



Tan Lee Ooi

# Buddhist Revitalization and Chinese Religions in Malaysia

Amsterdam  
University  
Press



Amsterdam  
University  
Press

Buddhist Revitalization and  
Chinese Religions in Malaysia



Amsterdam  
University  
Press

# Religion and Society in Asia

This series contributes cutting-edge and cross-disciplinary academic research on various forms and levels of engagement between religion and society that have developed in the regions of South Asia, East Asia, and South East Asia, in the modern period, that is, from the early 19th century until the present.

The publications in this series should reflect studies of both religion in society and society in religion. This opens up a discursive horizon for a wide range of themes and phenomena: the politics of local, national and transnational religion; tension between private conviction and the institutional structures of religion; economical dimensions of religion as well as religious motives in business endeavours; issues of religion, law and legality; gender relations in religious thought and practice; representation of religion in popular culture, including the mediatisation of religion; the spatialisation and temporalisation of religion; religion, secularity, and secularism; colonial and post-colonial construction of religious identities; the politics of ritual; the sociological study of religion and the arts. Engaging these themes will involve explorations of the concepts of modernity and modernisation as well as analyses of how local traditions have been reshaped on the basis of both rejecting and accepting Western religious, philosophical, and political ideas.

## *Series Editors*

Martin Ramstedt, Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle  
Stefania Travagnin, University of Groningen



Amsterdam  
University  
Press

# Buddhist Revitalization and Chinese Religions in Malaysia

*Tan Lee Ooi*

Amsterdam University Press



Amsterdam  
University  
Press

Cover illustration: Goddess of Mercy Temple, Penang, 2018

Photographer: Emily Lim Zhi Sing

Cover design: Coördesign, Leiden

Typesetting: Crius Group, Hulshout

ISBN 978 94 6372 643 6

e-ISBN 978 90 4855 183 5 (pdf)

DOI 10.5117/9789463726436

NUR 740

© Tan Lee Ooi / Amsterdam University Press B.V., Amsterdam 2020

All rights reserved. Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this book may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the written permission of both the copyright owner and the author of the book.

# Table of Contents

Abbreviations	9
List of Chinese Characters	11
Orthography	15
<b>1 Introduction</b>	<b>17</b>
The Origins of Buddhist Revitalization	21
Colonization and Modern Religion	22
Buddhist Modernism and Chinese Religions	24
The Flexible Chinese Attitude towards Religions	26
Buddhism in the Contestation of Religious Proselytizing in Malaysia	27
The Transnational Reconnection of Mahayana Buddhism	28
Fieldwork	31
Chapter Overviews	32
<b>2 A Brief History of Buddhist Transnational Connections</b>	<b>35</b>
Theravada Buddhist Communities in Malaya	36
Thai Buddhist Temples and Their Influence on Chinese Com- munities	36
Burmese Temples and Their Influence on Chinese Communities	38
Sinhalese Temples and Their Influence on Chinese Communities	38
Early Mahayana Buddhism in Malaya	40
Kek Lok Si (Temple of Paradise)	41
The Penang Buddhist Association (PBA)	43
Pan-Asian Phenomena of Buddhist Modernism	45
Reformed Buddhism: Thai Lineage	46
Buddhist Modernism: Sinhalese Lineage	50
<i>Ren Sheng Fo Jiao</i> (Buddhism for Human Life): Mahayana Lineage	57
Summary	64
<b>3 Reforming Chinese Buddhism through the Zheng Xin (Right Faith) Movement</b>	<b>65</b>
The Discourse of Zheng Xin	66
Zheng Xin in the Malaysian Chinese Buddhist Context	69



Amsterdam  
University  
Press

Defending Zheng Xin Buddhism in Malaysia	70
Conflict with the Unity Sect ( <i>Yi Guan Dao</i> )	71
Buddhicizing the Hungry Ghost Festival	73
The Role of the MBA	78
Formalization of Taking Refuge Ceremony	78
The Malaysian Buddhist Institute	81
Malaysian Buddhist Examination Syndicate (MBES)	82
The Buddhist Youth Movement and Zheng Xin Buddhism	83
Venerable Sumangalo: The Father of the Malaysian Buddhist Youth Movement	84
The YBAM and Zheng Xin Buddhism	86
The YBAM Network's Promotion of Zheng Xin Buddhism	89
Summary	92
<b>4 New Transnational Connections with Taiwan</b>	<b>95</b>
Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Merits Society	96
A Brief History of Tzu Chi in Taiwan	96
A Brief History of the Buddhist Tzu Chi Merits Society Malaysia	98
Tzu Chi and Malaysian Buddhism	99
Tzu Chi as a Humanitarian Corporation	99
Mobilization of Malaysian Chinese Buddhists in Volunteer Work	100
Charity Projects of Tzu Chi Malaysia	101
Recycling Project	104
Mass Participation	105
Shifting of Buddhist Cosmologies	106
Reinventing the Tradition of Self-Cultivation Practices	108
Tzu Chi's Pragmatism	109
Laity Oriented	110
Fo Guang Shan	111
A Brief History of Fo Guang Shan in Taiwan	111
A Brief History of Fo Guang Shan Malaysia	112
Fo Guang Shan and Malaysian Buddhism	113
Fo Guang Shan and the Chinese Mass Media in Malaysia	113
Fo Guang Shan's Vision of a Buddhist Popular Culture	115
Buddhist Education	116
Differences between Tzu Chi and Fo Guang Shan	118
Similarity of the Esthetics of Religious Space and Material	118
Esthetics of Fo Guang Shan Malaysia's Temple	118
Function and Use of <i>Jing Si</i> Books & Cafe	119
Summary	121



<b>5</b>	<b>Remaking Chinese Buddhists</b>	123
	Chinese Communities and Buddhism in Malaysia	123
	The Emergence of Second-Generation Religious Leaders: A Case of Venerable Chi Chern	125
	Chi Chern and Yinshun	126
	Chi Chern and Meditation Camps	127
	Chi Chern's Publications	129
	The Puzhao Buddhist Vihara Controversy	130
	Cultural Reformation in Chinese Communities	134
	Chi Chern's Vision for the Malaysian Chinese Communities and Buddhism	136
	Political Engagement of the Buddhist Community	137
	The Experience of Fo Guang Shan's Celebration: Chinese New Year Lantern and Floral Festival	138
	Tzu Chi's Chinese New Year Relief	140
	The Declining Role of Chinese Associations	141
	Transethnic Solidarities	142
	Exit Option Revisited	146
	Summary	148
<b>6</b>	<b>Counterforces of Buddhist Revitalization</b>	151
	Dreams about My Father	151
	Case 2: A Battle between Traditional Chinese Religion and Buddhism at Kampung Baru Jenjarom	154
	Case 3: The Urban Miracle of the Talking Buddha Statues	157
	Multiple Counterforces to Buddhist Revitalization	159
	Counterforces within Chinese Buddhism	162
	The Relaxation of Political Correctness in Zheng Xin Buddhism	163
	The Politics of Buddhist Unity	165
	Wesak Day Celebrations	166
	Statistical Legitimacy	169
	Summary	173
<b>7</b>	<b>Conclusion</b>	175
	Future Research	177
	<b>Appendices</b>	179
	Appendix 1: Song of Triple Gem	179
	Appendix 2: YBAM's Affiliate Members	180





**Bibliography** 189

**Index** 203

**List of Tables**

Table 4.1 Differences between Tzu Chi and Fo Guang Shan 118

Table 6.1 The distribution of religion among ethnic Chinese in  
Peninsular Malaysia, 1970 and 1980 (by percentage) 170

Table 6.2 The distribution of religion among ethnic Chinese in  
Malaysia, 1991 and 2000 (by percentage) 171

# Abbreviations

BMS	Buddhist Missionary Society
DZI	Dong Zen Institute
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FMBYF	Federation of Malaya Buddhist Youth Fellowships
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
KLCC	Kuala Lumpur City Centre
KLIA	Kuala Lumpur International Airport
MACC	Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission
MBA	Malaysian Buddhist Association
MBI	Malaysian Buddhist Institute
MBCC	Malaysian Buddhist Consultative Council
MBYF	Malayan Buddhist Youth Fellowship
MCA	Malaysian Chinese Association
MCCBCHST	Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism, and Taoism
MNMC	Malaysian Nibbana Meditation Center
NBYS	National Buddhist Youth Seminar
NYCC	National Youth Consultative Council
PAS	Parti Islam SeMalaysia
UMNO	United Malays National Organisation
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
YBAM	Young Buddhist Association of Malaysia





Amsterdam  
University  
Press

## List of Chinese Characters

Ang Choo Hong	洪祖丰
<i>ang pow</i>	红包
Boew Lean	妙莲
<i>bu gan jing chan</i>	不赶经忏
<i>bu hua yuan</i>	不化缘
<i>bu zuo fa hui</i>	不做法会
Caodong	曹洞
<i>Cheng Fo Zhi Dao</i>	成佛之道
Cheng Yen	证严
Chi Chern	继程
<i>Chu Ji Jing Xiu Ying</i>	初级静修营
Chuk Mor	竺摩
<i>Da ai tai</i>	大爱台
<i>Da Ren Gong</i>	大人公
<i>Dong Jiao Zong</i>	董教总
<i>duan qi chu jia</i>	短期出家
<i>fa du shi</i>	发毒誓
<i>Fa Gu Shan</i>	法鼓山
<i>fa hui</i>	法会
<i>fa ming</i>	法名
<i>Fo Fa Gai Lun</i>	佛法概论
<i>Fo Guang Shan</i>	佛光山
<i>Fo Jiao Ci Ji Gong De Hui</i>	佛教慈济功德会
<i>Fo qing zhi you</i>	佛青之友
<i>fo tang</i>	佛堂
<i>fo xue ban</i>	佛学班
<i>Guanyin Pusa</i>	观音菩萨
<i>gui yi san bao</i>	皈依三宝
<i>Hai Cao Yin</i>	海潮音
<i>Han Zang Jiao Li Yuan</i>	汉藏教理院
<i>he qi zu</i>	和气组
Hsing Yun	星云
<i>hu ai zu</i>	互爱组
<i>huat ah</i>	发啊
Hui Jixiang	慧吉祥
<i>Jia Xing Qi</i>	加行七
<i>jian yu fa shi</i>	监狱法师

<i>Ji Jing Yuan Lin</i>	寂静园林
<i>Jing Jin Qi</i>	精进七
<i>Jing Qi</i>	静七
<i>Jing Si Tang</i>	静思堂
<i>Jing Si Yu</i>	静思语
<i>Jing Tu Zong</i>	净土宗
<i>Kai Zhao</i>	开照
<i>la ji bian huang jin, huang jin bian ai xin</i>	垃圾变黄金, 黄金变爱心
<i>Liang Qi Chao</i>	梁启超
<i>Lingji</i>	临济
<i>Liu Miao Men Jiang Ji</i>	六妙门讲记
<i>Ma Hua Wen Hua</i>	马华文化
<i>Miao zhu</i>	庙祝
<i>Miao Yun Ji</i>	妙云集
<i>Mi Jiao</i>	密教
<i>Min Nan Fo Xue Yuan</i>	闽南佛学院
<i>Mi Nan Yu</i>	闽南语
<i>Min Su Fo Jiao</i>	民俗佛教
<i>mi xin</i>	迷信
<i>Nan Xiang Zheng Ce</i>	南向政策
<i>Nanyang</i>	南洋
<i>nian fo</i>	念佛
<i>Poon Teong</i>	本忠
<i>Pu Zhao Si</i>	普照寺
<i>Ren Jian Fo Jiao</i>	人间佛教
<i>Ren Jian Yin Yuan</i>	人间音缘
<i>Ren Sheng Fo Jiao</i>	人生佛教
<i>San Bao Ge</i>	三宝歌
<i>san gui wu jie</i>	三归五戒
<i>San Hui Jiang Tang</i>	三慧讲堂
<i>san qi</i>	三七
<i>She Fu Da Ren</i>	余府大人
<i>Sheng Yan</i>	圣严
<i>shi jie</i>	师姐
<i>shi xiong</i>	师兄
<i>Taixu</i>	太虚
<i>Tian Hou Gong</i>	天后宫
<i>towkay</i>	头家
<i>Tzu Chi Gong De Hui</i>	慈济功德会
<i>Tzu Chi Zong Men</i>	慈济宗门

<i>Wan Shou Gong</i>	万寿宫
<i>Wu Jin Deng</i>	无尽灯
<i>Wu ji Sheng Mu Zong Hui</i>	无极圣母总会
<i>xiang ban</i>	香板
<i>Xiao Zhi Guan Jiang Ji</i>	小止 观讲记
<i>xie jiao</i>	邪教
<i>xie zhu zu</i>	协助组
<i>Xi Fang Ji Le Shi Jie</i>	西方极乐世界
<i>Xin Ya</i>	新芽
<i>xiu xing</i>	修行
<i>Yi Guan Dao</i>	一贯道
<i>Yinguang</i>	印光
<i>Yinshun</i>	印顺
<i>Yu Lan Peng</i>	孟兰盆
<i>Yu Lan Sheng Hui</i>	孟兰盛会
<i>Zhen Fo Zong</i>	真佛宗
<i>Zheng Xin</i>	正信
<i>Zheng Xin Fo Jiao</i>	正信佛教
<i>zuo jiu dui le</i>	做就对了



Amsterdam  
University  
Press

# Orthography

This book uses the standard pinyin system for romanization of all Mandarin in the text, apart from places and personal names that have a well-known romanization. For example, 'Chi Chern' is used instead of 'Jicheng'. Malaysian Chinese follows the phonology of the dialect rather than the pinyin system. This also applies to name of monks and nuns in Taiwan, especially those of the older generation.



Amsterdam  
University  
Press





Amsterdam  
University  
Press

# 1 Introduction

## Abstract

This chapter lays out the origin of Buddhist revitalization in Malaysia. It has attempted to reflect on the influence of colonization on the construction of knowledge and understanding of well-defined religion (in specific Buddhism) that subsequently affected how Buddhists interact with traditional Chinese religion followers. The body of knowledge reviewed is in the fields of colonization and Buddhism, Buddhist modernism, Chinese religion studies, and Malaysian studies in terms of religious contestation with Islam and Christian.

**Keywords:** Buddhist modernism, Malaysian studies, colonization and Buddhism, Islam, Chinese religions

As a Chinese Buddhist born in Malaysia, I have been unconsciously immersed in the historical process of the making of modern Buddhism. There was a Chinese temple beside my house in Penang. The main deity was likely a deified imperial court officer. A mosque serenely resided along the main street approximately 50 meters from my house. At the end of the street was a Hindu temple decorated with colorful statues. Less than five minutes' walking distance from my house was a Buddhist association in a two-storey terrace.

The Chinese temple was a playground for all the kids who lived nearby. My friends and I respected the deities but sometimes we innocently stole some offering of candies and fruits donated by worshippers. The temple was busy throughout the year. Three major religious events were organized by the temple committee: the end of the first lunar month marked the spring celebration of a deity in the temple; the seventh lunar month was the Hungry Ghost Festival; and the eighth month honored *She Fu Da Ren*, the temple main deity's birthday. Neighbors gathered there to chat about national politics and local gossip. The traditional Chinese temple was thus deeply rooted in the community.

In terms of the level of religious intimacy and connection with various deities near my house, the Chinese temple ranked first, followed by the Hindu temple and finally, the mosque, which had a psychological distance demarcated by racial boundaries. I accompanied my mother several times to the Hindu temple. Once, I asked her why she prayed to a Hindu deity. She explained that the Chinese shared some deities with Hinduism. My mother represented a Chinese elder with a superbly tolerant attitude towards most religion. Her attitude, however, differed towards Islam because of the historical ethno-religious divide between Chinese and Muslims in Malaysia. I never ventured into the mosque. My only contact consisted of overhearing the complaints and prejudices from elders about the 'morning call' of *Azan* (morning prayer) and the heavy vehicular traffic caused by weekly Friday prayers.

The Buddhist association was in a typical residential terrace house. Architecturally, it did not conform to my perception of what a Chinese temple should look like. It also lacked the temple's traditional role and function. I did not attend its religious activities. Unexpectedly, the Buddhism promoted by the Buddhist Association significantly influenced my sister and me while we grew older. I soon realized that the association was a member of a national Buddhist youth association, the Young Buddhist Association of Malaysia, which has promoted the establishment of Buddhist doctrinal classes for Chinese communities to cultivate a new Buddhist generation that could better understand the Buddha's teachings.

My mother's flexible religious attitude was not a problem in family until my oldest sister and I received informal Buddhist education in a dharma class that was offered by a Buddhist society in our secondary school. 'Religious tension' between my mother and sister erupted on several occasions when my sister criticized some of our mother's religious and cultural practices as *mi xin* (superstitious). In later years, I echoed my sister's beliefs. My mother could not understand why the Chinese belief practices she inherited and maintained were being challenged by her children.

This book departs from my personal interest in the family's 'religious tension' and seeks to explore the context of a new way of understanding Buddhism amongst Malaysia's ethnic Chinese communities. It looks at the processes and outcomes of the Buddhist revitalization movement and its associated transnational connections. Lee and Ackerman (1997) associate Buddhist revitalization in Malaysia with the Chinese communities' ethno-cultural assertion starting in the 1970s. By contrast, Tan (2000 & 2006) problematizes Lee and Ackerman's hypothesis by arguing that Buddhist revitalization is not simply an ethno-cultural assertion. He encourages



exploring the internal dynamics of Chinese Buddhism as a possible contributing factor to the process of revitalization. Lee, Ackerman, and Tan have limited the scope of study of Buddhist revitalization in the Malaysian context. My research advances Lee and Ackerman's initial contribution and Tan's hypothesis by focusing on the revitalization's internal dynamics in their religious, political, and transnational dimensions. I reflect on the contradiction proposed by both views, ethnic model versus internal dynamic of Chinese Buddhism, and provide a broader view of Buddhist revitalization. In addition, my emphasis on both local and transnational factors to explain the process of Buddhist revitalization in Malaysia represents an original contribution to our understanding of the subject by departing from previous studies of Chinese Buddhism in Malaysia.

Buddhist revitalization in Malaysia is a religious modernization movement that has directly or indirectly connected with the reformism or revivalism of the larger Buddhist world. Lee and Ackerman (1997) and Tan (2000, 2006) use the term Buddhist revitalization to signify the aggregate phenomenon of the reassertion, rationalization, reorganization, and reinterpretation of Buddhism (Lee & Ackerman 1997: 57-58; Tan 2000: 299 & 2006: 303). In fact, they refer to similar practices of religious revivalism in other parts of the world under the rubric of increasing rationalization. I define Buddhist revitalization as a phenomenon of strengthening Buddhism as a more organized religion through exchanges of new ideas of Buddhism from historically and contemporarily connected regional ties. This religious revitalization transplants elements of modern religion to different parts of the Buddhist world from Buddhist majority countries. The revitalization is triggered by the social and political transformations and the related processes used to control and negotiate the discourses and resources to transform Buddhism to fit in the modern category of 'religion' as defined by the dominant discourse of modernity.

Most studies on religion in Malaysia have investigated Islam (Chandra Muzffar 1987; Farish Ahmad Noor 2004; Hussin Mutalib 1990 & 1993; Liow 2009; Nagata 1984; Peletz 2002). A few scholars have examined the revival of Hinduism, with a focus on the Indian community's social and political marginalization (Kent 2007; Lee 1989; Lee and Rajoo 1987; Loh 2003; Prorok 1998; Ramanathan 1996; Willford 2002, 2003, 2005 & 2006). Few studies examine revitalizations within Christian communities (Newton 1988) and Chinese folk religion (Ackerman 1993 & 2001; Chia 2012; Clark 2000; DeBernardi 2004 & 2006). Lee and Ackerman (1997), in their book *Sacred Tensions: Modernity and Religious Transformation in Malaysia*, devote a chapter to the Buddhist revitalization movement in Malaysia, but no volume



has been published to address the Chinese Buddhist revitalization within and beyond Malaysia.<sup>1</sup>

My book pursues four aspects of inquiries. The first aspect addresses the historical processes which have taken place since the 1950s. How has Buddhist revitalization developed in Malaysia since the 1950s? Who were the main actors and what did they do? The second aspect is related to the arrival of modern Taiwanese Buddhist groups in Malaysia. What strategies do Buddhist groups from Taiwan use to adapt to the Malaysian Chinese communities? How do Taiwanese Buddhist groups contribute to the process of revitalization? Thirdly, it investigates the revitalization in the broader Malaysian historical, cultural, and political contexts. Have the Malaysian Buddhist groups and Taiwanese groups shaped an alternative vision of a better society? Can the alternative vision of a better society offer the Chinese communities a way to transcend the racialized divide within the Malaysian nation-state? Lastly, I assess the implications of the Buddhist revitalization on the other Chinese religious practitioners. To what extent has the Buddhist revitalization impacted traditional Chinese religious practitioners? How have the other Chinese religious practitioners responded to the Buddhist revitalization?

My book focuses on the Chinese-educated Buddhist community.<sup>2</sup> Although my target group was primarily Chinese-educated Buddhists, important exchanges and interactions do occur between the English-educated and Chinese-educated groups. In addition, some Chinese Buddhists are bilingual and active in both groups. The term 'Chinese Mahayana Buddhism' or 'Chinese Buddhism' used in the book refers to the Buddhism practised by Chinese Buddhists in Malaysia rather than an academically defined tradition of Mahayana Buddhism. Hence, Chinese Mahayana Buddhism

1 There is another important group of studies about the cultural adaptation of Thai Buddhists in multiethnic societies. In Kelantan, Buddhism has been an ethnic boundary marker for the minority group. In an early investigation of the adaptation of the ethnic minority, the Thais, Golomb (1978: 14-17) observed that the 'community spirit among the Thai villagers was expressed most commonly in terms of identification with, and responsibility toward, their temple'. Another study by Mohamed Yusoff Ismail (1993) explored the relationship between Buddhist and Siamese ethnicity through the social organization of a Buddhist temple. The boundary of ethnicity is strengthened with the continuity of Theravada Buddhism, which has reconfirmed the role of religion in creating the ethnic boundary in a multi-religious society. However, the creation of the Thai Kelantanese ethnocultural identity is not fixed, but has been actively redrawn (Johnson 2012).

2 There has been a Chinese education movement since the 1950s which has successfully maintained a basic six years of Chinese primary school within the national education system. See Tan Liok Ee (1997) for the politics of Chinese education.



blends Mahayana Buddhism, traditional Chinese religion, and other traditional beliefs and practices found in Malaysia. ‘Who are Malaysian Chinese Buddhists?’ is a simple question with a complex answer. In fact, Chinese Buddhists practice Mahayana, Theravada, Tibetan, ancestor worship, and popular religions. Some Chinese adhere to one religion, but most Chinese believe in more than one religion concurrently. Given this wide spectrum of religious practice, I prioritize Chinese Buddhists who are more inclined to Chinese Mahayana Buddhism and those who mainly favor Chinese Mahayana Buddhism but remain attracted to Theravada Buddhism and traditional beliefs.

## The Origins of Buddhist Revitalization

Malaysia presents an example of Buddhist revitalization that exhibits distinct ambiguities of a second wave of Buddhist modernism. I consider the Buddhist modernization movement in the early 19th century as the first wave of Buddhist modernism. Buddhism experienced a first wave of religious reformation, which was started during colonial times from the 19<sup>th</sup> century that was triggered by religious competition with Christian missionaries. The first wave had used the standard notion of religion as defined in Abrahamic tradition. The reformation that happened in Buddhist majority countries spread to other Buddhist communities to form the second wave. The notion of what constituted the criteria of religion in the modern world has continued to influence the interpretation of Buddhism.

There is a trend to rediscovering the religious dimension of modernity. The term religious modernity has emerged in academe to capture the social reality of the existence of religion in the modern world (Goossaert & Palmer 2012: 303-306). This term is used loosely to describe the continued proliferation of religions in the contemporary world. However, there is a lack of conceptual formulation of religious modernity. Saler (2006) traces how ‘elites have enchanted themselves with the spell of disenchantment’ through what he termed as ‘historiography of modernity and enchantment’. Landy and Saler (2009) further edited a book on the various types of modern enchantments to rethink the ‘broken knowledge’ of modernity (Simon, 2009: 38-55). The ongoing redefinition of the modern enchantments has largely arisen from historicist and empiricist evidence. The ‘long-standing sociological view that modernity is characterized by “disenchantment”’ (Saler 2006: 692) has been critically challenged in non-Christian contexts (Asad 1993) by various traditions (Dubois 2005; Van der Veer 1994 & 2001;



Yang 2008). Moreover, religion itself as a category has been questioned by scholars who conduct research in non-Christian societies.<sup>3</sup>

### Colonization and Modern Religion

There are substantial discussions and reflections on the relationship of modernity and religion and the fundamental rethinking of the definition of religion. However, the conventional understanding of religion has continuously affected the transformation of many religious traditions that sought a modern outlook. This influence was first evident from colonization and the notion of modern religion by the elites in colonized societies who promoted the notion as the standard criterion for religious reformation. Colonization has imposed an understanding of religion according to the dominant view of modernity that perceives this modern world as compatible with scientism. There has been a trend to increasing notions of scientism and western rationality since the Enlightenment (Tambiah 1990). The idea of religion as scientific, organized, and institutionalized has been created and defined by the European tradition since the 17th century through colonial scholarship in various regions of Asia, and the idea has been implanted in the local communities in these regions without appropriate adjustments and reflections. This understanding gradually developed through colonial administration, Christian missionization, and colonial scholarship.<sup>4</sup>

Colonial administration categorized and defined the religious identity of their colonized subjects. Through censuses, a specific category to classify

3 For example, when Clifford Geertz encountered 'religion' in Indonesia, he 'faced not with an ant-hill assemblage of myths, spirits, and psychical practices to label and sort out, but with massive, deeply historical, and conceptually elaborated social and cultural formations, complete with officials, texts, economies, and ratified names. Complex societies, "civilizations" if you wish, some of them as large as subcontinents, with multicultural populations, bundles of languages, and spiritual connections across half the world, presented those of us who, trained on benge and Blessing Way, came to be engaged with them not just with a new object of study, but with a revised conception of how to study it – what it was we wanted to find out' (Geertz, 2005: 3). For Geertz, the conceptual equipment to understand religion 'was sparse and cursory [...] for describing competing traditions animating common situations, all seemed inadequate to the tumbling intricacy and intensity of things' (ibid. 3). See Geertz (1966).

4 There is a reflection on this dominant view on the influence on Buddhism by colonization. Hallisey (1995) suggests an 'intercultural mimesis' approach as a counterbalance to the one-sided negligence of Buddhist agencies in the interpretation of Buddhism. He notices that 'without the element of colonial domination or a sharp confrontation between Buddhists and Christian missionaries so visible', Thai Buddhism also transformed in the quite similar patterns as in Sri Lanka (Hallisey, 1995: 48). The local approach can help 'a better estimation of the extent to which Asian patterns left a mark on European representation of Buddhism' (ibid. 49).

beliefs and spiritual aspects called religion was created for the colonial administration. While completing the census, a particular religion that did not conform to that definition of religion was considered to belong to lower belief systems. In Malaya, colonial census enumerators were uncertain as to the category of Chinese religions seen all over the country. In 1921, the census enumerator reported that '[it] is difficult to say what is the religion of Chinese' (Nathan 1922: 102). Hence, aside from Christianity and Islam, there was a category of 'Other Religions' which grouped ancestor worship, Chinese Buddhism, and Chinese popular religions together.

Through learning from Christian missionaries, the Buddhist community developed ideas for religious modernization. The Buddhist majority population responded to the religious competition with Christian missionaries. Buddhist communities in a colony integrated practices of Christianity into their belief. Hence, the colony's Buddhist religious practices were not exclusively determined by Christian missionaries, but sometimes the Buddhist majority also integrated practices of the religion of colonial powers with their existing traditions.

Colonial scholarship directly influenced the redefinition and self-understanding of religion in the Buddhist world, including the archeological excavation of Bodh Gaya (Trevithick 2006), the compilation of Buddhist texts by scholars in Europe, the translations of Buddhist texts, and the writing of the histories of Buddhism and the Buddha (Almond 1988: 7-23). The British 'discovery' of Indian Buddhism resulted in the 'process of textualization', the emergence of historical Buddhism (Almond 1988), and the remodeling of Buddhist beliefs after the encounter of Christian missionaries with Buddhism (Harris 2006). The Buddha was demystified from an ancient god to a human figure (Almond 1988: 54-79). The British discovery established the so-called scientific analysis of Buddhism, which rejected and removed all the mystical aspects in Buddhism, and allowed for the religious reformation in Sri Lanka that was developed from interactions of the Theravada tradition among missionaries, colonial officers, and local clerics. Western scholarship established an interpretation of Buddhism by understanding the religion based on Abrahamic traditions (ibid. 139-141).

Buddhist modernism emerged from this imprint of colonization on religion. It was part of a transformation of a civilizational discourse that started in the last quarter of the 19th century 'beginning with the Christian-Buddhist debates in Sri Lanka' and the 'international links between Buddhists in Sri Lanka, Japan, and the West' (Duara 2001: 102). Similar debate and concern also took place in China, Japan, and Thailand. The transformation of Buddhism has adopted a modernity discourse, which prioritizes the elimination of 'superstitious' and mystical elements in order to cope with the modern world.





## Buddhist Modernism and Chinese Religions

The idea of a 'modern' interpretation of religion has impacted Buddhist communities in South, East, and Southeast Asia. Reform movements, particularly in Buddhist majority countries, emerged during the colonial period. Reformist Buddhists attempted to re-interpret Buddhism as a religion that was compatible with a new modern world. The legacy of reformism has continued to this day, influencing the subsequent generation of Buddhists who search for ways to practice theoretical Buddhism in the modern world.

Webb (2005: 213) summarizes 12 features of Buddhist modernism as outlined by Heinz Bechert from the experiences of Buddhist majority countries: '(1) a tendency towards relying on an independent and non-traditional understanding of the Buddha's teaching found in the early sources; (2) a process of "demythologization" of Buddhism; (3) the characterization of Buddhism as a "scientific religion"; (4) the emphasis on Buddhism as a "philosophy" rather than a creed or religion; (5) on its being a "philosophy of optimism" in contrast to Western criticism of "Buddhist pessimism"; (6) in terms of more practical issues, the emphasis on "activism" as forming an important feature of the Buddhist way of life; (7) in terms of social relations, valuing "social work"; (8) the claim by modernists that Buddhism "has always included a social philosophy" that is described as a "philosophy of equality"; (9) the demand that a Buddhist society should be democratic; (10) the emergence of Buddhist nationalism; (11) the tendency of modern Buddhists towards "rewriting history in accordance with their particular understanding of national history"; and (12) the revival and popularization of Buddhist meditation as an important development in Buddhist religious practices'.<sup>5</sup>

McMahan (2008: 6) deepens our understanding of Buddhist modernism. He argues that Buddhist modernism 'emerged out of an engagement with the dominant cultural and intellectual forces of modernity'.<sup>6</sup> Hence, Buddhist

5 Harris (2006: 168) asserts a similar view of the basic idea of Buddhist modernism. It is 'a search for the rational; a this worldly, energetic lay asceticism directed towards attaining nibbana in this life; an individualism that privileged personal spiritual attainment over the collective merit-making of a group; an undercutting of the traditional distinction between lay and ordained; intolerance of other faiths; rejection of ritual and "superstitious" practices linked with exorcism and "spirit religion" and the appropriation and privileging of doctrines' (Harris 2006: 168).

6 The chief elements of the intellectual forces of modernity include 'European Enlightenment, scientific rationalism, Romanticism and its successors, Protestantism, psychology, and modern social and political thought' (McMahan 2012: 160).



modernism rejects superstition and only believes in scientific findings (McMahan 2008: 4 & 5). However, it stresses the inner experience and maintains its religious position with a doubtful attitude towards positivistic way of thinking (*ibid.*). The notion of Buddhist modernism can be used to understand the development of Buddhism worldwide (*ibid.* 10). This development has established an international linkage beyond geographical and cultural boundaries (McMahan 2012: 160). Furthermore, in the age of globalization, the network 'creates conditions for rapid innovation' and multiplication of many new traditions (McMahan 2008: 259). However, alongside the trend of Buddhist modernism, the existing mutual relationship between Chinese Buddhism and Chinese religions will be affected.

Scholars in Sinology have had difficulty defining Chinese religions, notably if an understanding of religion by referring to experiences from the West is adopted. DeGroot (1912) refers to western ideas such as divinity, holiness, omnipotence, ritual, asceticism, and immortality to comprehend Chinese religions. By referring to the notion of religion, particularly Christianity, Weber (1922) describes the polytheism of Chinese religions as a 'magic garden'; Granet (1922) categorizes Chinese religions as peasant religion, a feudal religion, and the official religion; and Yang (1961) depicts Chinese religions as an unorganized religion.

Scholars of later generations have realized that Chinese religions are reflections of relationships with social reality. Wolf (1978) discovers that Chinese religions are intertwined with gods, ghosts, and ancestors; Weller (1987) elucidates the communal role of temples in Taiwan. Dean (2003) proposes a 'syncretic field of Chinese religion' that captures the fluid nature of Chinese religions. The 'field is a constantly self-differentiating field [...] marked by complex, hybrid forms of religious ritual and collective experimentation. The syncretic field has taken on very particular configurations and actualizations as it changes over time' (*ibid.* 353). Moreover, the ritual events of the field 'mould temporary autonomous zones [...] which can only exist in movement and transformation' (*ibid.* 358). His study in Southeast China discovered that the religious event 'is communal self-expression' that 'accumulated within the reservoir of local cultural memory' and is non-stable (*ibid.*).<sup>7</sup>

7 Another type of studies of Chinese religion indicates that the popular religious event of the masses has displayed the 'strength of local communities to reassert their autonomy and to resist the state' (Feuchtwang 2000, cited Chau 2006: 7). Chau (2006: 10) terms this religious space as the 'agrarian public sphere in rural China'. This religious public sphere differs from

The Buddhist revitalization is shrouded by religious modernization in Buddhist majority countries. The inclusive nature of Chinese communities' attitude will face the new way of practising Chinese Buddhism that is more exclusive, as 'Buddhist modernism is becoming the lingua franca of Buddhism' (McMahan 2008: 259). Despite the reflections in academia to diversify religion from the dominant view, the trend of practising religion according to the dominant view endures. The encounter between Buddhist modernism and Chinese religions in Malaysia provides a significant opportunity for the exploration of a case of a second wave of Buddhist modernism.

### The Flexible Chinese Attitude towards Religions

The Malaysian Chinese attitude towards religion is generally tolerant and inclusive. Religion is pragmatically practised, not strictly followed, by ordinary Chinese. Most have maintained their traditional beliefs, particularly ancestor worship, and patronize many traditional Chinese religions, world religions, the worship of new deities, and a number of new religions from abroad, such as Soka Gakkai, Nichiren Shoshu, and the Unity Sect.

The nature of the Chinese religious system is also responsible for this tolerant attitude. Traditional popular Chinese religion is very complex with its pantheon of gods, ancestors, and complex ritual calendar. Tan (1990: 1) argues that the 'Chinese [r]eligion is best seen as a single complex system, which encompasses the "traditional" beliefs and practices of the Chinese people: domestic and public, diffuse and organized'. The act of praying in Buddhist temples is solely to seek deities' protection, and devotees are seldom wholeheartedly committed to a particular religion or sect. The Buddha is treated as a deity in the Chinese Buddhist temple. Hence, most monks and nuns in Mahayana and Theravada temples in Malaysia have tolerated the practices of followers of Chinese religions and this cultural complexity of the Chinese religious worldview.

In the Malaysian context, economic factors could partially explain the fluid Chinese attitude towards religion. These factors have influenced the religious expectation of the Chinese, particularly during the early settlement period in the 18th and 19th centuries. When Chinese migrants first

'the bourgeois public sphere discussed by Jürgen Habermas in the context of Western European sociopolitical development on the 18th and 19th centuries' (ibid. 11). Chau explains that '[t]hrough the rebuilding of the temple and the reestablishment of rituals, these men reassert their authority as ritual specialists and the moral leadership roles' (ibid. 13). Furthermore, popular religion is used to express public opinion and to build communal authority (ibid. 59-76).



immigrated to Malaya, religion was expected to generate good fortune because of the miserable working conditions in their new land. Migrants required a religion that could offer immediate assistance and psychological appeasement. Hence, Chinese Buddhism's monks and nuns at the time helped 'mainly with chanting and performing ritual' (Ong 2005: 35) rather than with other transcendental concerns. This practice has continued until the present day.<sup>8</sup>

### **Buddhism in the Contestation of Religious Proselytizing in Malaysia**

Islamic revivalism in Muslim majority countries in the Middle East has spread to other parts of the Muslim world, particularly Southeast Asia in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Encouraged by developments in the Middle East, the early stages of Malay nationalism in the 1950s were also imbued with a flavor of Islamic revivalism. Following Malaysia's independence, Islam was declared the official state religion in the Constitution. Consequently, the Malay states began to establish or expand their departments of Islamic affairs in the 1960s. In response to pressure from local Muslims and political contestation with the Islamic political party Parti Islam Semalaysia (PAS), from the 1970s to the post-Mahathir period, the Islamization policy has intensified under the UMNO-dominated ruling coalition.

The implementation of Islamization policies such as the Islamic judicial system, finance, Islamic *dakwah* (proselytization activity), and Islamic education in national schools and universities, has created two religious fields in Malaysia: the Islamic and the non-Islamic. In 2010, approximately 61.3% of Malaysia's population consisted of Muslims. Buddhists, Christians and Hindus represented 19.8%, 9.2% and 6.3% of the total population respectively. Approximately 83.6% of the Malaysian Chinese were identified as Buddhists, and formed the largest minority religious group in the country (Census 2011). The 'distinction between the Islamic and non-Islamic religious fields suggests important differences in religious rationalization in terms of ideological cohesiveness, legal prerogatives, and bureaucratic development' (Lee & Ackerman 1997: 21). There is no officially established government body to regulate non-Muslim religions, thus indicating a lack of state funding and direct religious doctrinal control

8 According to the Encyclopedia of Religion, the main emphases of revivalism will be 'denunciatory, militant, utopian, millenarian, etc' (Burridge 2005: 7784-7790). However, Ling (1992) suggests that Chinese Buddhism in Malaysia was 'revival without revivalism'. He argues that there are different levels of revivalism in the Buddhist community and explains that in Malaysia, it happened 'quietly and unobtrusively' (ibid. 326).

for religions other than Islam. The distinct position of Islam in Malaysia has implications for public policy formulation and allocation. For example, from 2005 to 2008, Muslims received RM428.2 million for religious advancements, whereas non-Muslim religions received only RM8.16 million (Bernama 2008). Moreover, all other religions must share this modest funding.<sup>9</sup>

The Malaysian Constitution prohibits the propagation of other religions to Muslims. Followers of traditional Chinese religions tend to have fluid religious commitments. In the attempt to propagate Islam, followers of traditional Chinese religions and self-proclaimed Buddhists are the prime targets. The proportion of followers in the category of 'traditional Chinese religions' has dropped significantly since the 1980s. From the various census reports, the number of Chinese Muslims rose from 0.2% in 1970 to 1.0% of the population in 2000 but dropped to 0.7% in 2010. Meanwhile, among the Chinese communities, the followers of Christianity increased from 3.5% in 1970 to 9.5% in 2000 and to 11.1% in 2010 (Census 1975/76, 2001 & 2011).

Before Malaya's independence, Christianity was protected by the colonial power, with certain privileges in land acquisition and financial support for their missionary activities, and its followers had a higher social economic status. In the 1960s, when compared with Christian groups, Buddhist groups were outdated in their religious proselytizing machinery in terms of their 'technology of proselytizing', particularly, cleric training and organizational capacity. Those underdeveloped aspects alarmed clerics and lay Buddhist groups. The religious competition among non-Muslims and state-led Islamic *dakwah* triggered local Buddhist groups to strengthen their religious communities through organizational development and other activities (Lee & Ackerman 1997).

### The Transnational Reconnection of Mahayana Buddhism

Buddhist monks or nuns who served their Chinese-speaking followers in Malaya mainly arrived from China. The direct import of Buddhist clerics continued for many years until China's political system drastically changed to communism. The supply of Mahayana monks to Malaya suddenly ceased after the Communist Party of China (CPC) assumed power in 1949. Under the CPC, the suppression of religion and the Cultural Revolution weakened the institution of Mahayana Buddhism. Bilateral relations between Malaya and China were also influenced by the Cold War, which ended the religious

9 'From the RM8.16 million, RM3.39 million was allocated for Hindu temples, RM3.17 million for Buddhist temples, and RM1.6 million for churches' (Bernama 2008).



flow of Mahayana Buddhism from China. Malaysian citizens were prevented from visiting China until the immigration relaxation started in the 1990s.

Fearing Maoist influences on the Chinese communities, Britain tightened its immigration policy regarding the entry of Chinese monks to and from Malaya. This resulted in a shortage of monks in the early 1950s (*The Straits Times* 1953). In 1953, the abbot Chee Koon of Kek Lok Si temple in Penang informed the press that only 22 monks remained in the temple and that they had to help in other states. Because of shortages, some junior monks were assigned as abbots in other temples (*ibid.*). This stricter immigration law remained after independence and ended the religious supply of monks and nuns from China.

The linguistic orientation in the written and spoken language, and the expansion of tertiary education in the 1990s, led to another Buddhist network, namely, Taiwanese Mahayana Buddhism, to infiltrate larger Chinese communities in Malaysia. The linguistic orientation of Chinese communities is important in shaping religious preferences. Malaysia's national language policy has partly destroyed the colonial legacy of English education and its institutions. In Chinese communities, more parents have chosen Chinese education rather than national schools, thus producing more Mandarin speakers since the 1970s. In 2007, the Malaysian Ministry of Education revealed that approximately 90% of Chinese children studied in Chinese primary schools (Malaysiakini 2007). In the 1990s, with the declining English-educated population in universities, the Chinese-educated generation began to dominate Buddhist societies in university campuses, which had previously received most of its participation from English-speaking Chinese Buddhists.

The expansion of higher education has contributed to the emergence of a Chinese-educated middle class in Malaysia that seeks religious rationalization. The growth and diversification of tertiary education in Malaysia since 1990 has been dramatic. The total number of students enrolled has approximately doubled, from 230,000 in 1990 to 385,000 in 2000 (Lee 2002), with 1.13 million students recorded in 2010 (Kementerian Tinggi Malaysia 2012). This modernization project through formal education has generated 'the process of religious rationalization' (Lee & Ackerman 1997: 18 & 19). The younger and educated elite's growing awareness of Buddhist doctrines provides them with a sense of self-assurance and confidence (*ibid.* 57 & 58), and this 'religious rationalization' provides a search for a scientific way of religious understanding and organizational competency in religious propagation activities (*ibid.* 4).

The international relationship between Taiwan and Malaysia has facilitated a transnational reconnection for Mahayana Buddhism. International and

trade linkages between Malaysia and Taiwan were significantly closer than the linkages between Malaysia and China from the mid-1970s to the early 2000s. Under Taiwanese ex-President Lee Teng Hui's leadership, Taiwan's 'southward' foreign policy set the stage for the international relationships between Taiwan and Southeast Asian countries. Even before Lee Teng Hui's rise to power, Taiwan had established a representative institution in 1974 in Kuala Lumpur, the Far East Travel and Trade Center, to overcome diplomatic restrictions in foreign countries because of pressure from China.<sup>10</sup> In 1977, Malaysia established its own representative institution in Taipei, the Malaysian Airlines Taipei Branch, followed by the Malaysian Cultural and Trade Exchange Center in 1983.<sup>11</sup> Taiwan has been one of the top ten trade partners and a major source of FDI for Malaysia since the late 1980s.<sup>12</sup>

Mahayana Buddhism's religious flow recurred when Taiwan emerged as an important exporter of contemporary Buddhism to the world. Because Chinese-educated Malaysian Buddhists enjoy culture and language similarities with the Taiwanese, they have enthusiastically adopted this development. Taiwan's abundant resources and the close foreign policy ties between Taiwan and Malaysia have smoothed the transfer of ideas and materials to Chinese-speaking Malaysian communities. The arrival of Taiwanese Buddhist organizations in Malaysia has been ongoing since the late 1980s. Fo Guang Shan, a Taiwanese Buddhist group, established a temple at Klang in 1989. The Tzu Chi branches were established in Melaka and Penang in the early 1990s. These Buddhist organizations then spread from the city centers to rural areas in West and East Malaysia. Now, most of their activities are funded, organized and executed by Malaysian Buddhists.

Despite their charismatic religious masters being in Taiwan, these groups are localized in terms of management and funding. Malaysia has become their second-most important base, after their Taiwan headquarters. In the 2000s, they were accepted by Chinese Buddhist communities as an important group. When Taiwanese groups first arrived in the early 1990s, many Malaysian Buddhist groups felt uneasy because of the competition for resources. However, they are now considered a constructive agent in the development of Buddhism in Malaysia because they are involved in not only the propagation of Buddhism but also social development, such as in conducting fundraising activities for Chinese schools and community welfare projects.

10 It was then changed to the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office in 1992 (Chen 2002: 82).

11 In 1988, it was renamed the Malaysian Friendship and Trade Center (Chen 2002: 83).

12 Taiwan ranked as the third top foreign investor from 1988 to 1998 in Malaysia (Chen 2005: 108).



Judith Nagata (1999: 242) notes that Fo Guang Shan's founder Hsing Yun is involved in the 'politics of identity both among overseas Chinese' and is 'a potential mediator between Taiwan and China'. Nagata (1999: 242-243) observes that Malaysian Chinese Buddhists are involved in the 'shadow politics' of transnational groups and the politics of the Chinese identity of the global networks of Fo Guang Shan Monastery. Huang (2009) examines the case of a transnational Buddhist group, Tzu Chi, based in Melaka. Tzu Chi promotes the 'local need for Buddhist reformism' (ibid. 265). It transplants the teaching of 'creating universal humanitarianism by relieving suffering' (ibid. 250) to Malaysia. Their activities mainly concern welfare for the poor and elderly, recycling projects, the organization of disaster rescue teams, and the building of hospitals and schools (ibid. 2). Although Malaysian Tzu Chi members are 'distinctly embodied' by the transnational headquarters and Tzu Chi's founder, Cheng Yen, Huang discovers that 'Taiwan means not much' (ibid. 264) to the local Malaysian Buddhists and that the 'mission they perceived is firmly locally grounded' (ibid. 265).

## Fieldwork

I selected four Chinese Buddhist organizations to represent the Buddhist revitalization movement in urban and West Coast Peninsular Malaysia: the Malaysian Buddhist Association (MBA), the Young Buddhist Association of Malaysia (YBAM), Fo Guang Shan Malaysia (Fo Guang Shan), and the Buddhist Tzu Chi Merits Society Malaysia (Tzu Chi). These four organizations were chosen because they have impacted Chinese Buddhist communities through their formal organization, a formalization that has legitimized them to attract more members and become major organizations that can represent Buddhist communities. In terms of their basic demographic profile, the MBA attracts local monks, nuns, and older generations of Chinese Buddhists; YBAM works mainly with youth and local university graduates; Fo Guang Shan's members are from Chinese middle and upper classes; and Tzu Chi continues to be female-dominated and attracts followers who are more inclined to volunteerism.

The four Buddhist organizations have branches throughout Malaysia. I examined their headquarters but did not visit all their branches. However, I observed some of each organization's branches that were highly active. These included the Taiping Buddhist Association, the Melaka Buddhist Association, Fo Guang Shan's publishing house and cultural center, and Tzu Chi's cafe. I visited three main branches of the Tzu Chi, in Penang, Kuala



Lumpur and Melaka, to understand the nature of the regional differences of their projects and activities.

In the field, unexpected events required me to adjust my research. Because of the unforeseen office hour's closure of Fo Guang Shan's main temple, I visited traditional Chinese temples in Jenjarom and collected valuable data. I also attended a Buddhist conference organized by YBAM in Kuala Lumpur that contributed to the content. During the course of study, some incidents also helped me to understand my research questions, such as the case of the talking Buddha statues in Kuala Lumpur whose meaning I reconsidered in relation to the larger Buddhist revitalization context. The passing of my grandfather and my father also directly contributed to my research data on the relationship between reformist Buddhism and Chinese religions. Informally collected data and personal experiences of my involvement in the graduate Buddhist youth movement have provided in-depth and significant insight.

## Chapter Overviews

Chapter 2 elaborates on the historical connection between Malaya and the larger Buddhist world. Chinese Buddhism's root in Malaya started when the immigrant communities who arrived as laborers in tin mining and rubber plantations brought their religious beliefs. Thais, Burmese and Sinhalese brought the Theravada traditions that influenced Chinese Buddhists, while the Chinese inherited a loosely defined Mahayana Buddhism mixed with Chinese custom and popular religions. The idea of modern Buddhism was brought by religious leaders of various traditions to revitalize Buddhism.

Chapter 3 maps several initiatives of the Buddhist revitalization movement in Malaysia. Focusing on two groups, the MBA and the YBAM, the history and process of Buddhist revitalization that occurred through local efforts will be examined. Modern forms of Buddhism have been introduced in Malaya by various migrant communities since colonial times. The Malaysian Chinese who claim to have been Mahayana Buddhists have a more accommodating approach towards their religion for the amalgamation of various traditions. Reformist groups in Malaysia have begun a transformation process in seeking a well-defined Chinese Buddhism that is distinct from traditional Chinese religions. This Buddhization is led by national Buddhist organizations, especially the MBA and the YBAM. These organizations have embarked on a journey to strengthen themselves while drawing upon the principles of modern Buddhism. Various initiatives have been



undertaken to propagate Buddhism and the movement has contributed to the rationalization of Chinese Buddhism in Malaysia that distinguished Buddhism from Chinese religions.

Chapter 4 provides an overview of Buddhist revitalization in Malaysia in the age of globalization that has taken on particular significance since the late 1980s. To understand this transnational force, two important organizations were selected, namely, the Fo Guang Shan Malaysia and the Buddhist Tzu Chi Merits Society Malaysia. These two Taiwanese groups have started to bring different styles and forms of propagating Buddhism to the local Buddhist community and to provide idea of practising and propagating Buddhism. Fo Guang Shan, for instance, is attracting the Chinese middle class to their activities, supporting Chinese education, and fund-raising activities. Tzu Chi has been attracting many housekeepers and old people to participate in their charity and recycling projects since the early 1990s. Such developments represent the emergence of new social and political engagements at community and everyday levels.

Chapter 5 investigates factors of Chinese Buddhist revitalization which include Chinese politics and a cultural crisis within the Malaysian Chinese Buddhist communities. For middle and lower classes of Chinese, popular religion was used as an option to escape from the feeling of being trapped in a Malay Muslim dominated nation state. Buddhist activists, laypeople and clerics have played a larger role in Chinese communities to promote the exit option. The role of a prominent monk, Chi Chern, a second-generation Mahayana Buddhism religious leader will be explored. Then the new social engagement of Tzu Chi and Fo Guang Shan will be discussed.

Chapter 6 will use personal life episodes, media events, and fieldwork data to describe what I call the counterforces to Buddhist revitalization in Chinese communities. The forces can be seen especially in the common religious practices observed at important moments in the lives of traditional Chinese religionists. Traditional Chinese religionists have from time to time sporadically responded to the aspirations of Buddhist revitalization. The rationalization of Chinese religion by reformist Buddhist groups has inevitably undermined the credibility of the practitioners of popular Chinese religion. This conflict of interest has caused reactions in a subtle way.

