” (1875)
- Clements Markham’s “Narratives of the Mission of George Bogle to Tibet” (1876)
- Colman Macaulay’s “Report of a Mission to Sikkim and the Tibetan Frontiers” (1885)
- Richard Temple’s “Journal kept in Hyderabad, Cashmnr, Sikkim and Nepal” (1887)
- H.H. Risley’s “Gazetteer of Sikkim” (1909)
- Francis Younghusband’s “Tibet and India, our position in Tibet” (1910)
- J.C. White’s “Sikkim and Bhutan Frontier” (1908)
- L.S.S. O’Malley’s “Bengal District Gazetteers”

- Percy Brown’s “Tours in Sikkim and Darjeeling Districts” (1917)
- A.J. Dash’s “Bengal District Gazetteer” (1947)
- David McDonald’s “Touring in Sikkim and Tibet”

The Namgyal Institute of Tibetology’s collection of documents and agreements provides valuable insights into Sikkimese, Tibetan, Bhutanese, and British Indian history. Recent publications, such as “The life history of Ancient Buddhist Masters of India, China, Tibet, Bhutan, and Sikkim” (2019), offer information on key figures in Tibetan Buddhism and the Nyingma tradition.

4. Research Methodology

This study employs a historical research design, leveraging a combination of primary and secondary sources to gather data. Primary sources encompass Tibetan literature and documents and field study data, whereas secondary sources comprise relevant published and unpublished books, journals, and other materials. Oral traditions also play a significant role in shaping the research findings. A dual-method approach is utilized to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the data. Firstly, the dual attestation method involves cross-verifying information from literary texts with archaeological reports to validate the findings. Secondly, the typological comparison method allows for the classification and chronological sequencing of architectural and archaeological remains. By integrating these methods, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the historical context and phenomena under investigation. This approach enables the researcher to contextualize the past, identify patterns, and develop a nuanced interpretation of historical events.

4.1.a. *The Mindröling-Pemayangtse Monastic Affiliation*

The Nyingma school, founded by the revered Guru Padmasambhava, holds the distinction of being the oldest school of Tibetan Buddhism. Initially, the Nyingma tradition did not have a monastic setup, and its teachings were transmitted through a lineage of textual transmission and tantric teachings known as “*terma*” or hidden treasures. Over time, however, the tradition evolved through the compilation of scriptures and the establishment of monasteries. The Nyingma School places a strong emphasis on tantric practices and has assimilated various elements from the Bon tradition (O’Donovan, 2004:56-84). A significant aspect of the Nyingma tradition is its network of “Six Mother Monasteries,” which have given rise to a large number of branch monasteries. One such notable branch monastery is Pemayangtse in Sikkim. The six major Nyingma monasteries serve as the foundational institutions of this tradition. The six Nyingma monasteries in Tibet are significant centers of learning and spiritual practice. They include Palri/Schechen, Mindröling, Dorje Drak, Kathok/Dodrubchen, Palyul, and Dzogchen, each affiliated with specific lineages and traditions, preserving and transmitting the Nyingma heritage.

Most of these monasteries were destroyed either during the Communist invasion of Tibet in 1959 or the subsequent Cultural Revolution. However, through the dedication of local Tibetans and the support of Buddhist communities from within China and abroad, many of these monasteries have been fully or partially rebuilt (Goldstein, 2009). Furthermore, Buddhist masters from these institutions have established exile centres in India, Nepal, and Bhutan, serving as training grounds for the younger generation of lamas. It is noteworthy that while these major monasteries oversaw the branch monasteries of the Nyingma tradition, Lieutenant Colonel Laurence Austine Waddell specifically identifies Mindröling Monastery in Tibet as the parent monastery of Pemayangtse (Waddell, 1895). Founded by Rigzin Terdak Lingpa in 1676 within the Draché valley of central Tibet, Mindröling Monastery, meaning “Sublime Island of Ripening Liberation,” received full patronage from the Fifth

Dalai Lama. The monastery was conceived as a sanctuary where practitioners could pursue their spiritual disciplines in solitude and peace. According to Townsend, Mindröling Monastery represented a collaborative endeavour between temporal and spiritual authorities, serving as a “civilizational center” in early modern Tibet (Townsend, 2021). However, the monastery suffered extensive devastation in 1718 at the hands of the *Dzungar* Mongols from East Turkestan. The *Dzungar* military officer Tsainam Druphu, driven by animosity toward the Nyingma school, prohibited its practices and orchestrated the destruction of statues, scriptures, and stupas. This invasion led to significant loss of life among the lamas, teachers, translators, and guardians of the monastery, as well as the widespread destruction of invaluable artifacts and scriptures. Despite this destruction, Mindröling Monastery was restored between 1720 and the reign of the Seventh Dalai Lama (1708–1757), under the supervision of Ugyen Kelzang and Ugyen Choedak, with support from the Dalai Lama and secular authorities like Polhanas (Tucci, 1999:69-70). Concurrently, efforts were made to restore other Nyingma monasteries across various regions of Tibet. Mindröling Monastery is particularly renowned for its distinctive polygonal stone walls, constructed from slab stones, which offer valuable insights into Tibetan architectural art and style. The monastery’s architectural features encompass a range of buildings, statues, and mural paintings. In addition to the main hall, notable structures include *Sang-o Phodrang*, *Namgye Phodrang*, *Chokor Lunbhu Lakhang*, and *Gonsang Phodrang*, among others. In 1959, some monks from the monastery took refuge in India and founded a Mindröling Monastery near Clement Town in Dehradun, Uttarakhand state.



Figure 2: Pemayangtse Monastery

Terdak Lingpa’s lineage is known as the Nyö lineage (*gnyos* or *smyos rigs*), which translates to “Place of Perfect Emancipation.” However, following the establishment of Mindröling Monastery,

it came to be recognized as the Mindröling Lineage. Terdak Lingpa founded the monastery with the primary objective of establishing a stronghold for the traditions of Tantrayana, facilitating both its study and practice. Mindröling Monastery played a pivotal role in training teachers for the official schools of noble families and supplying well-trained government officials to Tibet. The monastery's apprenticeships in the arts and sciences produced many accomplished individuals who went on to become prominent figures. According to Townsend, the education provided at Mindröling offered training in literary arts and otherworldly fields of knowledge that were otherwise difficult to obtain, thereby becoming a "precious commodity" in central Tibet. Over time, Mindröling Monastery emerged as a focal point for various ritual traditions, including sadhana practice, ritual dances, and mandala construction, not only for Nyingma monasteries but also for other lineages across Tibet (Nagasawa, 2016:37-47). As noted by Jacob P. Dalton, the extensive tantric liturgies established at Mindröling had a profound influence, permeating the ritual fabric of nearly every major Nyingma monastery in Tibet (Dalton, 2016:99). Richard Kohn similarly highlights the spread of esoteric powers established at Mindröling into the broader Tibetan cultural sphere, underscoring the monastery's significant impact on the region's spiritual landscape (Kohn, 2001). During that period, one of the most significant aspects of Mindröling Monastery was Terdag Lingpa's progressive view on gender equality. From its inception, the monastery adopted a revolutionary concept that emphasized the education of women and highlighted their crucial role in propagating and practicing Dharma. Within the monastery, daughters were bestowed with the esteemed title of Jetsün, a term derived from the Tibetan words "Je," meaning lord or sovereign, and "tsün," signifying a great noble and virtuous person. Under the guidance of Jigme Pabo, a disciple of Terdag Lingpa, Pemayangtse Monastery was transformed in 1709, and the Mindröling lineage was established within it (Mullard, 2005:55-85). Following its establishment, Mindröling Monastery served as a prominent center for training Nyingma scholars. A notable tradition involved sending monks from Pemayangtse Monastery to Mindröling Monastery for study and training purposes. Upon their return to Sikkim, these Buddhist monks would impart the knowledge and training they had received in Tibet to their followers in their respective monasteries (Acharya, 1998:1-6). As Pemayangtse Monastery held the distinction of being the principal monastery in Sikkim, the chief lamas of nearly all other Nyingma monasteries and gompas in the region were typically deputed from Pemayangtse (Dorjee, 1977: 51-52). Jetsün Mingyur Paldrön, the daughter of Terdag Lingpa, played a pivotal role during her exile in Sikkim, which was necessitated by the Mongol invasion. During her stay, she imparted the religious teachings of Mindröling Monastery to the lamas of Pemayangtse. Notably, Jetsün Mingyur Paldrön taught over four thousand practitioners for several months, introducing new termas and cycles of her teachings to the King, chief attendants, and students. She shared both new and old terma teachings, along with the teachings of Terdag Lingpa, and subsequently became the root teacher of the King of Sikkim and countless Sikkimese practitioners. Through her efforts, she disseminated the Dzogchen teachings throughout the region. As a result of Jetsün Mingyur Paldrön's teachings, a strong and enduring connection has persisted between Sikkimese Dharma practitioners, Pemayangtse Monastery, and the Mindröling Lineage. Mindröling Monastery has consistently demonstrated an attunement to social needs, assimilating values rather than distancing itself from social customs. This approach has allowed the monastery to maintain a profound relevance and impact within the community it serves. Mindröling Monastery functioned as a vibrant cultural and educational center, dedicated to the transmission of doctrine and the propagation of religious teachings (Dyer, 2022). By providing spiritual education and training to the lamas of Pemayangtse, the monastery strengthened doctrinal continuity between itself and its subordinate institutions. This relationship between principal and subordinate monasteries served as a crucial mechanism for

preserving the integrity of monastic heritage across the Himalayan region, effectively countering the fragmentation of cultural ties. The development of monastic colleges within the Nyingma tradition occurred relatively late in its history. However, during the 17th century, in conjunction with—and to some extent under—the emerging Ganden Phodrang regime in central Tibet, the modern Nyingma monastic system began to take shape. This period saw the establishment of a formal system of Nyingma monastic colleges (*bshad grwa*), which played a pivotal role in the tradition's growth and consolidation. Lochen Dharmāurī (1654–1717) and his elder brother, Terdak Lingpa Gyurme Dorje/Rigzin Terdak Lingpa (1646–1714), were instrumental in the ascendance of Mindröling Monastery. Through their sustained efforts, they worked to establish the ritual protocols of the Nyingma tradition, making significant contributions to the compilation of the Nyingma Kama (*Rnying ma bka' ma*), or the “Oral Tradition of the Nyingma.” This collection embodied the lineages of tantric teachings, further solidifying the foundation of the Nyingma tradition (Kapstein, 2019). A land ownership document (*gtan-tshigs*) dated 1683 reveals that the monastic corporation of Mindröling had, by that time, acquired twenty-six separate branch monasteries (*dgon-ma-lag*) dispersed across central, southern, and eastern Tibet. These monastic estates were meticulously managed, with non-monastic tax-paying subjects (*khral-pa*) and tenant farmers (*mi-ser*) associated with them. The economic surplus generated from these branch estates was largely allocated to Mindröling Monastery, supporting its maintenance and daily operations. The spiritual mother-daughter relationship between Pemayangtse and Mindröling monasteries has played a pivotal role in disseminating Nyingma philosophy in Tibet and Sikkim. As the parent monastery, Mindröling guided Pemayangtse intellectually, exerting a profound influence on its administrative structure, monastic discipline, ritual practices, education and training, financial management, and specific rules and regulations. Both monasteries share a complex history, having faced sectarian devastation in the past (Cuevas, 2003:135-147). While Mindröling Monastery was ravaged by the Mongols, Pemayangtse Monastery suffered at the hands of the armies of Bhutan and Nepal. Despite these challenges, both monasteries have been recipients of local political patronage. Mindröling Monastery received support from the Ganden Phodrang government, whereas Pemayangtse Monastery continued to enjoy the patronage of the Namgyal dynasty in Sikkim, remaining a key ally of the state (FitzHerbert, 2018:49-120). The harmony between the two monasteries is evident in several aspects. Notably, the religio-spiritual dimension of Mindröling Monastery is intricately linked to the specific identity of its subordinate monasteries, partly determining the application of principles and tools within these institutions. The true nature of Mindröling's religio-spiritual identity is manifested in monasteries like Pemayangtse through sacred scriptures, underscoring the profound connection between these institutions.

The scriptures of the Nyingma school have profoundly influenced the leadership provided by Mindröling Monastery to its subordinate monasteries, shaping its doctrine and leadership styles (Townsend, 2021). These sacred texts have also played a pivotal role in developing the religious-spiritual dimension of both Mindröling and Pemayangtse monasteries. At the heart of Mindröling Monastery's tradition lies the ancient practice of oral transmission (*snyan brgyud*), an uninterrupted lineage of knowledge passed down from Nyingma masters to disciples and other monasteries (O'Donovan, 2004:56-84). This tradition, dating back to Guru Rinpoche (Birth year Earth Monkey or a Wood Monkey year-?), involves masters teaching scriptures to disciples, followed by detailed explanations (*bshad*) and guidance (*gdams ngag*). This process clarifies complex points, resolves doubts, and enables disciples to integrate the teachings through practice (*sgrub pa*), ultimately achieving higher levels of realization. The oral transmission at Mindröling encompasses tantric studies, sutra studies, and Dzogchen teachings, all of which have been transmitted to Pemayangtse Monastery. By preserving



Figure 3: Pemayangtse Shedra

this tradition, Mindröling Monastery has ensured the continuity of its spiritual heritage, extending it to subordinate monasteries. Pemayangtse Monastery, in turn, has maintained the authenticity and integrity of the guru-disciple relationship and the Nyingma scriptures. Furthermore, Mindröling's Nyingma philosophy was transmitted to Pemayangtse Monastery through the Tibetan Buddhist Canon (*bKa' 'gyur* and *bsTan 'gyur*) and Mindröling's unique scriptures, including Terdak Lingpa's Collected Works (*gTer bdag gling pa'i gsung 'bum*). This rich legacy has fostered a deep connection between the two monasteries, allowing them to flourish as beacons of Nyingma tradition (Sharma, 2024:176-196). The intellectual and religious ideology provided by Mindröling Monastery has served as a guiding force for Pemayangtse Monastery, enabling it to control the activities of other Nyingma monasteries in Sikkim and train lamas from subordinate branch monasteries for religious work. Under this guidance, Pemayangtse Monastery has adopted a systematic approach to management, facilitated by lamas trained at Mindröling. These trained lamas have effectively coordinated, strategized, and allocated resources, executed tasks, and overseen operations, acting as a vital link between the monastery's spiritual mission and the practical implementation of its strategies. In a similar vein to Mindröling, Pemayangtse Monastery has implemented various systems to enhance efficiency, including financial management and promoting member participation. The monastic administration has also evaluated matters beyond religious concerns, addressing the practical needs of the laity and incorporating both spiritual and practical aspects of monastery management. The management of Pemayangtse Monastery, led by trained lamas, has established collective objectives that include:

- **Community Building:** Bringing community members together and creating a sense of communal identity within the monastery through coordinated group engagements.
- **Community Service:** Engaging in community service and disseminating the monastery's teachings to promote spiritual growth and development.
- **Leadership Identification:** Identifying individuals within the religious community who demonstrate potential to lead farming and commercial activities.

The management structure of Pemayangtse Monastery mirrors that of Mindröling, with a hierarchical system where decisions are made from top to bottom. Senior monastery officials take important decisions, which are then distributed to subordinate committees and members for execution.

This hierarchical management approach has provided a focused vision and direction for the activities and operations of both monasteries, clarifying roles, duties, and decision-making processes (Gyal, 2007:51-59).

Mindröling Monastery has profoundly influenced the spiritual and cultural traditions of Pemayangtse Monastery. This influence is evident in Pemayangtse's Dzogchen practices, tantric rituals, manuscripts, murals, carvings, and sculptures, which reflect Mindröling's rich cultural heritage. The monastery's carved art objects, musical instruments, choreographed dance practices, and religious music traditions have also been shaped by Mindröling's legacy. Monastic education at Pemayangtse is built on oral and liturgical discourses by Mindröling masters, with Nyingma Buddhist scriptures, philosophy, and ritual practices at its core (Baker, 2018:404-428). The scholarly exchanges between the two monasteries have maintained a high level of education and art at Pemayangtse. The religious bond between the two monasteries has ensured that daily rituals, festivals, and ceremonies at Pemayangtse align with Mindröling traditions. Mindröling Monastery has enabled Pemayangtse to develop as a major center of spiritual practice through its unbroken lineage of the Nyingma tradition, emphasis on Dzogchen teachings, and preservation of artistic traditions. The Losar and Saga Dawa celebrations, along with other ritual practices and ceremonies performed at Pemayangtse, demonstrate the artistic and cultural exchange between the two monasteries and the enduring legacy of Tibetan Buddhism (David & Samuel, 2016:25-35). The shared reverence for Guru Rinpoche, the patron saint of Tibetan Buddhism, has led to collaboration between scholars from both monasteries on translation projects. These projects ensure the accuracy and authenticity of sacred texts, significantly impacting the monastery's educational infrastructure. This collaboration has contributed to Pemayangtse's revival of Tibetan identity in Sikkim, inspiring a new generation of Tibetans to seek their cultural roots.

4.1.b. Drepung & Tawang: Entwined by Tradition, United in Spiritual Pursuit

The Gelug tradition was founded by the revered Je Tsongkhapa Lobsang Drakpa, affectionately known as 'Je Rinpoche' (Mills, 2003). In the year 1409, he established the magnificent Ganden Monastery, which would become the birthplace of the Gelug school and the initiation point for its diffusion networks across Tibet (Chao, 2024:64-81). One of his most esteemed disciples, Jamyang Chöjé Tashi Palden, went on to found Drepung Monastery in 1416, while another prominent disciple, Jamchen Chöjé Shakya Yeshe, founded Sera Monastery in 1419. These three monasteries - Ganden, Drepung, and Sera - are collectively regarded as the mother monasteries or the 'Great Three Monasteries' of the Gelug school. Initially, Drepung Monastery consisted of a single small building that served as a humble abode for teachings and residence. Over time, the monastery underwent significant expansion, with the addition of an assembly hall, tantric hall, monks' quarters, and other structures (Dakpa, 2003). The construction of these buildings was made possible by the generous donation of materials by Neupon Namka Zangpo, the political leader of Central Tibet at the time, who was approached by Tsongkhapa for support. Under the guidance of Jamyang Chöjé Tashi Palden, Drepung Monastery flourished as a great institution of learning, with the master delivering extensive discourses on the Tripitaka concerning sutra studies and the four classes of tantra concerning tantra studies. The monks residing in the monastery were divided into seven groups based on their interests in the teachings, which eventually led to the establishment of seven colleges under the monastery's umbrella. Drung Dakpa Rinchen founded the college of Gomang and became a hub for scholarly pursuits. Loseling was established by Lekdenpa, where monks could delve deeper into the scriptures. Deyang, founded by Chokchen Janchub, fostered a spirit of inquiry and debate. Shagkor, established by Lopon Rabchok, provided a platform for monks to explore the intricacies of Buddhist philosophy. Gyalwa or Tosamling,

founded by Lopon Kunga Rinchen, emphasized the importance of contemplation and introspection. Dulwa, established by Drung Tsondu Dakpa, focused on the discipline and conduct of monastic life. Ngagpa, founded by Lopon Gyaltzen Tsultrim, specialized in the study and practice of tantra. Each of these colleges played a vital role in the development of the Gelug tradition, and Drepung Monastery remains one of the most revered institutions in Tibetan Buddhism to this day (Goldstein, 1998:15-52).



Figure 4: Tawang Monastery

The first Dalai Lama, Gyalwa Gendun Drub, received extensive sutra and tantra teachings at Drepung Monastery from the renowned Tsongkhapa. A remarkable tradition was established when each of the subsequent Dalai Lamas, from the second to the fifth, not only occupied the esteemed position of Throne-holder of Drepung but also made the monastery their permanent residence. It is believed that the name of the Tibetan Government, Ganden Phodrang, originated from the name of the Dalai Lama's residence at Drepung. In its heyday, Drepung Monastery was akin to a thriving city, housing approximately seven thousand monks, as reported by a mission in 1936-37 (Jansen, 2013:111-139). The monastery was sustained by a substantial portion of the villagers' produce, receiving a quarter of their output. However, the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) ascension to power in 1959 marked the beginning of a tumultuous period for Drepung Monastery. The CCP's policies aimed to suppress the elites politically, economically, and intellectually, and Drepung was particularly targeted due to its monks' bravery in defending the Dalai Lama, resulting in the deaths of Chinese soldiers (Chen, Barnett & Woesser, 2020) As a consequence, the monastery was stripped of its estates and granaries without any compensation, dealing a severe blow to its economic foundation. Despite this

setback, Drepung Monastery continued to engage in non-agricultural economic activities, showcasing its resilience. In the aftermath of the CCP's occupation, the monasteries of Sera, Drepung, and Ganden were rebuilt in India to preserve Tibet's rich monastic heritage. Drepung and Ganden Monasteries were re-established in Mundgod, south Karnataka, while Sera Monastery found a new home in Bylakuppe, also in Karnataka. This remarkable feat ensured the continuation of Tibet's monastic institutions and the preservation of its cultural legacy (McCleary & Kuijp, 2010:149-180). The Tawang region's profound cultural association with the three largest monasteries in Lhasa - Sera, Drepung, and Ganden - has led many Tibetan and Chinese scholars to describe it as an integral part of Tibet, now part of China. This perceived connection is cited as a strong reason for China's claim to Arunachal Pradesh as Southern Tibet. Indian scholars also acknowledge the cultural and territorial correlations between the region and Tibet. Historically, the Tawang region was closely linked to the Drepung Monastery in Lhasa, with the Tawang Monastery's monks being deeply associated with Drepung. The monastery sent a significant portion of its revenue to Lhasa, where it was allocated to the Drepung Monastery and the Tibetan Government. However, the tax sent by Tawang Monastery to Drepung was purely religious in nature, and the region was governed autonomously by local Monpa leaders. The cultural attachment of Tawang to Tibet was deliberately portrayed as official and administrative by Chinese scholars, whereas, in reality, the region's leaders and people were religiously devoted to the monastery. Tawang Monastery, often referred to as a 'sister monastery' to Drepung, flourished under the guidance of the Fifth Dalai Lama and Merak Lama (Lodo Gyatso). The Fifth Dalai Lama, a monk of the Drepung Monastery, played a significant role in shaping the character of Tawang Monastery. Lodo Gyatso became renowned as Merak Lama, his fame spreading far and wide. Under the patronage of the Fifth Dalai Lama, Tawang Monastery was affiliated with Drepung Monastery, receiving sacred relics, rules for lamas, abbots, and officials (Dutta Choudhury, 1996). The influence of Drepung Monastery on Tawang Monastery is evident in its religious functionaries, observances, and hierarchical positions of monks. The monastic curriculum of Tawang Monastery is modelled after Drepung's, with a strong emphasis on Buddhist philosophy, logic, and debate. Monks from Tawang would often study at Drepung, engaging in debates and scholarly discussions that honed their understanding of Buddhist teachings. The architectural similarities between the two monasteries are striking, with both utilizing natural materials such as stone, wood, and clay to create structures that blend seamlessly into their surroundings. The mural paintings, icons, and design patterns in both Drepung and Tawang Monasteries demonstrate a shared spiritual heritage, reflecting the Gelug tradition's rich artistic and cultural legacy. The murals in both monasteries depict similar themes, including Buddhist deities, mythological scenes, and symbolic motifs that convey the profound significance of Buddhist teachings. Avalokiteshvara, the Buddha of Compassion, is prominently featured, emphasizing the importance of loving-kindness and compassion in the Buddhist tradition (Huber, 2012). Other murals vividly depict the life of the Buddha, the wheel of Dharma, and the six paramitās, providing a visual representation of the Buddhist path to enlightenment. Intricate designs and patterns adorn the walls, ceilings, and doors of the monasteries, showcasing the artistic skill and craftsmanship of the Tibetan people. Geometric shapes, floral motifs, and auspicious symbols are used extensively in both monasteries, reflecting a deep sense of continuity and shared cultural heritage. The use of vibrant colors, especially red, yellow, blue, and green, reflects the spiritual significance of the monasteries and the profound meaning of Buddhist teachings. These colors are not merely decorative but convey specific aspects of Buddhist philosophy, such as compassion, wisdom, and renunciation. The careful preservation and restoration of the murals' colors have ensured that the beauty and significance of these artworks are preserved for future generations. By following in the footsteps of Drepung Monastery, which was the largest of all Tibetan monasteries, Tawang Monastery

became the second largest, testifying to the enduring legacy of the Gelug tradition in the region. The connection between the two monasteries is a testament to the power of spiritual and cultural exchange, and the profound impact that such relationships can have on the development of art, architecture, and Buddhist scholarship (Sánchez-Pardo, 2015).

The educational curriculum of Tawang Monastery mirrors that of Drepung Monastery, with a similar division of students based on their intellectual abilities and aptitudes. The administrative structure of Tawang Monastery is also modeled after Drepung's, emphasizing the importance of hierarchical organization and clear lines of authority. The office of the abbot or lama serves as the highest administrative authority in both monasteries, overseeing monastic discipline, spiritual education, and administrative decisions (Lama, 1999). The religio-cultural relationship between Drepung and Tawang has facilitated the exchange of scholars, teachers, and monks, and has persisted despite historical challenges, including the Chinese invasion and cultural upheaval. The Mongol rulers, who revered the Gelug school and Drepung Monastery as a major refuge for Mongol Buddhist monks, ensured the protection of Tawang Monastery from rival sects such as Nyingma and Karmapa. The Gelug tradition, to which both monasteries belong, emphasizes the teachings of esteemed masters such as Je Tsongkhapa Lobsang Drakpa, Gyaltsab Dharma Rinchen, and Khedrup Gelek Palsang, further strengthening the spiritual connection between Drepung and Tawang. Both monasteries rely on an extensive set of scriptures and textbooks, many of which were likely brought from Drepung Monastery during the seventeenth century. The Gelug monastic education system places a strong emphasis on the academic study of the five major Buddhist philosophies, including *Prajnaparamita*, *Madhyamaka*, *Pramana*, *Abhidharma*, and *Vinaya*. Students engage in rigorous study and debate, exploring the intricacies of Buddhist doctrine and philosophy through the lens of logic and critical inquiry (McCleary & Kuijp, 2007:1-49). The study of *Prajnaparamita* focuses on the stages and paths of mind necessary for the realization of enlightenment, while *Madhyamaka*, *Pramana*, and *Abhidharma* provide a comprehensive understanding of Buddhist epistemology, metaphysics, and cosmology. The study of *Vinaya* emphasizes the importance of monastic discipline and the rules of conduct that govern the behavior of monks. Through this rigorous educational system, students develop a deep understanding of Buddhist teachings and philosophy, preparing them for a life of spiritual practice and service (Gyeltshen & Lopez, 2021:1-35). The emphasis on logic and debate enables students to develop critical thinking skills, analyze complex philosophical concepts, and articulate their understanding of Buddhist doctrine. By mastering the five major subjects, students gain a profound understanding of the Buddha's teachings, enabling them to put them into practice and attain spiritual realization. Drepung and Tawang Monasteries share a unified curriculum, with foundational texts guiding the monastic studies, spiritual practice, and daily life of both institutions. The similar deities and worship practices of the two monasteries underscore their shared commitment to the Gelug teachings. Both monasteries reverently worship a range of protector deities, including Dharmapala, as well as wrathful deities such as Vajrabhairava and Hayagriva. The four wisdom protector deities - Shadbhuja Mahakala, Shri Devi Magzor, Begtse Chen, and Yama Dharmaraja - are also venerated in both monasteries, alongside two worldly deities, Vaishravana Riding a Lion and Tsangpa. This shared pantheon of deities reflects the deep spiritual connection between Drepung and Tawang Monasteries. The two monasteries also share common festivals, including Monlam Chenmo, which was initiated by Tsongkhapa in honor of Buddha Shakyamuni, and Saga Dawa, which commemorates the Buddha's enlightenment. These festivals are an integral part of the monastic calendar, fostering a sense of community and spiritual renewal among the monks. A notable feature of both monasteries is the presence of thangkas depicting similar bodhisattvas and Buddhist deities. The thangkas of Manjushri, Pratyeta Buddha, and Shakyamuni

Buddha are examples of the Gelug Lineage's artistic and spiritual heritage (Dreyfus, 2003:137-48). These exquisite works of art are painted on silk or cotton, showcasing the skill and devotion of the Tibetan artists. In addition to their spiritual pursuits, Drepung and Tawang Monasteries were also involved in trade and commerce. Tawang Monastery adopted the commercial system of Drepung Monastery, participating in the Bengal-Assam-Tibet and Burma trade operations via the Kameng-Tawang and trans-Himalayan route. The strategic location of Tawang, situated on the shortest route between India and Lhasa, made it an attractive hub for traders and travelers. This advantageous position enabled Tawang Monastery to profit from its involvement in the trade, fostering economic growth and stability in the region (Ma, 1998:167-87).

5. Conclusion

The Himalayan region has been home to a rich legacy of Buddhist monasteries, spiritually nurtured by Tibetan monastic institutions (Aguilar, 2016:3-20). The profound connection between these monasteries is exemplified by the relationships between Mindröling and Pemayangtse, as well as Drepung and Tawang. These monasteries have played a pivotal role in shaping the cultural, spiritual, and intellectual landscape of the region, fostering a deep sense of continuity and shared heritage (Kværne, 1995). The Mindröling-Pemayangtse monastic affiliation is a testament to the enduring legacy of the Nyingma tradition. Mindröling Monastery, founded by Rigzin Terdak Lingpa in 1676, served as a prominent center for training Nyingma scholars and played a crucial role in the transmission of doctrine and propagation of religious teachings. Pemayangtse Monastery, established in Sikkim in 1645, was deeply influenced by Mindröling's intellectual and religious ideology, adopting a similar administrative structure and monastic discipline. The relationship between Drepung and Tawang Monasteries is another remarkable example of the spiritual and cultural exchange between Tibet and the Himalayan region. Drepung Monastery, founded in 1416 by Jamyang Chöjé Tashi Palden, was a major institution of learning and spiritual practice in the Gelug tradition. Tawang Monastery, established in the 17th century, was guided by Drepung Monastery and shared a similar monastic curriculum, emphasizing Buddhist philosophy, logic, and debate. These monasteries have not only preserved the rich cultural and spiritual heritage of Tibetan Buddhism but have also contributed significantly to the development of art, architecture, and Buddhist scholarship in the region (Boisvert, 1992:123-141). The intricate murals, thangkas, and sculptures found in these monasteries are a testament to the artistic skill and devotion of the Tibetan people. The exchange of scholars, teachers, and monks between these monasteries has facilitated the transmission of knowledge and ideas, fostering a deep sense of community and spiritual renewal among the monks (Fang, 2024:1-23). The shared reverence for Buddhist deities and worship practices has also created a sense of unity and shared purpose among the monasteries. In conclusion, the relationships between Mindröling and Pemayangtse, as well as Drepung and Tawang, demonstrate the profound impact of spiritual and cultural exchange on the development of Buddhist monasteries in the Himalayan region. These monasteries have played a vital role in preserving the rich cultural and spiritual heritage of Tibetan Buddhism, and their legacy continues to inspire and guide spiritual seekers to this day. The significance of these monasteries extends beyond their spiritual and cultural importance, as they have also contributed to the economic and social development of the region (Hussain, 2013:264-308). The trade and commerce activities of these monasteries have fostered economic growth and stability, while their emphasis on education and community service has promoted social cohesion and well-being (Thakur, 2025:1-17). As we reflect on the legacy of these monasteries, we are reminded of the importance of preserving cultural heritage and promoting spiritual and intellectual exchange. The relationships between Mindröling

and Pemayangtse, as well as Drepung and Tawang, serve as a powerful example of the transformative impact of spiritual and cultural exchange, and their legacy continues to inspire and guide us today.

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