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# State, Society and Religious Engineering

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SECOND EDITION

# State, Society and Religious Engineering

Towards a Reformist  
Buddhism in Singapore

**KUAH-PEARCE KHUN ENG**



INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES  
SINGAPORE

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# Note on Romanisation

Chinese terms and names are transliterated by the *Hanyu Pinyin* system in the text with a hyphen between each Chinese character. Commonly-used terms and names are romanised according to the original spelling that appeared in the texts. In Singapore, this is often romanised according to the Fujian (Hokkien) dialect [H], the most commonly-used dialect in Singapore. Those that appear as quotations are written as they are in the original texts, which are spelled according to the Wade-Giles system [WG]. There are also several Cantonese [C], Japanese [J] and Pali [P] words. A list of the romanised terms and names and their corresponding Chinese characters is provided in the glossary at the back of the book.

# Preface to the Second Edition

Religion, since the beginning of human civilisation, has played a crucial role in all societies. Its metaphysical appeal continues to fulfil individuals' imagination and quest for an understanding of the unknown and the events that unfold before our eyes. Such a role has become even more significant with the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century as societies have become more complicated and besieged by increasing wants both metaphysical and material in nature. As we move into the age of globalisation, fraught with relativism that challenges existing structures, institutions and ideologies, we are confronted with a multitude of behaviours and insatiable demands that expose the world as both rational and chaotic, moral and immoral, and compassionate and ruthless. Amidst these conflicting demands, individuals continue to cope with religious and spiritual imaginations.

So, where does religion stand on the global stage in the contemporary world? Since the 9/11 incident in 2001, the world has been looking at all types of religious activities, religious revivalism and religious renaissance in a cautious manner. Could religion lead to what Huntington (1996) viewed as "clashes of civilization" considered inevitable because of differing ideological underpinnings of the different religions within different socio-political cultures, or could it be as the old school of thought has argued that religion continues its journey into humanity, allowing for discursive understandings and shaping the moral underpinnings of each individual society.

While the impact of the 9/11 incident has made us re-examine religions on the global stage, cementing the link between religion and politics and religion and security issues, too much attention today has been paid to this set of relationships, often neglecting the other aspects of religion in the globalised world that we live in. The political and security issues confronting religious activities often make it to the front page of major newspapers. Attention is focussed on the Islamic extremist groups and their actions or

would-be terrorist activities foiled by various governments in the world. At the same time, the violence between Buddhism and Hinduism has also made headlines in the news. Towards the end of 2007 and first half of 2008, attention was turned to Buddhism with the sudden assembly of monks in saffron robes taking to the streets in protest against authoritarian regimes with regard to religious freedom, human rights issues and political freedom in Myanmar and Tibet. Such high profile movements gained worldwide attention.

While such high profile actions made news, it is imperative for scholars and individuals within the communities to understand the root cause of such actions when religion and politics have become closely intertwined. At the same time, it is also imperative that the spiritual aspect which is the *raison d'être* is not neglected.

For the last three decades, Buddhism has gradually increased its influence on the global stage and with new converts from various parts of the world. In particular, Buddhism has experienced rapid development in America, Europe, and Australia, alongside its stronghold in the various Asian countries. At the same time, in Asia, Buddhism has also seen a rapid revival although in a different form that is more in tandem with the modern individual and youthful needs. From Japan to Southeast Asia, China and beyond, it is blooming. In Japan and Taiwan, various new Buddhist groups have emerged and taken root not only within their own society, but also in the western societies. Likewise in Southeast Asia, a new reformist wave has swept through countries such as Thailand, Vietnam, Myanmar, Malaysia, and Singapore as the elites seek to reform and modernise to suit modern Buddhism needs.

This book thus aims to fill a gap in the literature on the Sociology/Anthropology of Religion by attempting to understand the modern needs of Singapore Chinese. Their religious pursuits have resulted in the transformation of a folk-based syncretic Buddhism into a modern Reformist Buddhism in Singapore through self-introspection of the Reformist monks, nuns and lay Buddhists. At the same time, this book studies the state-society-religion relationship and why the Singapore state continues to

view religion as playing a crucial socio-cultural role in Singapore's multi-ethnic society. As such, the state established stringent guidelines to engineer the direction of the major religions in Singapore. The Singapore state has actively used various policies to encourage the religious groups to become socially engaged.

Reformist Buddhism in Singapore has grown out of a syncretic Chinese religious tradition which is commonly called *Shenism* where the saying is "going into a temple, one must light a joss-stick". Amidst the syncretic practices, there is a large element of Mahayana Buddhism. In addition, there is also a Singhalese culturalised version of Theravada Buddhist tradition patronised by the small Singhalese community and the Peranakan Chinese in Singapore. Today, Reformist Buddhism has taken root in Singapore society as many relate to its scriptural-orientation, focus on meditation, and compassion-based type of activities.

Another important aspect in the global revivalism of religion is its humanistic role where religious institutions throughout the world have become socially-engaged in education, welfare work and relief efforts at home and abroad. Increasingly, transnationalising compassion and work associated with religious philanthropy have become an important arena within the global religious supermarket.

Reformist Buddhism in contemporary Singapore society is now broadly seen as a humanist and socially-engaged Buddhism that seeks to promote spiritualism and compassion to the wider population. Thus, individual Reformist Buddhists engage in spiritual pursuit at one level and humanist and socially-engaged acts such as the provision of educational and welfare activities and facilities at another level. In so doing, Reformist Buddhists in Singapore create a new niche for themselves by becoming active providers of compassion.

The challenge for Reformist Buddhism in Singapore today is to reinvent itself at regular intervals. It also needs to seek out new niches that are closely grounded to the community where adherents are socially engaged in activities that are within the understanding and interpretation of their religious duties. In so doing, Reformist

Buddhism will ensure that it continues to be relevant to the needs of its adherents and their community as it marches into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

*Kuah-Pearce Khun Eng*  
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- (iii) Taylor and Francis (Routledge Journal), “Confucian Ideology and Social Engineering in Singapore”, *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 1990, 20(3): 371-382 (reproduced in Chapter 6).
- (iv) Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, (ISEAS) Singapore, “Delivering Welfare Services in Singapore: A Strategic Partnership between Buddhism and the State”, in *Religious Diversity in Singapore*, edited by Lai Ah Eng, (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008, pp. 505-523) (reproduced in Chapter 5).