

## **Buddhism in Singapore: A State of the Field Review**

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### **Introduction**

There are many different Buddhist traditions including Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana (or Tantrayana) coexisting and interacting with one another presently in Singapore. Buddhism, as practiced in the country, came from a number of countries such as China, Japan, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Thailand, and Tibet. The diverse origins of Buddhism in Singapore contribute to the existence of various sects ranging from the Pure Land (Jingtu 净土) and Zen (Chan 禅) of the Mahayana to the Gelug and Nyingma of the Vajrayana. In recent years, the transnationalization of Buddhist organizations have reached Singapore as shown by the setting up of overseas branches by the Buddha's Light International Association (Guoji Foguang Hui 国际佛光会), Dharma Drum Mountain (Fagu Shan 法鼓山) and Tzu Chi Foundation (Fojiao Ciji Cishan Shiye Jijinhui 佛教慈济慈善事业基金会).

According to the Singapore Census of Population of 2000, Buddhism is the majority and fastest growing religion in the country. The number of Singaporeans, who identified Buddhism as their religious affiliation, has significantly increased from 27 and 31.2 percent in 1980 and 1990, respectively, to 42.5 percent in 2000 (Singapore Department of Statistics 2000). The high growth rate of Buddhism in Singapore over the past two decades has appeared to parallel the budding scholarship on the religion in the global city-state.

This article reviews the existing scholarship on Buddhism in Singapore by leading academics and graduate students in the field from Singapore and abroad. By investigating the various ways in which Buddhist beliefs, practices, and organizations in Singapore have been studied, it suggests that more micro studies dealing with specific issues and smaller case studies remains to be done. The article concludes with some suggestions for future research in this field of study.

### **A Helicopter View: A Macro Approach to Buddhism in Singapore**

The dominant literature tends to approach the study of Buddhism in Singapore from a macro perspective. Scholars often examine the religion in an overarching and extensive manner rather than looking at specific issues or working on smaller in-depth case studies of Buddhist practices, organizations, personalities, and so on. These macro studies can be generally divided into four categories, namely, general accounts, sociological studies, historical studies, and country-specific studies.

The first general account on Buddhism in Singapore is probably Colin McDougall's *Buddhism in Malaya* (1956). Written prior to the independence of Singapore, McDougall offers a general survey of the different Buddhist activities in Malaysia and Singapore. He classifies the various activities according to the different countries from whence the Buddhist faith was imported. These include Chinese activities; Burmese activities; Singhalese activities; and Thai activities (McDougall 1956: 33-50).

Another general account is Piyasilo's (Piya Tan) *Buddhist Culture: An Observation of the Buddhist Situation in Malaysia and Singapore and a Suggestion* (1988).<sup>1</sup> Piyasilo's status as a Buddhist monk allows him an insider's perspective, and he offers a comprehensive survey of the many aspects of Buddhism in Malaysia and Singapore, which includes the local context of Buddhism, Buddhist trends, education, commitment scale, and identity, among others.

Lo Yuet Keung (Lao Yueqiang 劳悦强), a professor of Chinese Studies at the National University of Singapore, presents a succinct overview of Chinese Buddhism in Singapore. His short essay on "Buddhism" in *Singapore: The Encyclopedia* (2006) effectively summarizes the development of the religion from its early arrival with the Chinese immigrants to the recent surge of interest among many young people. Lo (2006: 74-75) highlights several significant themes, including temple building, missionary monks, humanitarian services, education, and religious growth. These three general accounts present broad and sweeping surveys of Buddhism in Singapore and offer useful background information on the religion. As such, they are useful resources for readers without prior knowledge of Buddhism in the country.

Several sociological studies have attempted to analyze and theoreticize Buddhism in Singapore in a macro perspective. The first sociological study is Vivienne Wee's article entitled "Buddhism in Singapore" (1976). Wee ([1976] 1997: 130) argues that although about 50 percent of the Singaporean population declare themselves as "Buddhists," and use a common religious label, they "do not in fact share a unitary religion." Therefore, she suggests that "'Buddhist' systems as practiced in Singapore must be considered in the larger context of Chinese religious behavior" (Wee [1976] 1997: 131). According to her study, "Buddhism" in the Singapore context actually refers to Chinese syncretic religions consisting of Buddhist, Confucianist and Taoist elements. However, "Buddhism" as a religious phenomenon cannot be simply regarded as a Chinese syncretic religion. Instead, Wee ([1976] 1997: 132) contends that "Buddhism" in Singapore can only be understood in a "dialectic framework": on the one hand, "Buddhism" as Canonical Buddhism, and on the other hand, "Buddhism" as Chinese Religion. Wee's seminal article is an important contribution to the field and offers a useful model to understand the religion as practiced in the country.

The late Trevor Ling, a sociologist and renowned Buddhist scholar, contributed to the field with two articles: a paper entitled "Buddhism, Confucianism and the Secular State in Singapore" (1987) and a book chapter entitled "Singapore: Buddhist Development in a Secular State" (1993). His first paper examines the "religious composition of Singaporean society at the present time [1980s], the nature of secular state in Singapore, and the degree of success which has been achieved in avoiding religiously generated social conflict" (Ling 1987: 1). It offers useful background to the relationship between state and religious institutions in Singapore. In the book chapter which appeared in his 1993 edited book, *Buddhist Trends in Southeast Asia*,

Ling uses the Buddhist concept of “Triple Gems”<sup>2</sup> to analyze the development of Buddhism in Singapore. His study is divided into three broad themes, namely, the Buddha in Singapore, the Dhamma in Singapore, and the Sangha in Singapore (Ling 1993a: 154-183).

In recent years, the larger forces of modernization and social change in Singapore have forced Buddhism in the country to change and cater to the modern needs of the believers, the society, and the state. Kuah Khun Eng, a professor of anthropology at the University of Hong Kong, in her PhD dissertation entitled “Protestant Buddhism in Singapore: Religious Modernization from a Longer Perspective” (1988) first introduced the concept of “Reformist Buddhism” to examine the changes and development of Buddhism in the Singapore context. In her dissertation-based monograph *State, Society and Religious Engineering: Towards a Reformist Buddhism in Singapore* (2003), Kuah (2003: 1) examines the “the process of ‘Buddhicization’ of the Chinese religious syncretism and a movement towards Reformist Buddhism within the Chinese community where 65% of the Buddhists now regard themselves as Reformist Buddhists.” She argues that “the agents responsible for transforming the religious landscape of the Singapore Chinese include the Singapore state, the Buddhist Sangha and the Reformist Buddhist within the community” (Kuah 2003: 1). According to Kuah, Reformist Buddhism is a “scriptural religion as well as a social religion, and provides time and space for members to interact in a religiously and socially intimate way.” It is also a “compassionate religion” which cares for the “socially less-abled and less-privileged people both within Singapore and abroad” (Kuah 2003: 217). Kuah categorizes the main activities of the Reformist Buddhists into the religious and the secular domains. Within the religious sphere, there are six main types of activities, namely, “propagating Buddhist scriptural knowledge to the public; encouraging general participation; nurturing a group of committed Reformist Buddhists; performing missionary work and engaging in subtle proselytization; putting faith into real life practice and action; and legitimizing Vesak day as a public holiday.” In the secular domain, “Reformist Buddhists support numerous socio-cultural and welfare activities” (Kuah 2003: 233). Her extensive research, based on anthropological fieldwork method of participant-observation and ethnographical interviews, demonstrates how the religion over the years has very much shifted from “Chinese syncretism” in the early years to “ideological Buddhist scriptural purity” (Kuah 2003: 10). It offers a fresh perspective to the current scholarship and provides a useful conceptual framework to study Buddhism in contemporary Singapore.

A number of historical studies examine the history of Buddhism in Singapore over a broad time period. These extensive historical surveys present useful background on the changes, continuities, and contexts of the religion in the country. The first of these studies is Shi Chuanfa’s 释传发, *Xinjiapo Fojiao fazhan shi* 新加坡佛教发展史 (A History of the Development of Buddhism in Singapore) (1997). Shi, a Buddhist scholar-monk formerly from the Minnan Buddhist College (Minnan Foxue Yuan 闽南佛学院) in China, wrote the book during his visit to Singapore. He offers a broad chronological history beginning with a brief introduction to the local conditions of Singapore and Chinese migration to the island. Following that, he illustrates the arrival of Chinese Mahayana Buddhism and the subsequent development and evolution of the faith over the years. Shi’s emphasis on the history of Chinese Mahayana Buddhism in Singapore can probably be attributed to his personal background and Buddhist

training. Nevertheless, he devotes a very brief chapter to discuss the development of Theravada Buddhism in the country (Shi 1997: 140-147). Shi's pioneering study is an important contribution to the historical study of Buddhism in Singapore. It serves as a useful reference for future scholars to further develop on many of his findings.

Broad historical surveys seem to be a popular approach to studying Buddhism in Singapore. Building on Shi's earlier research, two studies—one in English and one in Chinese—appeared in 2005. The former is Y.D. Ong's English-language book *Buddhism in Singapore: A Short Narrative History* (2005), which is the first work in a Western language to examine the social and institutional history of Buddhism in Singapore. Tracing the religion's development on the island-state from the British colonial period through the present-day global environment, it seeks to provide a humble and "concise narrative history" of the struggles and difficulties, personalities and activities of the various Buddhist organizations (Ong 2005: 12). Ong follows a chronological narrative to survey the development and the current state of the three main Buddhist traditions in Singapore, namely, Theravada, Chinese Mahayana, and Tibetan Vajrayana. It looks in particular at a number of significant changes and continuities that impacted the development of Buddhism in the country; they include the colonial administration, the Chinese immigration, the arrival of the different Buddhist traditions, the World War II and the Japanese occupation of the island, the post-war growth and awakening of the Buddhist community, the transformation in the post-independence period, and the rise of new generation institutions and expansion of welfare services in recent years.

Ong's Chinese equivalent is Hue Guan Thye's (Xu Yuantai 许原泰) MA thesis entitled, "Xinjiapo Fojiao: Chuanbo yan'ge yu moshi" 新加坡佛教: 传播沿革与模式 (Buddhism in Singapore: Propagation, Evolution, and Practice) (2005). His thesis highlights the pattern of Buddhist propagation and evolution in colonial and independent Singapore, and analyzes the spread of Buddhist culture in the country (Hue 2005: 12). Similar to Ong's study, Hue's study also offers a long historical sweep across two centuries, covering all the three major Buddhist traditions in Singapore. His insightful analysis, especially in Chapter Five, sheds some light on the structure and recent development of Buddhism in Singapore, and offers a better understanding to the advantages and challenges over the past two to three decades (Hue 2005: 165-183). Both studies complement one another, and offer a panoramic historical overview of the arrival and subsequent development of Buddhism in the country.

Liu Xianjue's 刘先觉 and Lee Coo's (Li Gu 李谷) recent co-authored book, *Xinjiapo Fojiao jianzhu yishu* 新加坡佛教建筑艺术 (Buddhist Architecture in Singapore) (2007), aims to "recapture and re-discover the roots of Buddhist architecture in Singapore" (Liu and Lee 2007: viii). The book is an ambitious attempt to survey the broad history and recent development of Buddhist architecture in the country. Using data collected from more than 260 Buddhist temples and 50 major buildings, Liu and Lee (2007) discuss the historical development of Buddhist architecture in Singapore, and explain the factors that influenced the architectural styles across the different time periods. The authors conclude that the traditional architectural designs have "gradually fused with the demands of a modern and practical community that is eager to cater to the needs to its citizenry caught in the throes of a knowledge based economy." This "fusion" of Buddhist architecture in Singapore caters to the monastic

needs of the monks, nuns and lay devotees as well as to the “social and cultural needs of the community” (Liu and Lee 2007: 215).

Country-specific studies, the last category of macro studies, are slightly more specific compared to the three earlier groups discussed above. Trevor Ling (1993b: 1-5) suggests that a “country-specific” study of Buddhism is useful to examine the plurality of “Buddhisms” and the geographical variations between “cultural regions.” As such, these studies survey and analyze a particular Buddhist tradition in Singapore according to its place of origin. Two such studies examine Thai Buddhism in Singapore, and one each on Chinese and Tibetan Buddhism. The earliest research done on Thai Buddhism is Wong Yuen Lee’s honors thesis entitled “Thai Buddhism in Singapore” (1986) supervised by the late Trevor Ling. Wong uses the concept of “Thai Buddhist” in Singapore to demonstrate the “various aspects of Thai Buddhism and rituals among the ‘Thai Buddhists’ in Singapore, and to investigate the role of Thai Buddhism in relation to the society” (Wong 1986: 2). The thesis is divided into five brief sections: the historical background of Thai Buddhism in Singapore; the daily activities and festivals in the temple; the role of monks in strengthening the believers’ faith in Thai Buddhism; the laity’s attitude towards the religion and monks; and an overall assessment of the role of the monks and their interactions with the laity. This general study on Thai Buddhism in the country is indeed “informative to specialists as well as the general readers” (Wong 1986: 4).

Twenty years later, Pattana Kitiarsa, an anthropologist and specialist on Thai popular Buddhism, revisited the topic of Thai Buddhism in Singapore. In his recent paper “Buddha-izing Singapore: Religious Mobilities and Thai Migrant Monks in Singapore” (2007), Kitiarsa aims to “re-position the relationship between religion and transnational migration.” He explores the origins and growth of Thai Buddhism in Singapore in the “age of migration,” and focuses on the Thai monk’s mobility and agency in their missionary effort to spread the Thai tradition of Buddhism abroad. Kitiarsa (2007) offers a four-fold argument: first, the studies of Thai migrant monks and transnational networks of Thai Buddhism offer themselves as the form and content for the focal concept of religious migration in Southeast Asia; second, the case study of Thai migrant monks and the extensive networks in both Singapore and Thailand suggest that “an analysis of religious and ethnic changes in religious communities cannot be confined to the receiving community”; third, Thai Buddhism as a religious capital being transported and transplanted into Singapore, a growing affluent religious market, reflects some deep characteristics of the country as a “young, immigrant state”; and finally, Thai Buddhism in Singapore has emerged as an important example of how a “religious transnational space is developed and maintained within a complex, yet highly regulated immigrant society.”

Seck Kwang Phing (Shi Guangpin 释广品), a Buddhist educator and abbot of the Leong San See Temple (Longshan Si 龙山寺) in Singapore, offers a broad and general survey of Chinese Buddhism in Singapore. His essay “Hanchuan Fojiao zai Xinjiapo chuanyang de yanhua ji fazhan” 汉传佛教在新加坡传扬的演化暨发展 (The transformation and development of the propagation of Chinese Buddhism in Singapore) (2004), which is included in the conference volume *Chuantong yu xiandaihua: Hanchuan fojiao xiandai quanshi* 传统与现代化: 汉传佛教现代诠释 (Tradition and Modernity: A Contemporary Interpretation of Chinese Buddhism), is an ambitious attempt to survey the history of Chinese Buddhism in

Singapore over four broad historical periods. Seck (2004: 54) suggests that the first period, which stretches from the second to the nineteenth century, marks the development of Chinese Buddhism prior to its arrival in Singapore. The second period between the early nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century is regarded as the stage of emergence and growth of Chinese Buddhism in Singapore. The third period which spans from the mid-twentieth to the twenty-first century, symbolizes the consolidation and maturity of Chinese Buddhism in the country when Chinese Buddhist leaders and organizations have firmly established themselves in the Singapore society. The final period covering the twenty-first century is seen as the age of globalization of Chinese Buddhism. He concludes that the larger forces of social transformation are likely to have a major impact on the development of Chinese Buddhism in Singapore (Seck 2004: 54). Seck's study, which spans almost twenty centuries, illustrates the long-term historical change and continuity of Chinese Buddhism. It shows that the religion is far from static and has constantly adapted to changes in the broader socio-political context. More specific attention can be paid to this extensive area.

The last of these country-specific studies is Chen Guan Liang Gabriel's honors thesis "Propagating the Bodhi Tree: Tibetan Buddhism in Singapore" (2007). Chen argues that "the historical geography of Tibetan Buddhism in Singapore can be conceptualized and studied as the diffusion of religious innovation" (2007: 3). He applies the concept of "religious innovation diffusion" to investigate the origin and spread of Tibetan Buddhism in Singapore (Chen 2007: 7-12). Locations, forms, patterns, and stages are used to explain the diffusion process of Tibetan Buddhism over time and space, while the six "C" factors—content, contexts, carriers, catalysts, constraints, and characteristics of adoption—are subsumed under the dynamics of religious innovation diffusion process, and explain why diffusion took place (Chen 2007: 8). Using both quantitative and qualitative data, Chen's study sheds much light on the origins and spread of Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism, a relatively recent religious phenomenon in Singapore.

The majority of the existing literature on Buddhism in Singapore adopts a macro perspective. This pool of literature is important in two ways. On the one hand, extensive studies by scholars such as Wee ([1976] 1997), Ling (1993a), and Kuah (2003) offer useful conceptual frameworks to the study of Buddhism in Singapore. These writings provide interested scholars and students with an overarching perspective and useful concepts to understand the religion in the country through the lens of critical scholarship. On the other hand, the historical and country-specific studies in particular, lend important contextual background to the state of Buddhism in Singapore (Wong 1986; Shi 1997; Seck 2004; Hue 2005; Ong 2005; Chen 2007; Kitiarsa 2007; Liu and Lee 2007). Hence, they present valuable information on the origins, spread, transformation, and consolidation of the various Buddhist traditions in the Singapore society.

While studies with a broad perspective provide useful conceptual frameworks and contextual backgrounds to the study of Buddhism in Singapore, they are often selective in their focus and analysis of the various issues. As Ong (2005: 12) suggests, "each Buddhist center or temple has its own unique story to tell—its struggles, and difficulties, its personalities and programme of activities." Buddhism in Singapore is far too multi-faceted and complex to be defined and studied from a broad, general perspective. Therefore, a more specific and focused approach, building on the theories and findings of previous research, is needed to draw out more insights into the religion in Singapore.

## From Macro to Micro: Specific Issues and Case Studies

A small handful of micro studies have emerged in recent years. This growing pool of literature can be classified according to the specific approach they take and the issues they attempt to explore. One of the micro approaches is to examine the key Buddhist personalities in Singapore. Yang Shuya's 杨淑雅 MA thesis "Yan Pei Fashi de hongfa shiji" 演培法师的弘法事迹 (The Missionary Activities of Venerable Yan Pei) (2000) is an academic biography of the late Venerable Yen Pei (Yan Pei 演培, 1917-1996), an eminent monk in Singapore. Her study outlines the three stages of the Venerable's life in three different places: China, Taiwan (Hong Kong), and Singapore (Yang 2000: 1-2). Yang examines the missionary activities of Venerable Yen Pei within the broader socio-political context to understand his life and times. She argues that the Venerable is a "modern monk who keeps up to date" in the propagation of Buddhist teachings (Yang 2000: 2). The thesis offers valuable insights to the different roles adopted by Venerable Yen Pei in his pursuit of "this worldly Buddhism" during each of the three phases in his life. Yang's study shows an important departure from the macro approach. Instead of offering a broad survey of the various key Buddhist personalities in Singapore, the study focuses on the religious career of a single monk. For this reason, it allows a sharper analysis on the role of Buddhist leadership in the spread and development of the faith in the country.

Another study that deals with the issue of Buddhist leadership and key personalities is Jack Meng Tat Chia's article "Buddhism in Singapore-China Relations: Venerable Hong Choon and his Visits, 1982-1990" (2008). Chia's research on Venerable Hong Choon (Hong Chuan 宏船, 1907-1990) is not a biography; it seeks to position the Venerable's visits to China from 1982 to 1990 within the broader context of Singapore-China relations since the reopening of China in the late 1970s. Chia (2008: 865) contends that "Buddhism plays a role in fostering Singapore-China relations in the period prior to the official establishment of diplomatic ties between the two countries in 1990." As such, in the absence of formal diplomatic channels between Singapore and China, Venerable Hong Choon's visits could thus be seen as "a form of informal diplomacy with the aim of confidence building" (Chia 2008: 865).

Hue Guan Thye adopts a gendered perspective in his recent study on lay Buddhist women in Singapore. His paper "Zhongguo nüxing yimin yi Xinjiapo Fojiao fazhan—Yi ershi shiji zhongye de san wei nüxing Fojiaotu weili" 中国女性移民与新加坡佛教发展——以 20 世纪中叶的 3 位在家女性佛教徒为例 (Chinese female migrants and the development of Buddhism in Singapore—A case study of three female lay Buddhists in the mid-twentieth century) examines the role of three female lay Buddhists—Bi Junhui 毕俊辉, Wang Nongshu 王弄书, and Gu Zhengmei 古正美—and their contributions to the propagation of the religion in the country. Drawing on commemorative publications and Buddhist periodicals, Hue (2008) commends Bi Junhui and Wang Nongshu for their contributions to the Maha Bodhi School (Puti Xuexiao 菩提学校), and Gu Zhengmei for her leadership in the preparation of a Buddhist Studies curriculum for the Religious Knowledge programme introduced by the Ministry of Education in 1984.<sup>3</sup> He argues that female Buddhists, whether ordained or lay, have a significant role to play in the development of Buddhism in Singapore. Hence, Hue (2008) hopes

that his research is able to revise the traditional male-dominated historical narrative on the religion.

An alternative way to study Buddhism in Singapore using a micro approach is to focus on the religious institutions and organizations. Lianshan Shuanglin Monastery 莲山双林寺, the oldest Buddhist monastery in Singapore, is a popular topic of research.<sup>4</sup> Ye Zhongling's 叶钟铃 article "Liu Jinbang chuangjian Shuanglin Chansi shimo" 刘金榜创建双林禅寺始末 (Liu Jinbang and the establishment of the Shuanglin Monastery) (1997) looks at Liu Jinbang, a wealthy Chinese businessman, and his contributions to the founding of the Lianshan Shuanglin Monastery. Ye (1997) discusses the motivations behind the setting up of the monastery, the fundraising process, and inscriptions dedicated to Liu Jinbang, as well as the monastery's architecture.

Zeng Ruluan's 曾汝銓 paper "Hanchuan Fojiao zai Xinjiapo suo miandui de tiaozhan: yi 'Lianshan Shuanglin Si' wei ge'an" 汉传佛教在新加坡所面对的挑战: 以'莲山双林寺'为个案 (The challenges faced by Chinese Buddhism in Singapore: A case study of "Lianshan Shuanglin Monastery") (2004) explores the challenges and major issues faced by Buddhist monasteries in Singapore. Drawing from her own experience as the Secretary of the Lianshan Shuanglin Monastery Restoration Committee (Lianshan Shuanlin Si Fuyuan Weiyuanhui 莲山双林寺复原委员会), Zeng illustrates how the various Singapore legislations—Societies Act, Charities Act, Property Act, Goods and Services Tax Act, and Preservation of Monuments Act—affect and influence the monastery. For this reason, she argues that Singaporean Buddhists should express concern and play a more pro-active role in influencing the legislative process (Zeng 2004: 215-216). In addition, Zeng (2004: 217-219) offers several suggestions on how Chinese Buddhist monasteries in general and Lianshan Shuanglin Monastery in particular can survive and prosper in the English-speaking globalized environment of the twenty-first century.

Chan Chow Wah, a former Lee Kong Chian Research Fellow at the Singapore National Library Board, presented a paper entitled "Storm in Shuang Lin: Ethnography of Social Actors in the Political Climate of 1939-1942" in December 2006 at the inaugural Lee Kong Chian Research Fellowship Series. The extract of his paper, appeared as "Storm in Shuang Lin" (2007), offers a summary of his argument and major findings. Chan (2007: 4) demonstrates how the Lianshan Shuanglin Monastery was once used as a training ground for anti-Japanese volunteers who provided logistics support via the Burma Road during the Sino-Japanese War in the 1930s. His short article reveals that the monastery "had great impact on the lives of two men, Mr Wu Hui Min, a volunteer for the war effort, and Venerable Pu Liang, the Abbot of the monastery" (Chan 2007: 4). Chan (2007: 8) concludes that the stories of Wu Hui Min and Venerable Pu Liang would allow the later generations to understand how an event influenced and impacted individuals, and how their actions "shaped the course of the Sino-Japanese War."

Tan Shiling Cheryl's MA thesis "Religious Alternation, Spiritual Humanism: Tzu Chi Foundation in Singapore" (2008) examines how the Tzu Chi Foundation, a transnational Taiwanese Buddhist philanthropic organization, is able to attract "multi-religious membership," and its implications for religious conversion, affiliation and Buddhism in the Singapore context. The research is based on her extensive fieldwork conducted in Singapore and Taiwan from

February 2006 to May 2008. Tan (2008: 29) combines “an agency and structural approach” and discusses the notions of “multi-religiosity, religious customization, dual-sphere framework, religious alternation, and spiritual humanism.” She argues that these factors account for Tzu Chi Foundation’s popularity and success in Singapore. Tan’s study is a significant contribution to the study of Buddhism and “new religions movements” in Singapore, and is a pioneering research on transnational Buddhist organizations in the local context.

Kuah Khun Eng’s notion of “Reformist Buddhism” has become a useful framework for examining the specific issues related to the recent development of Buddhism in Singapore. Jack Meng Tat Chia has applied this concept in two recent articles. In the co-authored article “Rebranding the Buddhist Faith: Reformist Buddhism and Piety in Contemporary Singapore,” Chia and Chee (2008: 1) study the rise of Reformist Buddhism in Singapore and its quest to rebrand the faith “through advocating Buddhist ideology as the key emphasis by its practitioners rather than ritual.” Drawing on interviews conducted with fifty lay Buddhists, they contend that Reformist Buddhists, instead of “habitually” enacting religious rituals, are “more concerned with the active reflexive engagement of how the hitherto established dramatization of piety and acquiescence to the elemental tenets of the religion is institutionalized” (Chia and Chee 2008: 1). Their research seeks to uncover the principles and practices of Reformist Buddhism and the general opinions on these believers in contemporary Singapore. They provocatively conclude that a heightened awareness of the influence of Reformist Buddhism might potentially polarize the practice of Buddhism in Singapore into two camps—Traditional and Reformist—thus leading to latent intra-faith tensions within the local Buddhist community (Chia and Chee 2008).

Chia’s (2009) “Teaching Dharma, Grooming Sangha: The Buddhist College of Singapore” examines the Buddhist College of Singapore within the broader context of Reformist Buddhism in the country. He argues that Reformist Buddhism has “legitimized the process of rationalization and bureaucratization of Buddhist institutions in the country” (Chia 2009: 123). By scrutinizing the origins, structure, challenges, and future plans of the Buddhist College of Singapore within this larger religious trend, Chia (2009) demonstrates that the college is very much a product of the Reformist Buddhist movement. Organizationally, the Buddhist College of Singapore is modelled after modern colleges and universities. Educationally, it has taken on a highly complex, rational and systematic academic structure, and has a team of highly educated academic staff. As such, Chia (2009: 134-136) concludes that the college is an excellent case study to elucidate the rise of Reformist Buddhism in Singapore.

From this review, it is clear that macro studies have dominated the existing scholarship and appear to be a more popular approach to study Buddhism in Singapore. Nevertheless, there are a growing number of micro studies dealing with specific issues and smaller case studies in the recent years. This burgeoning pool of literature has covered a broad array of topics. They include Buddhist leadership and personalities (Yang 2000; Chia 2008; Hue 2008), institutions and organizations (Ye 1997; Zeng 2004; Chan 2007; Tan 2008), as well as the recent trend towards Reformist Buddhism (Chia and Chee 2008; Chia 2009). The micro approach adopted in these recent studies has offered valuable in-depth insights of the religion and highlighted its multifacetedness. Nevertheless, the research is merely a tip of the iceberg and more needs to be done.

## **Conclusion: Ongoing Research and Future Directions**

The final section discusses some of the ongoing research and offers some future directions to the study of the Buddhist faith in the global city-state. To the knowledge of the author, presently, there are three major ongoing research projects pertaining to Buddhism in Singapore. The largest scale and most noteworthy one is Kuah Khun Eng's comparative study on Buddhist philanthropy in Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan. In addition, two graduate students are currently writing their dissertation on a topic related to the Buddhist faith in the country. Chia Chee Kain Arthur, a PhD candidate in the Southeast Asian Studies Programme at the National University of Singapore, is researching on the cult of Guan Yin 观音 (Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva) in the Southeast Asian context. Another graduate student is Hue Guan Thye, a PhD candidate at the Center for Chinese Language and Culture, Nanyang Technological University. He seeks to build on his prior research and is working on a comparative study of Buddhism and Taoism in Singapore. As their works are still in progress, this article is unable to review them.

Future research in the study of Buddhism in Singapore can be pursued in several directions, and particularly from a micro perspective. First, academic biographies of key Buddhist personalities are very much lacking in the existing literature. Many of the available biographies of the Buddhist leaders, often available for free distribution at the various Buddhist organizations, are highly hagiographic and do not position the individual within the broader socio-political context. Therefore, more contributions are needed to shed more light on the roles of the major Buddhist leaders in the propagation and development of the faith in the country.

Second, transnational Buddhist organizations as well as controversial Buddhist groups are potential topics for future research. On one hand, mega transnational Buddhist organizations including the Buddha's Light International Association, Dharma Drum Mountain, and Tzu Chi Foundation from Taiwan have set up their overseas branches in Singapore. These organizations are in fact highly successful in winning converts and increasing membership. On the other hand, controversial Buddhist organizations such as the Gelugpa Buddhist Association, a Tibetan Buddhist center which is rejected by the Dalai Lama (The Buddha Channel 2006) and the Panna Youth Center, a highly "Christianized" Buddhist group, are potential areas of academic research. For this reason, more studies on transnational and controversial Buddhist groups can be done to examine their religious beliefs and practices, organizational structure, conversion strategies, and so on.

Finally, scholars interested in the study of Buddhism in Singapore should not shy away from exploring issues relating to conflicts and controversies within the Buddhist community. Recent controversies with regard to the authenticity of the Buddha tooth relics from the Buddha Tooth Relic Temple (The Straits Times 2007a, 2007b) and the alleged financial irregularities of the Ren Ci Hospital and Medicare Center (The Straits Times 2007c, 2007d, 2007e, 2007f, 2007g) have brought about many discussions and debates in the local media and general public. An academic perspective would likely add greater breadth and depth, and offer a more critical angle to such public discourses.

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## Notes

1. Piyasilo was then an ordained Theravada Buddhist monk. He has returned to laity and is currently known as Piya Tan Beng Sin.
2. The Triple Gems refers to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.
3. The Religious Knowledge programme was discontinued in 1989. See Kuah (2003: 189-214).
4. The Lianshan Shuanglin Monastery was founded in 1898. It was gazetted as a national monument in 1980.

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