THE MAKING OF MODERN BUDDHISM:

CHINESE BUDDHIST REVITALIZATION IN MALAYSIA

TAN LEE OOI

(B. Sc. (Hons), M.A. USM)

A THESIS SUBMITTED
FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE

2013
DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis is my original work and it has been written by me in its entirety. I have duly acknowledged all the sources of information which have been used in the thesis.

This thesis has also not been submitted for any degree in any university previously.

TAN LEE OOI

25 July 2013
Acknowledgements

This thesis was completed with the financial support and other resources of the Asia Research Institute PhD Scholarship and the Department of Southeast Asian Studies, National University of Singapore. I am thankful to my supervisor, Dr. Irving Johnson, whom I believe will become a great educator in the future, for his patience in providing critical commentary and correcting grammatical errors in my drafts. I also appreciate my PhD committee members, who tested me during the Qualifying Exam and thus helped me to consider new scopes and directions for my research.

Without various conferences, workshops, seminars, and lectures sponsored by the Asia Research Institute that attracted leading scholars on Chinese religions such as Kenneth Dean, David Palmer, Julia Huang, and Mayfair Yang, I would not have been able to strengthen my thesis. Without registration, I attended a module on religion and secularism offered by Prof. Prasenjit Duara in which it opened my perspectives on the studies of Chinese religions. With the support of the NUS library, I ordered more than 30 books that deepened my analysis.

I was fortunate to enroll in the Southeast Asian Studies Programme because it had the most vibrant graduate student community, a vibrancy that was formed through the diverse student backgrounds in terms of age, ethnicity, nationality, gender identity, and ideology. Many sessions of sharing emotions, knowledge, conversations, food, and drinks
with fellow colleagues, including Somrak, Budi, Guangcan, Sophie, Hao, Kanami, Kambie, Lina, Natalia, Grace, Yoshi, and so on are memorable.

I extend my appreciation to all Malaysian Chinese Buddhists I met during my fieldwork and before starting my research. They provided valuable data and were considerably helpful in sharing information. I would like to particularly thank the organizing committee members of The 2th International Conference on the Research of Malaysian Buddhism who invited me to present a paper. I met not only the current researchers but encountered many active Buddhist laypersons who attended the conference.

Finally, I owe the very possibility of my academic journey to my mother and sisters.
# Table of Contents

DECLARATION ii  
Acknowledgements iii  
Table of Contents v  
Abstract ix  
List of Tables xi  
List of Figures xii  
Abbreviations xiv  
List of Chinese Characters xv  
Orthography xviii

## Chapter 1  Introduction 1

- The Origins of Buddhist Revitalization 8  
  - Colonization and Modern Religion 9  
  - Buddhist Modernism and Chinese Religions 12

- Buddhist Revitalization and Chinese Religions in Malaysia 15  
  - The Flexible Chinese Attitude towards Religions 15  
  - Buddhism in the Contestation of Religious Proselytizing in Malaysia 16  
  - The Transnational Reconnection of Mahayana Buddhism 18

- Studying Chinese Buddhists and Buddhism in Malaysia 22

- Methodology 24

- Chapter Overviews 26
# Chapter 2  A Brief History of Buddhist Transnational Connections

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theravada Buddhist Communities in Malaya</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thai Buddhist Temples and their Influence on Chinese Community</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burmese Temples and their Influence on Chinese Community</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sinhalese Temples and their Influence on Chinese Community</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Mahayana Buddhism in Malaya</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kek Lok Si (Temple of Paradise)</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Penang Buddhist Association (PBA)</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pan-Asian Phenomena of Buddhist Modernism</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reformed Buddhism: Thai Lineage</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddhist Modernism: Sinhalese Lineage</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rensheng Fojiao (Buddhism in Human Life): Mahayana Lineage</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Summary 73

# Chapter 3  Reforming Chinese Buddhism through the Zheng Xin (Right Faith) Movement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Discourse of Zheng Xin</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zheng Xin in Malaysian Chinese Buddhist Context</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defending Zheng Xin Buddhism in Malaysia</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict with the Unity Sect (Yi Guan Dao)</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddhicizing the Hungry Ghost Festival</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Role of the MBA</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formalization of Taking-Refuge Ceremony</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Malaysian Buddhist Institute</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysian Buddhist Examination Syndicate (MBES)</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Buddhist Youth Movement and Zheng Xin Buddhism</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Venerable Sumangalo: Father of Malaysian Buddhist Youth Movement</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The YBAM and Zheng Xin Buddhism</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The YBAM Network’s Promotion of Zheng Xin Buddhism</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Summary 116

# Chapter 4  New Transnational Connections with Taiwan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Summary 118
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Merit Society</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Brief History of Tzu Chi in Taiwan</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Brief History of Buddhist Tzu Chi Merit Society Malaysia</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tzu Chi and Malaysian Buddhism</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tzu Chi as a Humanitarian Corporation</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobilization of Chinese Buddhists in Volunteer Work</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charity Projects of Tzu Chi Malaysia</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recycling Project</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mass Participation</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shifting of Buddhist Cosmologies</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reinventing Tradition of Self-cultivation Practices</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tzu Chi’s Pragmatism</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laity Oriented</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fo Guang Shan</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Brief History of Fo Guang Shan in Taiwan</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Brief History of Fo Guang Shan Malaysia</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fo Guang Shan and Malaysian Buddhism</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fo Guang Shan and the Chinese Mass Media in Malaysia</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fo Guang Shan’s vision of a Buddhist Popular Culture</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddhist Education</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differences between Tzu Chi and Fo Guang Shan</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Similarity of the Aesthetics of Religious Space and Material</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aesthetics of Fo Guang Shan Malaysia’s Temple</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensorial Consumption in Jing Si Books &amp; Café</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Chapter 5 Remaking Chinese Buddhists**

Chinese Community and Buddhism in Malaysia 159

The Emergence of Second-Generation Religious Leaders: A Case of Venerable Chi Chern 161

Chi Chern and Yinshun 164
Chi Chern and Meditation Camp 166
Chi Chern’s Publications 169
The Puzhao Buddhist Vihara Controversy 170

Cultural Reformation in Chinese Community 176
Chi Chern’s Vision for the Malaysian Chinese Community and Buddhism  178
Political Engagement of Buddhist Community  180

The Experience of Fo Guang Shan’s Celebration: Chinese New Year Lantern and Floral Festival  183

Tzu Chi’s Chinese New Year Relief  186

The Declining Role of Chinese Associations
   Transethnic Solidarities  187
   Exit Option Revisited  190

Summary  199

Chapter 6  Counterforces to Buddhist Revitalization  203

Dreams about Father  203

Case 2: A Battle between Chinese Religions and Buddhism at Kampung Baru Jenjarom  206

Case 3: An Urban Miracle of The Talking Buddha Statues  211

Multiple Counterforces to Buddhist Revitalization
   Counterforces within Chinese Buddhism  214

The Relaxation of Political Correctness in Zheng Xin Buddhism
   The Politics of Buddhist Unity  221
   Wesak Day Celebration  224
   Statistical Legitimacy  225

Summary  234

Chapter 7 Conclusion  236

Appendices  242

Bibliography  261
Abstract

This thesis documents the religious connection, transformation, and tension within a complex traditional belief system in a multi-religious society. In particular, the thesis revolves around a discussion on the religious revitalization of Chinese Buddhism in modern Malaysia. This Buddhist revitalization movement is intertwined with various forces, such as colonialism, modernity, and global capitalism. Reformist Buddhists have helped to remake Malaysia’s urban-dwelling Chinese community and have provided another option for Chinese who feel marginalized in a Malay and Muslim majority nation state. As Malaysia modernizes, there are growing concerns by certain segments of the country’s ethnic Chinese Buddhist population to separate Buddhism from popular Chinese religion. Besides the two Malaysian groups, namely Malaysian Buddhist Association and Young Buddhist Association of Malaysia, this call for a new ethnicized religion is significantly influenced by two Buddhist groups that originated in Taiwan in the late 1980s, the Tzu Chi Merit Society and Fo Guang Shan Malaysia. These Buddhist revitalist movements, have labeled popular Chinese religions as “superstition”. Both local and Taiwanese groups have created a distinctive form of Buddhism by formalizing certain ceremonies, promoting Buddhist education, Buddhicizing Hungry Ghost Festival, popularizing meditation, and mobilizing Chinese Buddhists in volunteer work such as crisis relief, charity and recycling project. This attempt to create a new form of Buddhism
in order to modernize the community’s religious beliefs to more effectively address social dilemmas and moral crises has strengthened Chinese identity in Malaysia. A notable development is the politics of transethnicity that is being led by Tzu Chi to overcome racialized politics. Nevertheless, these reformist groups face counterforces from traditional Chinese religionists to their attempts at revitalization within the context of cultural complexity of Chinese belief system. These counterforces come from both within and beyond the community that force Chinese Buddhist to rethink their religious, ethnic and for some, political affiliations. This thesis tells the story of how a minority community comes to grip with the puzzling drama of modernity, history, globalization, and cultural assertion in an ever changing Malaysia.
List of Tables

Table 4.1  Differences between Tzu Chi and Fo Guang Shan  154
Table 6.1  The Distribution of Religion among Ethnic Chinese in Peninsular Malaysia, 1970 and 1980 (by Percentage)  231
Table 6.2  The Distribution of Religion among Ethnic Chinese in Malaysia, 1991 and 2000 (by Percentage)  232
List of Figures

Figure 1 Venerable K. Sri Dhammananda Nayaka Thera (1918-2006) 60
Figure 2 Master Taixu (1890-1947) 67
Figure 3 Tunku Abdul Rahman (right no. 6) officiated the opening ceremony for Malaysian Buddhist Association at Kek Lok Si in 1959 72
Figure 4 Venerable Chuk Mor (1913-2002) visited his birth place in China in 1987 73
Figure 5 Venerable Sumangalo (1903—1963) 107
Figure 6 Tzu Chi’s Still Thoughts Abode (Jingsi Tang) in Penang 124
Figure 7 Tzu Chi Melaka’s recycling center 133
Figure 8 Master Cheng Yen, the founder of Tzu Chi Merit Society 142
Figure 9 Master Hsing Yun, the founder of Fo Guang Shan 145
Figure 10 Venerable Chi Chern 163
Figure 11 Master Yinshun (1906-2005) 165
Figure 12 Venerable Chi Chern (Left no.2) at the Bersih 3.0 gathering 182
Figure 13 Chi Chern was helping a protestor to cut her hair in an Anti-Lynas rally 182
Figure 14 Fo Guang Dong Zen Temple during the Chinese New Year Lantern and Floral Festival at Jenjarom, Selangor 186
Figure 15 Tzu Chi volunteer provided monetary assistant to a Malay student to continue his education 195
Figure 16 Tzu Chi volunteer helped a Malay woman victim in fire broke out incident 195
Figure 17 Malaya Tiger protection activity gained support from different races 196

Figure 18 Wan Shou Gong at Jenjarom 211
## Abbreviations

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

List of Chinese Characters

Boew Lean    妙莲
Bu gan jingchan 不赶经忏
Bu huayuan   不化缘
Bu zuo fahui  不做法会
Chengfo Zhidao 成佛之道
Cheng Yen    证严
Chi Chern    继程
Chuji Jingxiu Ying 静修营
Chuk Mor     竺摩
Da Ai Tai    大爱台
Daoshi      导师
Da Ren Gong  大公
Duanqi Chujia 短期出家
Fa dushi    发毒誓
Fa Gu Shan  法鼓山
Fa Ming     法名
Fa Shi      法事
Fofa Gailun 佛法概论
Fo Guang Shan 佛光山
Fo Jiao     佛教
Foqing Zhiyou 佛青之友
Fotang      佛堂
foxue ban   佛学班
Guanyin    观音
Gui Jie     鬼节
Gui Yi      鬃依
Gu Zheng    古筝
Haicao Yin 海潮音
He Qi Zu    和气组
Hsing Yun  星云
Hu Ai Zu    互爱组
Huaqiao Zhengce 华侨政策
huat ah     发啊
Jianyu Fashi 监狱法师
Jiaxing Qi  加行七
Jijing Yuanlin  寂静园林
Jingjin Qi  精进七
Jingqi  静七
Jingsi Tang  静思堂
Jingsi Yu  静思语
Jingsi Shuxuan  静思书轩
Jingtuo Zong  净土宗
Kai Zhao  开照
Laji bian huangjin, huangjin bian aixin  垃圾变黄金，黄金变爱心
Liang Qi Chao  梁启超
Liu Miaomen Jiangji  六妙门讲记
Mahua Wenhua  马华文化
Miaozhu  庙祝
Miaoyun Ji  妙云集
mijiao  迷教
Minnan Foxue Yuan  闽南佛学院
Minan Yu  闽南语
Minsu Fojiao  民俗佛教
Mixin  迷信
Nanxiang Zhengce  南向政策
Nanyang  南洋
Nianfo  念佛
Poon Teong  本忠
Pu Du  普渡
Pu Zhao Si  普照寺
Renjian Fojiao  人间佛教
Rensheng Fojiao  人生佛教
Renjian Yinyuan  人间音缘
San Bao Ge  三宝歌
San Gui Wu Jie  三归五戒
Sanhui Jiangtang  三慧讲堂
Sanqi  三七
Shefu Daren  佘府大人
Sheng Yan  圣严
Shijie  师姐
Shixiong  师兄
Sida Zhizhu  四大支柱
Taixu  太虚
Tian Hou Gong  天后宫
towkay  头家
Tzu Chi Gong De Hui 慈济功德会
Tzu Chi Zong Men 慈济宗门
Wan Shou Gong 万寿宫
Wu Jin Deng 无尽灯
Wuji Shengmu Zonghui 无极圣母总会
Xiangban 香板
Xiao 孝
Xiao Zhiguan Jiangji 小止观讲记
Xie Zhu Zu 协助组
Xifang Jile Shijie 西方极乐世界
Xin Ya 新芽
XiuXing 修行
Yi Guan Dao 一贯道
Yinguang 印光
Yinshun 印顺
Yu Lan Peng 盂兰盆
Yu Lan Sheng Hui 盂兰盛会
Zhen Fo Zong 真佛宗
Zheng Xin 正信
Zheng Xin Fojiao 正信佛教
Zuo jiu dui le 做就对了
Orthography

This thesis uses the standard *pinyin* system for romanization of all Mandarin in the text, unless the places and personal names that have well-known romanization. For an example, “Chi Chern”（继程）is used instead of “Jicheng”. The name of Malaysian Chinese follows the phonology of the dialect rather than *pinyin* system. This also applies to name of monks and nuns in Taiwan especially those of older generation.