

Chapter 7

An Insider's Research into Buddhist History¹

Jack Meng-Tat Chia

Buddhism is one of the major religions in present-day Singapore. In fact, one can easily notice the rich diversity of different Buddhist traditions – Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana – co-existing and interacting in our global city-state. According to the 2000 census, Buddhism is both the majority and fastest growing religion in Singapore.² Despite this, there are only a handful of studies on the history of Buddhism in Singapore.³ As I have argued in a recent essay, while these previous research provide a useful introduction to change and continuity in the history of the religion, they tend to be overly ambitious and broad in their scope. Rather than focusing on specific themes or providing in-depth case studies of Buddhist practices, organizations and personalities, these studies examined the religion in an overarching manner. As a result, they are seldom able to fully explore and analyze the multi-faceted and complex issues surrounding Buddhism in the history of Singapore.⁴ For this reason, research on specific themes and case studies in the religion remain to be done.

-
- 1 I am grateful to C. C. Chin, Kuah Khun Eng, Loh Kah Seng, and Soh Gek Han for their helpful comments. Pseudonyms are used in this paper.
 - 2 Singapore, *Census of Population 2000* (Singapore: Department of Statistics, 2000).
 - 3 See Shi Chuanfa 释传发, *Xinjiapo Fojiao fazhan shi* 新加坡佛教发展史 [A History of the Development of Buddhism in Singapore] (Singapore: Xinjiapo Fojiao Jushilin, 1997); Y. D. Ong, *Buddhism in Singapore: A Short Narrative History* (Singapore: Skylark Publications, 2005); Hue Guan Thye 许原泰, *Xinjiapo Fojiao: Chuanbo yange yu moshi* 新加坡佛教: 传播沿革与模式 [Buddhism in Singapore: Propagation, Evolution and Practice] (M.A. dissertation, Nanyang Technology University, 2005); Liu Xianjue 刘先觉 and Lee Coo 李谷, *Xinjiapo Fojiao jianzhu yishu* 新加坡佛教建筑艺术 [Buddhist Architecture in Singapore] (Singapore: Kepmedia International Pte Ltd, 2007).
 - 4 Jack Meng Tat Chia, 'The Study of Buddhism in Singapore: A State of the Field Essay', paper presented at the Buddhism in India, China and Southeast Asia – Interaction and Practice Conference, 19–20 January 2008, Singapore.

As a Buddhist and a history student born and raised in Singapore, the history of Buddhism in Singapore is an area of research that has always intrigued me. In an attempt to gain greater understanding and insight into this area, I decided to investigate the role of Venerable Hong Choon (Hong Chuan 宏船), an eminent Buddhist monk in Singapore. According to my respondents, while some devotees remember him as the Supreme Chinese Monk (Huaseng Dazunzhang 华僧大尊长), others regard him as a living Bodhisattva. There are also rumours that the Venerable was a personal spiritual advisor to the then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew since the 1960s. However, like most Buddhists of my age, I have never known him. In fact, when he passed away in 1990, I had yet to become a Buddhist. Nevertheless, I have heard many interesting stories about him and his seemingly extraordinary life.

During the summer vacation of 2006, I visited the then newly opened Venerable Hong Choon Museum (Siyuan Xuan 思源轩) in Kong Meng San Phor Kark See Monastery (Guangmingshan Pujuesi 光明山普觉寺) at Bright Hill Road.⁵ From the exhibits and photographs displayed in the museum, I found that Venerable Hong Choon made eight visits to China from 1982 to 1990. In these visits, he met with national and religious leaders, made pilgrimages to sacred Buddhist sites, officiated a number of religious ceremonies, and helped to restore monasteries religiously affiliated with his master Hui Quan 会泉. Interestingly, all these visits occurred before Singapore and China established formal diplomatic relations. This got me interested to find out if the Venerable's religious exchanges played any role in the foreign relations between the two countries. And so I framed the questions, why did Venerable Hong Choon visit China? What was his role in Singapore's relations with China, if any at all? How and why did the Singapore and Chinese governments arrange the religious exchanges between the two countries? I discussed my insights into these questions in my history honours thesis, 'Buddhism in Singapore-China Relations: Venerable Hong Choon and his Visits, 1982–1990'.⁶

This essay seeks to reflect on some of the advantages and challenges I faced as an 'insider' in researching on the history of Buddhism in Singapore. Drawing from my experience in studying Venerable Hong Choon's role, I also discuss some of the methodological issues and problems that many researchers in Singapore are likely to face if they attempt to study their own religion through the lens of critical historical scholarship.

5 For the website of the museum, see Kong Meng San Phor Kark See Monastery, 'Venerable Hong Choon Museum', <http://www.kmspks.org/Gallery/vhc_museum/hcmuseum.htm> accessed 22 February 2010.

6 Religious affiliation can be based on tonsure, Dharma and ordination. See Holmes Welch, *The Practice of Chinese Buddhism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 403–4.

AN 'INSIDER'S' SEARCH FOR RELIGIOUS HISTORY: RESEARCHER'S POSITIONALITY

The issue of the advantages and limitations of 'insider' and 'outsider' approaches and perspectives in the study of Buddhism has stimulated discussions among religious studies specialists over the past decades.⁷ As Cristina Rocha and Martin Baumann point out, the "Buddhist" and "scholar of Buddhism" are not always exclusive categories', as both constantly have to 'wrestle with the identity of their field, as well as their own identities' in their attempts both to produce new knowledge of Buddhism and shape the development of the religion in both the West and Asia.⁸ On the one hand, supporters of the 'insider' approach generally assert that religious affiliation and membership offers a more in-depth insight into issues and provides one with greater empathy towards and knowledge of the faith and its followers. On the other hand, proponents of the 'outsider' perspective maintain that approaching the study of religion as a non-believer accords greater detachment from and objectivity towards the research. Therefore, each approach confronts the researcher with a unique set of advantages and disadvantages.

From my research experience, I see my position as an 'insider' as providing greater comparative advantage than that of an 'outsider'. Upon becoming a Buddhist at the age of 16 in 1998, I started attending Buddhist talks and Dharma classes. This helped to build up my knowledge and understanding of the religion, particularly of the scriptures, rituals and religious lexicon. Between 2000 and 2004, I also served as a executive committee member in a Buddhist youth organization and was active in the Buddhist community in Singapore. Experience in a leadership position enhanced my familiarity with the local Buddhist scene and gave me the opportunity to know several Buddhist monastic and lay leaders.

The sources for research into Buddhist history comprise a wide range, including written documents, oral history and epigraphic material. An 'insider' is more likely to obtain the trust of the Buddhist order and gain access to these sources for two main reasons.⁹ First, the monastic and lay leaders, as the makers of Buddhist

7 The revised version of my thesis has been published as 'Buddhism in Singapore-China Relations: Venerable Hong Choon and his Visits, 1982–1990', *The China Quarterly*, 196, December 2008: 864–83.

8 This discussion was recently reignited in the special issue of *Journal of Global Buddhism*, 9, 2008: 81–163. See also Christopher Ives, 'What Are We, Anyway? Buddhists, Buddhologists, or Buddhologists?' *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, 18, 1998: 96–100.

9 Cristina Rocha and Martin Baumann, 'Buddhists and Scholars of Buddhism: Blurred Distinctions in Contemporary Buddhist Studies', *Journal of Global Buddhism*, 9, 2008: 81.

history, are also often the gatekeepers of the sources. As the leaders of Buddhist organizations, they are vested with the power to determine with whom to share the sources. Hence, they are more likely to trust an ‘insider’, namely, a researcher who follows the same religion. When the researcher is an ‘insider’, the religious leaders generally feel more assured that information which they shared, and which might be deemed ‘sensitive’ – in particular when it relates to certain controversies or even scandals in the Buddhist community – will not be used against them and their respective monasteries or organizations. This explains why they are more forthcoming in sharing their knowledge and research materials with an ‘insider’. When I asked one of my respondents if he would reveal his experiences with anyone other than a researcher from the Buddhist community, he replied, ‘Maybe. But I will only give him the “model answers” as I will not feel comfortable revealing too much information’. What he meant by ‘model answers’ were responses that would avoid controversial issues and instances of conflict in the Buddhist community, while at the same time casting them in a more positive and harmonious light.

Second, an ‘insider’ researcher who has taken Buddhist studies classes is able to comprehend the concepts and issues of Buddhist history more empathetically than an ‘outsider’. For instance, in my research on Venerable Hong Choon, I came across many familiar Buddhist terms such as ‘chuanfa 传法’ and ‘dacheng 大乘’, and Buddhist personalities such as ‘Hong Yi 弘一’ and ‘Tai Xu 太虚’, which researchers from non-Buddhist backgrounds may find, initially at least, unfamiliar. In general, ‘insiders’ have an advantage in requesting for research materials, in knowing the right interview questions to ask, and in reading and translating the sources. With these advantages, I had a much easier time gaining access to published documents and records, oral history interviews and epigraphic sources.

HITTING THE BUDDHIST LIBRARIES: DOCUMENTS AND RECORDS

Unknown to most people, important temple documents are usually published in Buddhist publications, which are then kept in the libraries of monasteries and Buddhist organizations. Useful publications for the study of Buddhist history in Singapore include commemorative volumes (*jinian kanwu* 纪念刊物); newsletters; periodicals; and the hagiographies of eminent monks (*Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧传). For instance, one of the most important sources is the *Nanyang Fojiao* 南洋佛教, a free monthly periodical published by the Singapore Buddhist Federation (*Xinjiapo Fojiao Zonghui* 新加坡佛教总会).¹⁰ Founded by Venerable Siong Khye (Chang Kai 常凯)

¹⁰ I did not utilize any state archival sources for my research because there was hardly any relevant material on Venerable Hong Choon in the National Archives of Singapore. The only materials in the Archives were photographs of the Venerable’s funeral procession and

in 1969, the Nanyang Fojiao is still widely circulated and read in the local Buddhist community. Each issue contains announcements, reports, photographs of major Buddhist activities and celebrations in Singapore, speeches delivered by Buddhist leaders at key events, and essays written by both members of the sangha and lay people. In addition, the minutes of meetings and financial statements of the Singapore Buddhist Federation and the affiliated Singapore Buddhist Free Clinic are also published in this periodical. Another useful source is the commemorative volumes. For my research, I depended heavily on the *Special Commemorative Volume in Memory of Venerable Hong Choon* (Hongchuan Fashi Jinian Tekan 宏船法师纪念特刊). This commemorative volume was published by Kong Meng Shan Phor Kark See Monastery in 1993 to commemorate the third death anniversary of the Venerable. It contained many essays, private letters, newspaper articles and old photographs of his visits to China, all of which were extremely important for my research.

The majority of Buddhist monasteries and organizations are usually unable to provide much unpublished material, such as the original minutes of meetings, private correspondence, memoranda, and old photographs. Most of these documents and photographs are likely to have been published in the regular periodicals or newsletters of the respective monasteries and organizations. The personal writings and other private papers of senior monastic leaders are also usually published in a commemorative volume shortly after their death. These materials are readily available in most major Buddhist libraries in Singapore.

Most of my research was conducted at three major Buddhist libraries in Singapore: the Kong Meng Shan Phor Kark See Monastery Library at Bright Hill Road, Singapore Buddhist Lodge (Xinjiapo Fojiao Jushilin 新加坡佛教居士林) Library at Kim Yam Road, and The Buddhist Library at Geylang Road. While the research materials were openly available in the libraries and did not require privileged access, I still depended on the librarians, that is, the keepers who manage the collections, for their assistance and advice in locating and retrieving the materials. This is because, with the exception of the Kong Meng Shan Phor Kark See Monastery Library which had an online catalogue,¹¹ the catalogues of the Singapore Buddhist Lodge and the Buddhist Library had not been made available online and could only be accessed at the library with the help of the librarians. Furthermore, the materials are catalogued neither according to the Dewey Decimal Classification nor Library of Congress

cremation ceremony. National Archives of Singapore, Access to Archives Online, <<http://picas.nhb.gov.sg/picas/public/internetSearch>>, accessed 22 February 2010.

11 Singapore Buddhist Federation, 'Wenhua Jiaoliu 文化交流', 2008, <<http://www.buddhist.org.sg/sbf/community/cultural>>, accessed 22 February 2010.

Classification that most researchers are familiar with. For this reason, locating the materials can be a major headache for researchers, so it is always a good idea to seek the help of the librarians.

The keepers in this context, the librarians, are often either full-time ‘Dharma workers’ or volunteers in the Buddhist organizations.¹² To make the research easier and more efficient, it is always prudent to first inform the librarians about your research, and academic and religious affiliations. And being an ‘insider’, observing the basic Buddhist etiquette such as greeting the librarians as ‘shixiong 师兄’, meaning Dharma ‘brother’ or ‘sister’, will make them more willing to provide a helping hand or dispense useful advice in searching for materials in the library.

CONDUCTING INTERVIEWS: ORAL HISTORY

Besides conducting research in the Buddhist libraries, I also interviewed disciples of the late Venerable Hong Choon who had accompanied him on the China visits and are now senior leaders in the Buddhist community. These Buddhist leaders are the important makers of Buddhist history in Singapore. They are active participants in the local Buddhist scene whose interviews provided numerous valuable insights and sometimes offered greater depth than the written sources.

Being an ‘insider’ is an advantage in conducting interviews with these makers of Buddhist history. I was able to seek the help of monastic leaders and Dharma friends to organize the interviews with little difficulty. Furthermore, since they regarded me as a trustworthy ‘insider’, they were more forthcoming in sharing sensitive information which threw light on conflicts within the Buddhist community. Nevertheless, conducting interviews as an ‘insider’ also has its shortcomings. One issue which I confronted was that, although some informants took me into their confidence, other respondents felt inclined to put things in a more hagiographic and religious manner, since we held the same faith. For instance, when I asked my respondents about their experiences on their visits to China with Venerable Hong Choon, one of them, Zhiming, replied:

12 Kong Meng San Phor Kark See Monastery, ‘KMSPKS: Library’, 2008, <<http://www.kmspks.org/service/library.htm>>, accessed 22 February 2010; Singapore Buddhist Lodge, ‘Xinjiapo Fojiao Jushilin: Tushu Guan 新加坡佛教居士林: 图书馆’, 2008, <http://www.sbl.org.sg/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=20&Itemid=42>, accessed 22 February 2010; The Buddhist Library Singapore, ‘Our Facilities’, 2008, <<http://www.buddhlib.org.sg/facilities.htm>>, accessed 22 February 2010.

The success of Venerable Hong Choon's visits to China was very much a blessing from the Triple Gems ... Because of the blessings of the Triple Gems (Sanbao jiachi 三宝加持), all things then were possible.¹³

Another respondent, Chuanyang, pointed out:

I must say that it was Buddha's guidance and our good karma that we were able to embark on such an important trip to China. Everything just went miraculously well.

An 'insider' researcher should also be discerning and not accept every statement from the interviewees at face value. I tried to assess the reliability and accuracy of the information by checking it against other interviews and other types of sources. For instance, when I asked one of my respondents how many religious leaders went on the fourth visit with Venerable Hong Choon, he was unsure of the exact number and simply said that 'many people went for the trip'. To obtain the accurate number, I had to ask other respondents as well as look up the commemorative volume. This helped me to check for possible discrepancies and allowed me to obtain a sound understanding of religious history in Singapore beyond the exaggerated or hagiographic vindications. It is simplistic and unscholarly for an academic to simply accept at face value the stated motivations for and experiences of the Buddhist exchanges.

LOOKING AT PLAQUES AND PILLARS: EPIGRAPHIC SOURCES

Lastly, epigraphic sources are also useful for studying the history of Buddhist monasteries and organizations. The inscriptions found on plaques and pillars in a temple are an important source on its history. The names of the major donors and the years of major renovations of the building can usually be found on these inscriptions. As such, these steles are a useful complement to print and oral sources. For my research, I visited the Kong Meng Shan Phor Kark See Monastery, where Venerable Hong Choon was the former abbot, to examine the epigraphic sources. The inscriptions found on the plaques provided useful information on the history of the monastery. However, the most useful epigraphic sources were the inscriptions found on relic stupa of Venerable Hong Choon. As 'insiders' know, such inscriptions often provide a chronology of the life and religious achievements of eminent monks. These epigraphic sources, when read alongside print and oral sources, enable the researcher to obtain a fuller picture of Buddhism in Singapore history.

13 Kong Meng San Phor Kark See Monastery, 'V-LIB WebOPAC Kong Meng San Phor Kark See Monastery', 2008, <<http://apps.kmspks.org/library/search>>, accessed 22 February 2010.

AN 'INSIDER'S' CHALLENGES

Despite the many advantages, delving into the Buddhist past in Singapore as an 'insider' can also be likened to sailing between Scylla and Charybdis. There are three main challenges which an 'insider' is likely to face. First, the 'insider' who is given privileged access to useful and valuable materials may feel the pressure to live up to the expectations of the makers of history, especially when they make a request for a copy of the completed work.¹⁴ Consequently, an 'insider' may encounter the tension between their religious belief and the pursuit of academic knowledge. They may thus feel obliged to script the Buddhist past in a more 'positive' manner to meet the expectations of the respondents, which will help retain the goodwill and support of the makers for future research. Therefore, an 'insider' may have to be sensitive in the choice of words when writing up the research. This can be a quite a challenge. On the one hand, the researcher is obliged to be analytical and critical as demanded in academic scholarship. On the other hand, they must avoid coming across as disrespectful to the religion and its leaders.¹⁵

Next, an in-depth examination of hagiographic religious sources can shed useful light on critical issues surrounding the relationship between religion, state and society. This is absent from the official, and secularized, Singapore Story, which focuses mainly on the political developments of Singapore as a nation under the leadership of the People's Action Party government. Some, but not all, state documents relating to sensitive religious matters such as the acquisition of temple lands and relocation of temples for development are available in the National Archives of Singapore.¹⁶ Where such materials remain classified, however, researchers can turn to oral history to obtain a window into these multi-faceted issues.¹⁷ Nevertheless, they may remain unwilling to fully interrogate these issues as religion remains a politically sensitive subject in the eyes of the state, not to be publicly discussed.¹⁸ As a result, historians

14 Dharma workers refer to Buddhist employees working either full- or part-time in a Buddhist organization.

15 The 'Triple Gems' refer to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.

16 In fact, two of the religious leaders whom I interviewed requested for a copy of my completed work.

17 For instance, I decided to use the term 'religious diplomat' instead of 'political monk' to describe Venerable Hong Choon's role in Singapore-China relations, as the latter is deemed more derogative to the late religious leader, since monks are not supposed to be involved in politics.

18 The records of the Singapore Improvement Trust, the defacto colonial urban improvement and housing agency, contain some information on the clearance of temples and cemeteries; they are deposited at the National Archives of Singapore and are open access. The bulk of the clearances occurred, however, during the postcolonial Housing and Development Board

may decide to practice 'self-censorship' and avoid confronting controversial issues or unpleasant episodes in the religious past. These issues include resistance against the state acquisition of temple properties, the involvement of Singaporean politicians in the management of religious organizations, and rivalry and conflict between the faiths. If an 'insider' historian practices such self-censorship, sadly, they will knowingly end up playing the role of the keeper of Singapore history themselves.

Finally, a bigger methodological problem remains. While 'insiders' are well-placed to understand the archaeology of knowledge in a Buddhist organization and are given better access to information, they are unable to access all the sources. This is because the totality of the minutes and correspondences is far too voluminous to be fully included in the periodicals and commemorative publications. Furthermore, given the hagiographical nature of the sources and the probable refrain from mentioning sensitive material, it is highly likely that what is published may have been sanitized. It appears that, from a larger perspective, Buddhist libraries may not be completely different from government archives in having both published and unpublished sources. For this reason, 'insiders' should avoid taking published material at face value but need to strive to verify them against other available sources. This would allow us to obtain a fuller picture of Buddhist history in Singapore.

This essay has discussed some of the advantages and difficulties I encountered as an 'insider' in my research on Buddhism in Singapore history. An 'insider' may enjoy a number of advantages in obtaining records found in Buddhist libraries and gaining interview access to the makers of history. But they must also be mindful that gatekeeping and censorship issues also exist within the 'insider' position and of the need to avoid becoming a keeper of the very history they attempt to write. Religion, and Buddhism in particular, remains an under-explored area in the study of Singapore history. The lack of knowledge about the local religious scene, coupled with the sensitivity of some of the issues involved, has caused many researchers to shy away from Singapore's religious history. It is therefore my hope that more researchers – both 'insiders' and 'outsiders' – can devote more attention and resources to this silent past.

(HDB) period. The HDB records are still closed. See the introduction to this book and Loh Kah Seng's chapter on the 1961 Bukit Ho Swee fire. On the existence of internal security documents on an outbreak of religious violence in Singapore, see Khairudin Aljunied's chapter on the Maria Hertogh controversy.