The Current Situation of Buddhism in Singapore

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1. Introduction

This paper discusses the current situation of Buddhism in Singapore. Buddhism in Singapore is unique, as it incorporates the characteristics of Buddhism found in several countries. These characteristics can be divided roughly into two categories: understructure, and superstructure. The understructure is related to traditional Chinese Buddhism, a mixture of Mahayana Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism, and its role in providing a sense of community. On the other hand, the superstructure is related to the learning of the dharma, which is mainly influenced by Theravada Buddhism from South East Asia and Sri Lanka.

2. Religions in Singapore

According to the Singapore Census of Population 2010, the proportion of Buddhists is 33.3%, which is the highest among all the religions. This is followed by Christianity (18.3%), no religion (17.0%), Islam (14.7%), Taoism (10.9%) and Hinduism (5.1%). However, the proportion of Buddhists has decreased from 42.5% to 33.3% over the last 10 years.

Religious affiliation is related to ethnicity. As of 2010, the ethnic composition of Singapore is Chinese (74.1%), Malay (13.4%), Indian (9.2%) and others (3.3%). Among the Chinese, the proportion of Buddhists is 43.0%, followed by persons with no religion (21.8%), Christians (20.1%) and Taoists (14.4%). For the Malays, 98.7% of the population is Muslim. Religious affiliation among Indians is more diverse compared to the Malays. Majority of Indians are Hindu (58.9%), followed by Muslims (21.7%), Christians (12.8%), and other religions (5.4%). These statistics allow us to conclude that the majority of Buddhists in Singapore are Chinese.

The statistics also show the distribution of religious affiliation by age group. The proportion of Buddhists is higher among older persons than younger persons, while the pro-
portion of persons with no religion shows the opposite for the two age groups. This implies a decrease in the proportion of Buddhists, and an increase in the proportion of persons with no religion in the near future.

3. Previous studies

Chia (2009) provides a comprehensive review paper on Buddhism in Singapore that categorizes previous studies into a macro approach and micro approach. The macro approach includes general accounts, sociological studies, historical studies and country-specific studies, while the micro approach includes biography and focuses on specific religious institutions and organizations. This paper adopts a micro approach, focusing on 2 religious institutions and organizations, Thian Hock Keng Temple, and The Buddhist library.

4. Thian Hock Keng Temple

Thian Hock Keng Temple is a Chinese temple dedicated to Mazu, the seafaring goddess, along with Boddhisattva Guanyin and Holy Emperor Lord Guan. Like other Buddhist temples in Singapore, it shows a mixture of Mahayana Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism all in one site.

The devotees of this temple have a shared Chinese identity. The main function of this temple was to provide for the community of Chinese people who originally came from Fujian province a means of maintaining their Hokkien identity. Many of the activities hosted in this temple were mainly for these Hokkien immigrants and they spoke Hokkien dialect at the temple as a way of maintaining their culture.

Ling (1993) explains the history of the temple. It served as the meeting place for a society known as Lo Shan She. Lo Shan She provided regular lectures on the first and fifteenth of every lunar month at the temple, with the audience comprising of mainly merchants and intellectuals. The contents of these lectures had a strongly Confucian rather than Buddhist character. Therefore, religious doctrine was not important compared to the maintenance of their social identity.

The history of the temple shows that the understructure of Buddhism in Singapore consists of its role in the community. However, the role of the temple is gradually changing. The temple is open to non Hokkien immigrants and provides several events for them. The situation might have been changed since Ling (1993).
5. The Buddhist library

The Buddhist library provides several events related to Buddhism as well as a library. The library holds events such as Pujas, Buddhist festivals, meditation, Dharma talks and seminars. Many participants are of Chinese ethnicity. Therefore, like Thian Hock Keng Temple, the library supports the Chinese community.

However, several events such as meditation and Dharma talks are taught by Sri Lankan monks in English. The participants typically have a traditional Chinese Buddhist religious background, a mixture of Mahayana Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism. The networking events are based on this kind of Buddhism. On the other hand, the dharma and meditation events at the library are based on Theravada Buddhism. In addition, the library offers a master’s degree awarded by a university in Sri Lanka. Interestingly, few participants feel conflicted about the mixing of traditional Chinese Buddhism and Theravada Buddhism.

The difference between the level of understanding of Buddhism at the community and academic levels comes from the lack of sanghas in Singapore. Many monks are invited to Singapore to teach Buddhists as there are few monks here. Since the monks come from several countries and teach their countries’ Buddhism, Buddhism from many countries influences Buddhists in Singapore. For instance, Theravada Buddhism from Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar, and Cambodia was introduced into Singapore by the monks, forming the superstructure of Buddhism in Singapore.

Many participants at the Buddhist library started out enjoying the sense of Chinese community and may have been uninterested in the kinds of Buddhism they believed in. However, some of them become motivated to study Buddhism deeper after attending several networking events, leading them to join the dharma talk and meditation events. In this case, the Buddhism they learn is Theravada Buddhism from Sri Lankan monks.

6. The future of Buddhism in Singapore

Statistics show that the percentage of Buddhists in Singapore has decreased, especially among the younger generation, and this percentage can be expected to continue decreasing. This may imply that Buddhism’s role in maintaining the identity of the Chinese community has become smaller. The younger Chinese generation has adopted a Singaporean identity,
and may not care where their ancestors came from. On the other hand, the role of Buddhism as a form of learning and practice might increase. Some people are becoming dissatisfied with attending only the community events and are starting to show more interest in Buddhism itself. As a result, courses on Buddhism and meditation are becoming popular.

Considering this situation, traditional Chinese Buddhism and Theravada Buddhism from South East Asia and Sri Lanka could become integrated in Singapore. Traditionally, there has often been a history of a split in Buddhism. However, the unique environment in Singapore could make it possible to see an integration of the two kinds of Buddhism instead.

7. Conclusion

This paper discusses the understructure and superstructure of Buddhism in Singapore through the two cases of Thian Hock Keng Temple and The Buddhist library. It is believed that this paper contributes to the previous studies to update the situation Buddhism in Singapore despite the limited samples. The understructure consists of traditional Chinese Buddhism, a mixture of Mahayana Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism, that provides a sense of community to immigrants from China or those from a specific province. The superstructure, which consists of Theravada Buddhism from South East Asia and Sri Lanka, supports Buddhist learning and practice. Moreover, the importance of the role of Buddhism is gradually moving from the understructure to the superstructure.

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