



## A Case Study on The Influence of Buddhism on Multiculturalism

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### Abstract

Multiculturalism is cultural diversity in which different race and ethnic groups come together in the society with their own cultural heritage and beliefs. The main question for discussion in this paper is: Is Buddhism the root for development in a multicultural society? In the following sections, we explore how Buddhism and culture influence each other as they evolve with time. Through the lens on Singapore's way to multiculturalism, we draw important lessons from the integration efforts of its ethnic and racial communities, formulation of practical national policies and social measures that focus on justice and equality, and establishment of a common national identity regardless of language, race or religion. Of course, the social development of multicultural diversity is related to different practices in different cultural context and cultural expression. However, since culture is not purely based on religion and a multicultural society is made up of various ethnic and religious elements, it is difficult to determine that Buddhism is the root of multiculturalism for societal development.

### Introduction

The origin of religion is complex, and its meaning is ambiguous. In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1955), Emile Durkheim observes that totemism, a belief on the relationship between man and nature, plants or animals, is the earliest religion available to mankind. Man creates their own idea of religion and gives meaning to it as long as it remains relevant for man and answer the needs



of society. Religion continues to evolve and exist as a cultural and transmissible human activity, and it can only be defined by the characteristics that they are found. The idea of mysterious existences like the supernatural and spiritual beings is being ascribed with imaginations, symbols and rites to create connection and bond.

In post-Durkheimian vision of religion, Clifford Geertz argues in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1977) that religion is a cultural system which is related to a particular social context where religious phenomena are manifested. In his theory, he explained that society with the same culture shares a system of concepts and symbols where individual has the fundamental understanding on the nature of reality. Similar as cultural activities, religions can be subjected to empirical observation and study to enable deeper understanding on the society.

Whereas in *Religion Explained* (2001), Pascal Boyer argues that since religion is a cultural construct, it cannot fit into any definition of religion. To him, religious ideas are created inside individual minds because concepts in mind are constructed due to external influences. The result may fail or succeed during cultural transmission, if a cultural phenomenon takes place, the result is a successful selection. Boyer (2001:40) asserts that all religions share a common characteristic, that is, the belief in supernatural agents, for instance, god, spirit or ancestor; and that people have religious ideas and beliefs since they acquire such concepts from others. The supernatural agent definition of religion by Boyer is based on the concept of an unknown agent with strength and power, which is beyond the understanding of individual.

Of course, there are religions in the world where the concept of creator God is absent. This is the case of Buddhism. Buddhism derives from the Sanskrit word Budh which signifies “to know” then “to wake up” and it means a doctrine of awakening, a doctrine of insight and knowledge. The Oxford English Dictionary recorded the earliest usage of “Buddha” as 1681, “dharma” as 1796, “Buddhism” and “Buddhist” as 1801 (Bluck 2006:4). When Buddha discovered the truth, it was



Dhamma-Vinaya. Dhamma refers to the truth, which the Buddha discovered and taught; and Vinaya refers to the discipline, which he formulated as precepts of behavior for the renunciants. Buddhism is not his invention and he is not a creator of religion. It is impossible to reduce Dhamma-Vinaya into a vast collection of literature or a philosophical system of thoughts. It is a way of life, a mental cultivation, a deep awakening with the ultimate goal of self-transformation.

So the main question for discussion in this paper is: Is Buddhism the root for development in a multicultural society? Multiculturalism is the co-existence of different race and ethnic groups of different language and religion in the society with their own cultural heritage and beliefs. In other words, multiculturalism is associated with cultural and religious diversity. In the following sections, we explore Singapore's approach to diversity and draw lessons on how the social strategies and government policies help to build a cohesive multicultural society. We further examine the cultural tools in Singapore and discuss how Buddhism and culture influence each other.

### **Multiculturalism – The Case of Singapore**

According to a Pew Research Study by Cooperman and Lipka (2014), Singapore is the most religiously diverse country in the world. It also implies that there are a mix of religious affiliations even within the same racial group. For instance, the dominant racial group is Chinese and Singaporean Chinese could identify themselves as a Buddhist, Taoist, Catholic, Christian, Muslim or Others. While Singapore allow religious freedom for people, the government disallow any religion's involvement in politics. They promote religious harmony by working closely with communities to reduce communal tensions. One of the government initiatives to reduce communal tensions is the setup of Inter Racial and Religious Confidence Circles (IRCC) in every constituency since 2002 to deepen residents' understanding of various beliefs and practices through inter-faith dialogues and religious festivities. Further, I want to bring to attention three main points that contribute to the social cohesion in a multicultural Singapore.



First is the implementation of practical social measures. Singapore is a country of immigrants, mainly from China, India, Malaysia, Indonesia and Middle East. It is a secular state based on meritocracy but not based on any race, language or religion. Each citizen is classified under one of these categories on personal Identification Card – Chinese, Indian, Malay or Others. Each race has their own language and religion. Self-help groups from each race to provide assistance are setup to ensure representation for all ethnic and religious communities in Singapore. The compulsory national service for all Singaporean men provides opportunities to come together and understand each other. Importantly, Singapore’s aim is integration and not assimilation, and this constitutes the uniqueness of a Singapore case. Any drafting of national policies is based on the above-mentioned classification. For instance, a bilingual policy implemented in 1966 requires all students to learn English and their mother tongue (or the “official” language of their race) in school.

Second is the implement of appropriate national policies, Singapore model of multiculturalism relies on social cohesion or social harmony. The government focus on integration instead of assimilation to promote cohesion. In Singapore, more than eighty percent of citizens live in public housing with ethnic diversity in all its neighborhoods. Among the more prominent policies include the Ethnic Integration Policy implemented by Singapore Housing and Development Board in 1989 that requires every block to have ethnic quotas with a specific cap on the number of Chinese, Indians, Malay or Others depending on Singapore demographic makeup. In addition, the national pledge in four official languages were formulated to recite in school assemblies and national ceremonies to overcome the differences resulted from potential divisive factors of race, language and religion. The expected

commitment from the people is illustrated in Singapore’s Pledge (National Heritage Board website): “We, the citizens of Singapore, pledge ourselves as one united people, regardless of race, language or religion, to build a democratic society based on justice and equality so as to achieve happiness, prosperity and



progress for our nation”.

Third, as a multicultural society with several cultural communities, the British rule in Singapore in the past has provided two useful cultural tools. The first cultural tool is the English law and the English legal system that have helped to govern over the affairs of various communities. Over the years, the English common law evolves to become the Singapore common law to regulate social and political life, and it is indispensable for global economic system. The second cultural tool is the English language as the common language for all the communities in Singapore. Under the Constitution of Singapore, English, Malay, Mandarin and Tamil are designated official languages in Singapore even though Malay is the national language. And English language is the language of government and administration, and the neutral common language to unite people as Singaporeans.

Hence, besides the political will to plan social strategies and implement government policies, multiculturalism would not be possible without these two important cultural tools. This is crucial for peace and harmony as Singapore is a Chinese-majority city in a Malay-majority part of Southeast Asia. Significantly, the attitude of openness and expansion remains as its own culture and belief evolve, each race is expected to allow itself to be influenced by the culture and belief of other races. As a result, multiculturalism becomes the fundamental principle for a sustainable development of distinctive variants of Singaporean culture not based on race and religion but on a growing common Singaporean identity that everyone shares.

### **How Buddhism Shapes Singapore Culture**

From the lessons drawn, Singapore multiculturalism is premised on respecting the differences that conform to well defined race and religion, and Buddhism cannot be the sole determinant element to influence such multicultural society. Being a more inclusive religion in Singapore, Buddhism was brought in by the Chinese immigrants in a syncretic nature and in evolving diversity. As a result, Buddhism in Singapore slowly evolves to have its own interpretation and practice.



Here I highlight three main observations how Buddhism has influenced the culture in the context of Singapore.

The first observation is that the Buddhist community in Singapore is not unitary and homogeneous. There exists a Buddhist network, however, there is no centralized religious authority that can claim legitimately to represent and manage different traditions. There are also mega transnational Buddhist organizations like Tzu Chi Foundation and Buddha's Light International Association in Singapore that can gather a large membership of active followers participating in major Buddhist festivals like Vesak Day. And I observe a growing trend of Engaged Buddhism with an expansion in welfare services and cultural activities in Singapore. One can also see different "brands" of Buddhism based on ethnic and nationality with a spectrum of Buddhist lineages and traditions, for instance, Sinhalese Buddhism, Thai Buddhism, Burmese Buddhism, Japanese Buddhism, Zen Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism. Even within the same ethnic and nationality, there is a difference in traditions according to the spiritual teacher, and Singaporeans have numerous options to support or participate according to their preference.

The second observation is an increasing focus in Buddhist education among the lay Buddhists opting to attend Dhamma classes and talks organized by the Theravada Tradition. There are more options for meditation and retreat activities organized by Buddhist temples and societies. Some Mahāyāna Buddhist temples offer Dhamma classes based on the works of reformist Chinese Masters, Tai Xu (太虚 1890-1947) and Yin Shun (印顺 1906-2005), who

were pioneers in the renewal of Mahāyāna Buddhism. Due to the economic and political turmoil in China, and partly due to the influence of political writings and Christianity, both Buddhist masters were determined to end the decline in Buddhist Teachings and to clear misconceptions and superstitions by reforming the Sangha and Chinese Buddhism. The reformed Buddhism in the Mahāyāna world is referred to as the Humanistic Buddhism (人间佛教) that has adapted the Buddha's teachings and practices to address contemporary worldly



issues. This humanistic approach inspired a Buddhist revival movement among the Buddhists, though often met with resistance from the conservative and traditional elders, and also the practitioners of certain Buddhist sects.

The third observation is the existence and growing strong Chinese cultural elements in Mahāyāna Buddhist organizations. Some Mahāyāna monastics remain well connected with the Chinese network overseas and continue with the practice of Chinese syncretic religion. Due to a shortage of monastics in Singapore, many Chinese monastics are invited over from China to be the spiritual leader of some Mahāyāna organizations, to perform religious ceremonies or study in Buddhist College of Singapore (BCS) which is centered only on Mahāyāna Tradition. For a few years, Kong Meng San Monastery (or Bright Hill Temple) has offered Confucius teachings. In Chinese culture, filial piety is the greatest virtue. Hence, there are popular sutras related to filial piety like The Fundamental Vows of the Bodhisattva Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva for certain rites and ceremonies. During the seventh lunar month in Singapore, Buddhist rites are performed for the salvation of deceased in all Mahāyāna places including some Theravada temples. Some Chinese Singaporeans with mixed religious heritage of Taoism and Buddhism might participate since it is a part of the Chinese tradition. In the culture of globalization and capitalism, certain aspects of Buddhism have been packaged into a commodity for sale. Some places commodify it into a product, give it an identity and tag a value to it. For instance, the reification of “merit” into a commodity with a price tag. Even though such practice has increased the cultural and religious capital, it has already misconstrued the true meaning of karma.

According to Sociologists, the process of migration usually increases the intensity of religious faith. As Buddhism needs to co-exist with other cultural systems, and in the process of being embraced as an “migrant”, the integration often evolves itself into a “syncretic Buddhism”. In other words, the transmigration of Buddhism and its transnational network has mixed with the local syncretic religion and form its own unique Mahāyāna Buddhism with elements of local Chinese



culture in Singapore. During Buddha's lifetime, he has allowed his teachings to be transmitted and taught according to local culture so that everyone can study and practice the Dhamma in their own language. In order to further understand the interrelationship of Buddhism and culture, it is meaningful to look back at the history of Mahāyāna Buddhism before its spread to Singapore.

### **How Chinese Culture Shape Mahāyāna Buddhism**

To understand how Chinese culture has shaped Buddhism, I have analyzed three strategic moves that are related to Buddhist practices when Indian Buddhism encountered the social and cultural fabrics of China in our history, and most importantly, they mirror the Buddhism in countries that practice Mahāyāna Buddhism as well.

The first strategic move was the creation of Zen lineage in genealogical table to justify the establishment of a new school that would not conflict with then existing social system of Confucianism that considered renunciation as an irresponsible, selfish and unfilial act. In a Chinese society, ancestry relationships and family values are particularly strong and significant. In order for the monastics to gain acceptance in the society, renunciation was interpreted as a form of merit making act to benefit nine generations of ancestors, especially their parents, thus, making it a great filial piety act in order to repay back the kindness of their parents. Hence, in this cultural context, renunciation might not carry the right motivation – which is to end suffering and attain liberation (or enlightenment).

The second strategic move was the translation of Sanskrit texts into Chinese with the influence of linguistic logics and cultural elements of Confucianism and Taoism. Buddhism has built on some elements of Confucian and Taoist beliefs in order to co-exist coherently, for instance, adaptation of the outer appearances of monastery and building, and adaptation into local customs and political situation was obviously necessary. I want to highlight that the given circumstances for the transmission of Buddhism have led to problematic interpretation and translation of Buddhist scriptures in rendering Sanskrit to



Chinese (Meisig ed. 2010, Mizuno 1989:52-5).

The third strategic move when bringing Buddhism to China was to modify the Vinaya for Buddhism to integrate in the strong Confucian society. In the Tang Dynasty, a famous Zen Master Bai Zhang Huai Hai (百丈懷海, 720-814 CE) reformed Buddhist monastery

structure and adapted Vinaya to Zen. Dumoulin (1988:170) records that the Pure Rule of Pai- chang (百丈清規) is a new set of precepts drawn on the traditions of Theravada and Mahāyāna.

The Mahāyāna Tradition follows the Bodhisattva Precepts listed in Brahma Net Sutra (梵网经) that states 10 major precepts and 48 minor precepts to follow in the Bodhisattva path. It

was brought into China and translated by Kumārajīva in 406 CE, as Adamek mentioned in The Teachings of Master Wuzhu: Zen and Religion of No-religion (2011:160), “internal evidence suggests that it could not have been compiled before 431 CE”. However, there was no agreement by the scholars on this.

As Buddhism evolves over time in China, there are numerous cultural adaptations for the continuity of the religion. In terms of alms-round practice, the ancient traditional Chinese society considers such image as begging and it constitutes a “loss in face”. In line with the traditional Chinese value of diligence, Zen Master Bai Zhang promotes hard labor work in the life of a monk as a form of practice and to work for a meal, as the Zen saying goes “a day without work, a day without meal” (一日不做, 一日不食) (Dumoulin 1988:171). For self-

sustainability issues, daily farming to get the source of food has evolved to providing ancestral tablets and columbarium, and chanting services and puja for the deceased. To work around the precepts of no food to be taken after lunch in the Vinaya, the innovative idea was to treat dinner as “medicinal food” to sustain health. With the economical background of the monk, plant-based diet from the farm was the most practical source of food. Hence, having dinner and vegetarian diet has become part of Mahāyāna Tradition till modern times.



## Conclusion

These social and cultural forces continuously shape Buddhism, and in turn shape different cultures. Just as a plant absorbs oxygen and releases carbon dioxide, Buddhism absorbs the cultural elements of the Chinese, evolves organically and releases its unique culture, and in turn, interacts and influences the Chinese culture back again. The above analysis has shown that culture and Buddhism are interrelated and interdependent on each other. The social development of multiculturalism may contain elements of Buddhism, but it is impossible to conclude that Buddhism is the root of multiculturalism for societal development.

As the Buddha taught about the *paṭiccasamuppāda* (Interdependent Co-arising), there are conditions that lead one factor to the arising of another, there are conditions that lead one factor to the ceasing of another (Lim 2019). This core principle of Buddhism on the interconnected relationship of everything in reality and in the world can be expressed in the formulae below:

When this exists, that comes to be; with the arising of this, that arises.

When this does not exist, that does not come to be; with the cessation of this, that ceases. (Bodhi 2012 p.1463)

Finally, it is meaningful to look at the reason why Buddha gave the spiritual path

he taught as Dhamma-Vinaya. The goal of the Buddha is to teach Dhamma in its practicality and applicability way to benefit sentient beings and lead them to liberation. The goal of the teachings is to offer the truth and morality as a guide in a relevant way, to motivate one to live life to the fullest in every mindful way and to transform oneself towards the path of awakening. The history and evidences have indicated that both the teachings and discipline are inseparable and interdependent of each other, suggesting a strong foundation in understanding and practice is needed in transforming oneself. In other words, given any cultural context, the importance of the relationship of Dhamma and Vinaya cannot be underscored.



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