

# Beyond the Mainland: An Introduction

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Mention “Southeast Asian Buddhism” and what comes to mind is often Theravāda Buddhism, the dominant religion in the mainland Southeast Asian states of Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand. Therefore, it is no surprise that scholars of Southeast Asian Buddhism have long been interested in studying how Theravāda Buddhism shaped the history, culture, and politics of mainland Southeast Asia. Conversely, maritime Southeast Asia conjures the image of the Malay Archipelago, consisting of the Muslim-majority countries of Brunei, Indonesia, and Malaysia, as well as the Catholic-majority states of the Philippines and East Timor. Within the region, Singapore is considered an anomaly because of its predominant Buddhist and Chinese population. As I have argued elsewhere, scholars of Southeast Asia tend to highlight the cultural and historical differences between mainland and maritime Southeast Asia and emphasize the religious contrast between mainland Theravāda Buddhism and maritime Islam and Catholicism when conceptualizing the region’s religious diversity (Chia 2020, p. 7).

Recent scholarship over the past decade has started to pay more attention to the presence of Buddhist communities in the Islamic Malay world, Catholic Philippines, and Buddhist-majority Singapore. While some scholars have highlighted the vibrant activities and networks of Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhists (Chia 2020; Dean 2018; Dy 2015; Hsu 2021; Hue 2020; Tan 2020), others have noticed a small but lively Theravāda Buddhist presence (Blackburn 2012; Chia 2021; Johnson 2013; Kitiarsa 2010; Samuels 2011). More intriguingly, recent studies have revealed that Mahāyāna and Theravāda Buddhists in the maritime region of Southeast Asia are not isolated within their communities but frequently interact and even merge the practices of different traditions together (Chia 2018; Zhang 2018).

In this same vein, this Special Issue of *Religions* brings together five articles that explore the diverse beliefs and practices of Buddhist communities in the maritime Southeast Asian states of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore. The collection of essays—written by innovative Southeast Asian-based scholars in Anthropology, Chinese Studies, Communication Studies, History, and Religious Studies—provide new perspectives on the lesser-known Buddhist communities in this region. These five articles are empirically grounded in a specific community, but they situate their analyses in much broader disciplinary and theoretical perspectives.

*Beyond the Mainland* opens with two articles that focus on Buddhist-majority Singapore. Guan Thye Hue, Chang Tang, and Juhn Khai Klan Choo’s “The Buddhist Philanthropist: The Life and Times of Lee Choon Seng” uses the biography of Lee Choon Seng (李俊承, 1888–1966) as a prism to examine the development of lay Buddhist piety and philanthropy in twentieth-century Singapore. Lee Choon Seng, a successful Chinese businessman and community leader, was arguably the most prominent Buddhist householder in Singapore history. He was best known for his role as the founding and inaugural chairman of the Singapore Buddhist Federation in 1949. The article presents Lee Choon Seng’s religious activities in three phases of his life: the pre-World War Two era (1920–1942), the Japanese Occupation period (1942–1945), and the post-war era (1945–1966).

Keng Yung Phua’s “‘Contramodernist Buddhism’ in a Global City-State: Shinnyo-en in Singapore” explores the history and development of Shinnyo-en (真如苑), a new Japanese Buddhist movement, from its arrival in Singapore in 1983 to the present. Building on



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the notion of “Contramodernist Buddhism,” Phua argues that the changing memory of the Japanese Occupation in Singapore, coupled with the spiritual appeal of Shinnyo-en’s contramodernist spirituality and practices to Singaporean Chinese Buddhists, has led to the organization’s rapid expansion in this global city-state. The article places the development of Shinnyo-en in the larger context of Japan-Singapore relations and concludes with a discussion of Shinnyo-en’s socially engaged Buddhist activities in Singapore’s society.

For its part, Lee Ooi Tan’s “Conceptualizing Buddhization: Malaysian Chinese Buddhists in Contemporary Malaysia” discusses the “Buddhization” of Chinese Buddhist community in contemporary Malaysia. “Buddhization,” as Tan suggests, is the process of “guiding someone or something under the influence of Buddhism.” Drawing on data collected from interviews and participant observation at the individual and institutional levels, Tan argues that “Buddhization” in Malaysia is both a product of Islamization and a strategy of survival in the Muslim-majority nation. He highlights six aspects of Buddhization activities among Malaysian Chinese Buddhists, namely taking refuge, participating in Buddhist associations, taking Buddhist examination, attending meditation courses, choosing Buddhist weddings, and preferring Buddhist funerals.

Next, Yulianti’s “The Birth of Buddhist Organizations in Modern Indonesia, 1900–1959,” looks at the emergence and evolution of Buddhist organizations in late colonial and early post-colonial Indonesia, revealing that Buddhist organizations established during this period served the needs of an emerging Buddhist community from diverse national and ethnic backgrounds. She demonstrates how the Peranakan Chinese community was actively establishing Buddhist organizations and propagating the Dharma, accelerating the growth of Buddhism in the world’s largest Muslim nation. The article offers a brief history of a number of prominent Indonesian Buddhist organizations, including the Java Buddhist Association, Batavia Buddhist Association, Gabungan Sam Kauw Indonesia, Persaudaraan Upasaka Upasika Indonesia, and Buddhist Study Club.

Finally, Aristotle Chan Dy’s “Buddhist Modernism in the Philippines: Emerging Localization of Humanistic Buddhism” brings to light the growth of humanistic Buddhism (人間佛教), a modernist form of Chinese Buddhism, in the Philippines. Dy analyzes how two humanistic Buddhist organizations—Ciji (慈濟) and Foguangshan (佛光山)—seek to localize Buddhist teachings and practices to attract a wider following in the Catholic-majority maritime Southeast Asian country. He reveals that these two organizations rely on education, culture, and charity as a platform to localize themselves and cater to the needs of the local population. Yet, as Dy concludes, Ciji and Foguangshan can do more to translate Buddhist teachings into various Philippine languages.

The Buddhists who are the focus of the articles in this Special Issue are mostly ethnic Chinese, be they migrants or local-born descendants. While the articles have offered some valuable insights into the Buddhist experiences in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore, there is considerable room for further exploration into the practices and activities of non-Chinese Buddhists in these locations. Furthermore, little is known about the minority Buddhist population in Muslim Brunei and Catholic East Timor. Thus, there are many more Buddhist persons and institutions in maritime Southeast Asia that deserve our attention, and they should be the focus of future research endeavors by scholars within and outside the region.

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