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Enlightenment on Display: The Origins, Motivations, and Functions of Hagiographic Buddhist Museums in Singapore

Goh Aik Sai*

The unprecedented emergence of hagiographic Buddhist museums in Singapore in the 2000s superficially appears to be attempts by the Buddhist community to memorialize their deceased venerables. While this is undoubtedly true, the choice of modern museums rather than traditional memorial halls or stūpas signifies that other formative forces may be at work. This article argues that rather than being isolated commemorative events, the successive establishment of these museums points to certain etic socioreligious factors affecting the local Buddhist community in the preceding decades. Through a review of the historical evidence, interviews with crucial museum stakeholders, and surveys of museum visitors, I posit that the museums are a manifestation of the confluence of the effects of the community's response to religious rivalry, Buddhist intellectual and pedagogical reforms, conjoined with the adoption of nontraditional methods for the memorialization of charismatic reformist monks. Lastly, I investigate hagiographic Buddhist museums as sites of didacticism, heuristics, and skillful means.

Keywords: Buddhist museum, Buddhist memorial hall, Buddhist gallery, hagiography, memorialization, reformist Buddhism in Singapore, heuristics, skillful means

Introduction

From the early 2000s, Singapore witnessed for the first time in its history the establishment of Buddhist museums and galleries. This novel event, which went largely unnoticed by the general public as well as the majority of local Buddhists, signified a sea change in the modus operandi of the museums' and galleries' parent organizations. Trends contributing to this change built up over the decades preceding the twenty-first century and

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Table 1 Singapore Buddhist Museums

Museum	Hagiographic ¹	Year Open	Years since Passing of Monk	Year Closed/Suspended
1 Nei Xue Tang	No	2005	–	2007
2 Yen Pei Memorial Hall	Yes (Yen Pei)	2006	10	–
3 Venerable Hong Choon Museum	Yes (Hong Choon)	2006	16	–
4 Kong Hiap Memorial Museum	Yes (Kong Hiap)	2007	13	–
5 Buddhas of the World Museum ²	Yes (Buddha)	2007	–	–
6 Hai Yin Culture and Arts Research Gallery ³	No	2008	–	2012 ³
7 80 Gallery	Yes (Song Nian)	2010	13	2016
8 Cultural Center (Museum) ⁴	No	2014	–	–
9 Eminent Sangha Museum ⁵	Yes (Multiple Monks)	2014	–	–
10 Tzu Chi Da Ai Gallery	No	2016	–	2021 ⁶

Notes: ¹ The memorialized person is named in parentheses.

² Previously known as the Nagapuspa Buddhist Culture Museum until 2019 when it changed its name, it gives a narrative of Buddha Śākyamuni's biography and is located within the Buddha Tooth Relic Temple and Museum.

³ It is unclear when the gallery closed, but I estimate it to have been between December 18, 2011 and May 2012.

⁴ Located within the Wat Ananda Metyarama Thai Buddhist Temple complex.

⁵ The second museum inside the Buddha Tooth Relic Temple and Museum.

⁶ The gallery's last day of operation was October 31, 2021.

culminated in these museological institutions. Of the ten Buddhist museums surveyed by the author, six are hagiographic museums (see Table 1). This article, supported by interviews with major stakeholders of Buddhist museums and centers in Singapore and visitor surveys at two hagiographic Buddhist museums, seeks to uncover the most salient sociohistorical factors and motivations that may have been instrumental in their establishment.

A Buddhist museum is defined here as a *permanent institution dedicated to collecting, conserving, or exhibiting almost exclusively Buddhist-related artifacts and paraphernalia*. Artifacts refer to the full range of artworks consisting of texts, paintings, and sculptures; while paraphernalia is defined as related items such as the Buddhist clergy's own works, writings, robes, rosaries, artworks, relics, and reliquaries. Included in my definition are Buddhist *galleries* and *museological memorial halls*,¹⁾ even though they may not self-identify as museums or fulfill all functions of museums as the International Council of Museums (ICOM) allows for the inclusion of “other institutions as having some or all of

1) These are memorial halls resembling museological spaces with features such as spotlights, air conditioning, labels, display cabinets, and informational panels. A prime example is the Yen Pei Memorial Hall, which prohibits photography but is a well-renovated, brightly lit, clean, and air-conditioned environment with a central life-sized statue of the monk, wall panels illustrating his biography and achievements, and his published works, belongings, and relics in glass display cabinets.

the characteristics of a Museum” (ICOM 2017, 3). For the remainder of this article, I use the word “museum” to refer to a museum, gallery, or museum-like memorial hall. While Buddhist museums may be state or privately owned, the ones in Singapore are all privately owned, usually by Chinese Buddhist organizations and more rarely by wealthy individuals.²⁾ The focus of this study is a subset of these Buddhist museums that are *erected explicitly to commemorate (usually deceased) sangha* (Skt. *saṃgha*; Buddhist ordained monks or nuns). These museums may be standalone memorialization efforts or supplementary to other forms such as stūpas, commemorative volumes, collected works, or the naming of buildings and institutions after the venerables.

The earliest Buddhist museums were set up by British colonial administrators primarily to house archeological finds in Bagan, Myanmar (begun in 1902 and completed in 1904), and Sarnath, India (begun in 1904 and completed in 1908). One of the first privately owned Buddhist museums is the Jacques Marchais Museum of Tibetan Art in New York, established in 1945. In Singapore, the first Buddhist museological space seems to be Nei Xue Tang (内学堂), which opened in 2005.

The academic study of Buddhist museums appears to have begun in earnest in 2003 in the field of Thai Buddhism with the studies by Louis Gabaude, who observes that Thai Buddhist museums are but a natural progression from the centuries-old Buddhist practice of erecting stūpas (dome- or mound-shaped shrines for relics) to one “where nothing is kept aside or unseen” (Gabaude 2003b, 117) and that these museums are pedagogical instruments showing “Buddhahood in action, Buddhahood here and now, Buddhahood visible, as solid as crystal” (Gabaude 2003a, 181). Paritta Koanantakool (2006, 158) finds that many Thai Buddhist museums’ collections originated as gifts and offerings, while Christina Kreps (2014) explores Thai temple museums by highlighting the stark differences between the object-based and information-oriented epistemological practices of Western museology, and the unique practices of these museums, where the emphasis is on “people’s emotional, spiritual engagement with and experience of objects” (Kreps 2014, 232). Kreps also observes that “there is not one universal museology but a world full of museologies” (Kreps 2014, 251).

Closer to Singapore, Jack Chia (2017) describes a Buddhist memorial hall in Indo-

2) While the Buddhist religious landscape in Singapore is diverse, with representations from Theravāda, Chinese Mahāyāna, and Tibetan traditions as well as other New Religious Movements, this study focuses primarily on Chinese Buddhist organizations. Some interview excerpts conducted at a Tibetan Buddhist center are also included because this organization has explicitly made known its plan to establish a Buddhist relics museum, which to date has not materialized (*Straits Times*, December 12, 2006; *Lianhe Zaobao*, August 14, 2006). The center is particularly well known for organizing massive year-end Buddhist relics exhibitions. The *Straits Times* and *Lianhe Zaobao* (联合早报) are the nation’s main daily newspapers in English and Chinese respectively.

nesia and concludes that “Buddhist museums can also serve as a space to present the hagiography of an eminent monk” (Chia 2017, 274). In one of the earliest studies of Buddhist museums in Singapore, I (Goh 2016) present a succinct account of the Nagapuspa Buddhist Culture Museum; while Justin McDaniel (2016) focuses on the collecting practices of the founder of Nei Xue Tang. In his monograph on “socially dis-engaged Buddhism”—a twist on “socially engaged Buddhism”—McDaniel (2017, 135–147) devotes a mostly descriptive chapter to the Buddha Tooth Relic Temple, which houses the Nagapuspa Buddhist Culture Museum and the Eminent Sangha Museum. None of the above studies, however, investigated the causal factors or motivations that may have led to the general proliferation of Buddhist museums or the particular emergence of hagiographic Buddhist museums in Singapore.

Since no two hagiographic Buddhist museums are homologous, it may be more useful to think of them as occupying points on a spectrum within the definition proffered earlier with varying degrees of emphasis and display strategies. Nonetheless, to give readers a sense of what such a museum may look like, I describe below certain commonalities of hagiographic museums while noting that no museum fits exactly this ideal type. I start with the example of 80 Gallery, which has a balanced mix of hagiographic and peripheral elements, and then explain other features not found there.

The now-defunct 80 Gallery (Songnian Shuyuan 松年书院) was housed in a rented two-story, air-conditioned commercial building in Chinatown and was open daily except Mondays and public holidays.³⁾ Songnian (松年, 1911–97) was a famed Chinese calligrapher and painter, and a former abbot of Mahabodhi Temple in Singapore. Better-endowed museums may have salaried staff, but 80 Gallery was managed by volunteers. Its ground floor was a merchandise area with a small exhibition space available for rent. The second level was a permanent place for the memorialization of the venerable (see Fig. 1). According to its poster, it featured the “master’s belongings such as flywhisk, ink stone, brushes, cassock, and others, together with the masterpieces of calligraphy and painting.” It also had a bust of the monk and two panels extolling the life stories and achievements of Songnian and Guojun (果峻, 1974–), the current abbot of Mahabodhi Temple.⁴⁾ Admission to the gallery was free, but there were paid classes for meditation, *taiko* drumming, *taiji* (tai chi), Chinese calligraphy, and painting, which attracted non-Buddhist visitors.

Other features of hagiographic Buddhist museums not present at this gallery may

3) Opening dates and times for hagiographic Buddhist museums in Singapore vary greatly depending on the management. They can range from being open for only a couple of special days each year to daily, but admission is usually free.

4) Guojun is Songnian’s disciple who established the gallery in 2010. No academic study has been conducted on Songnian yet, despite his prominence in the local Buddhist community.



Fig. 1 Second Floor of 80 Gallery

Source: Goh Aik Sai.

include worship spaces, displays of *śarīras* (cremated somatic relics), honorific titles and fans, texts, Buddha statues, and other artworks previously owned by the monks.⁵⁾ Display labels, if present, are generally bilingual in English and Chinese.⁶⁾ Some may also have interactive touchscreen displays. The museums' contents depend on the areas their creators decide to focus on and the venerables' achievements. Although there is no standardized format for these museums, a common thread running through them is the impetus to construct an explicitly museological space to commemorate eminent sangha. Unlike Thailand or Cambodia, there is no single authority governing Buddhist monastics

5) This alludes to the collecting practices of individual monastics, which are beyond the scope of this paper. For example, Kong Hiap was the recipient of hundreds of calligraphic works and paintings from his close associates in China, which are now displayed in his memorial museum. By contrast, Hong Choon was not an avid collector, and his museum showcases mainly his personal items such as his work desk and chair.

6) Labels are usually provided for the museums' main exhibits, but their provision may be dependent on factors such as the museums' resources and expertise. The labels are normally in English and simplified Chinese following the nation's promotion of English and "mother tongue" languages, including Mandarin Chinese. Since the hagiographic museums in this study were set up by Chinese Buddhist organizations and most of their devotees are ethnic Chinese, having Chinese labels can be seen as instrumental as well as aligning with a particular form of Asian modernity (Rappa and Wee 2006, 77–104) and China's growing political and economic clout (see Wong and Tan 2017, 27–28).

in Singapore.⁷⁾ As such, the question of whether and how a monastic is to be memorialized is contingent on the respective community's leadership and wherewithal. Frequently, decisions are made by the sangha's immediate successor and the temple's board of directors or trustees.

What follows is an investigation into the vicissitudes of the local Buddhist community after World War II, when various monks who settled in Singapore from China contributed to arresting the religion's decline by implementing a gradual but spirited reformation. Since they were approximately of the same age group, a significant number of them passed on in the 1990s, triggering a passionate memorializing movement culminating in the construction of hagiographic Buddhist museums, galleries, and memorial halls in the 2000s. I then show how these museums are related to didacticism, heuristics, and skillful means. It should be noted that the movement is neither organized by a collective body nor systemic but was a trend comprising disparate initiatives by independent organizations which took form ten to 16 years after the demise of each individual monk destined for memorialization.

Religious Rivalry

Like other religions in Singapore, Buddhism is in a constant state of flux due to societal, religious, economic, demographic, and political changes. A significant factor contributing to these changes is pressure from proselytizing religions. It has been conclusively shown that religious competition and conversion were rife in Singapore in the second half of the twentieth century following a "concerted proselytization drive" (Tong 2007, 192) by Christians in the 1960s–80s (Kuo *et al.* 1988, 5; Goh 2014, 127).⁸⁾ Scholars concur that from independence in 1965 up to the 1980s, Singapore experienced a "Charismatic Renewal movement" from Christian churches, which resulted in an increase of Christians among the Chinese from 2.4 percent in 1921 to 2.8 percent in 1931, 10.6 percent in 1980, and 14 percent in 1990 according to official censuses⁹⁾ (Kuo and Tong 1995, 8). Researchers point out that even though the figure is not high, the converts were "better educated

7) The official regulatory authority of most religious groups is the state's Commission of Charities, because religious groups tend to register as charitable organizations. The closest one gets to a supervisory body for Buddhist centers is the Singapore Buddhist Federation, but it has no authority over its members and membership is not mandatory. The federation usually acts as a spokesperson on behalf of the Buddhist community, even though not all Buddhist organizations belong to it.

8) See Quah (1989, 63) for an exposition of the four main factors accounting for the success of Protestant Christianity in Singapore.

9) This figure further increased to 16.5 percent in 2000 (Saw 2007, 42) and 20.1 percent in 2010 (Saw 2012, 42). Between 1931 and 1980, no data on religious affiliation was gathered in official censuses.

and of higher socio-economic status. . . . As such, they tended to be more visibly involved in evangelistic activities, and exerted much influence in Singapore socially and economically, disproportionate to their size” (Kuo and Tong 1995, 17).

A 1988 report commissioned by the Ministry of Community Development found that “most of the [Christian] converts come from families where their parents are Buddhists, Taoists, or practise ancestor worship” (Kuo *et al.* 1988, 15).¹⁰ In other words, the primary arena of religious change taking place was within the Chinese populace (Kuo and Tong 1995, 32). The authors identified the “push” factors as (1) a “general dissatisfaction among young Chinese Singaporeans with the beliefs and rituals associated with their parents’ religion,” which was heralded as “illogical,” “unrealistic,” and “superstitious” (Kuo *et al.* 1988, 15); and (2) young Chinese Singaporeans being benighted with respect to doctrines of their parents’ religion. The “pull” factors were (1) the lack of an alternative religion, with Hinduism and Islam being ethnically and racially linked to Indians and Malays,¹¹ and Christianity being seen as a nonaligned religion (Kuo *et al.* 1988, 16); (2) the perception of Christianity as modern, English-based, “rational, orderly and systematic” (Kuo *et al.* 1988, 17); and (3) the aggressive evangelism sanctioned by churches and the sense of communal belonging engendered by their ecumenical activities (Kuo *et al.* 1988, 17–18). An additional pull factor, I posit, was the introduction of “Religious Knowledge” (see below) as a subject in secondary schools, which further raised consciousness of Christianity (Tan 1997, 616; Kuo *et al.* 1988, 15). Twenty years after the report, other empirical research reaffirmed the persistent concern that Buddhism was still not as attractive as Christianity to the younger generation (Chew 2008).

While the proportion of people self-identifying as Buddhists has increased over the years, there is no monolithic Buddhist identity in Singapore. Those who profess to be adherents of the religion, especially older Chinese, may know little of its essential canons and associate Buddhism with Taoism or Confucianism (Wee 1976, 180). This group of nominal Buddhists—or what some have called “Chinese Religionists,” “Shenists,”¹² or

10) The ministry commissioned and published five reports written by scholars (Kuo *et al.* 1988; Kuo 1989; Kuo and Quah 1989; Quah 1989; Tong 1989) that elicited widespread media coverage and drew attention to the dramatic increase of Christians, especially among younger and better-educated Chinese. Michael Hill (2004, 351) asserts that the resultant backlash partly contributed to the withdrawal of the Religious Knowledge syllabus in 1989.

11) Tham Seong Chee (1984) notes that Christians were prohibited from proselytizing to these two ethnic groups, thus limiting their target only to the Chinese. The then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew had, as early as 1965, directed Christians to cease proselytizing to Muslims (Thio 1995, 33n18).

12) Shenism (and its adherents, Shenists) derives its name from the worship of spirits (*shen* 神) and is characterized by an “eclectic mix of the wider Chinese cosmology that includes Daoist understanding of the polarity of yin and yang and the five elements, Buddhist understanding of karma, death and rebirth, and selected Confucian values. It also includes the worshipping of various folk gods and deities” (Kuah-Pearce 2009, 3; see also Elliott [1955] 2020, 29).

“Syncretists”—are deemed to be superstitious, conservative, and out of touch with modern society since they possess only a superficial understanding of the religion mixed with non-doctrinal customs and beliefs. Due to the pervasiveness of this usually older group—primarily grandparents, parents, or elders in traditional Chinese hierarchical families—and their inability to satisfy the spiritual needs of the younger generation, Buddhism is deemed to have lost its broad appeal to the latter group of people. As a result, the younger generation has gravitated toward Christianity, which is perceived as modern, rational, progressive, and an asset in striving for upward socioeconomic mobility (Tong 2007, 82, 93) through, for instance, networking with fellow brethren during regular church meetings. In this respect, “dissatisfaction with the existing Chinese religious landscape has provided fertile ground for the Christian evangelists to proselytize and convert a substantial number of younger Singaporean Chinese” (Kuah-Pearce 2009, 272).

Mission Schools and Religious Knowledge

Statistics from a 1988 ministerial survey found a strong positive correlation between the religious affiliation of the school a person attended and his or her religion, and that students from Christian mission schools were three times more likely to convert to Christianity than students from secular schools (Kuo and Quah 1989, 26). The significance of social relationships and the wish to be accepted by peers means that the formative teenage years are most susceptible to religious switching (Kuo *et al.* 1988, 14–15; Kuo and Quah 1989, 35). It has also been hypothesized that once a child reaches the age of 13, a “window of conversion” opens (Kuo and Quah 1989, 34). According to the 1990 population census, 45.3 percent of those who converted did so when they were less than twenty years old (Kuo and Tong 1995, 34). Phyllis Chew (2008, 389, Table 16.5) finds that 60.1 percent, or 95 ($n = 158$), of her 12- to 18-year-old informants switched to Christianity. Thus, the evidence strongly suggests that one of the principal locales in which Chinese were targeted and converted by evangelistic Christian groups was mission schools, especially among the Protestant denominations (Kuo 1989, 23). Indeed, Tong Chee Kiong (2007, 101) reports that more than half of his interviewees converted to Christianity in school.

In the 1990s, S. Gopinathan (1995, 18) reported that there were a whopping total of sixty Christian mission schools in Singapore: 28 primary, 31 secondary, and one pre-university. These “provide a fertile environment for the promotion of Christian faith and the conversion of non-Christian students to Christianity” (Kuo *et al.* 1988, 38). In sharp

contrast, there are only three Buddhist mission schools¹³⁾—two primary and one secondary—resulting in a feeling among Buddhists that their community botched the chance to play a major role in the local secular educational system. I conjecture here that this is principally due to (1) the lack of cohesiveness and affirmative action within the Chinese Buddhist community during the colonial era and the early years of nationhood; (2) the greater affinity of early Chinese immigrants with their respective clans (Pang 2016, 30), partly on account of their indiscriminate syncretic perception of Chinese religions; and therefore (3) the diversion of any available funds to the Chinese medium school-building efforts of higher-profile local Chinese clan associations (Lim 2019, 426), which by and large catered to the needs of the Chinese population (Pang 2016, 30–31) and thus enervated other analogous endeavors.¹⁴⁾ Overall, these clans founded a respectable total of 44 schools, of which only a trifling 11 survived after the introduction of the national school system.¹⁵⁾

With only three Buddhist mission schools, it is unsurprising that when the government decided in 1984 to introduce Religious Knowledge in secondary schools, Chinese parents (Kuah-Pearce 2009, 246) and Buddhist leaders alike lauded the gesture, notwithstanding the fact that Bible Knowledge and Islamic Religious Knowledge were already allowed to be taught as examination subjects in Christian mission schools and Malay medium schools respectively starting from 1979 (Tan 2008, 323; Chia 2011, 394). In other words, compared to other religious educational institutions, Christian mission schools and government-aided Malay schools had a head start of five years of ministry-sanctioned religious education for their students.

13) I distinguish between Buddhist mission schools and other tertiary-level Buddhist schools. The former are schools allied with Buddhist organizations that offer national-level secular compulsory education for children of school-going age. In these schools, Buddhism is taught as an optional and non-examinable subject outside of curriculum time. The latter are non-secular schools, often housed within the premises of temples, that provide diploma and above certificates in Buddhist Studies only. See Table 2.

14) For example, the Singapore Buddhist Girls' School was purportedly closed due to lack of funds (Ong 2005, 120). The huge discrepancy in the numbers between Christian and Buddhist mission schools, and its relationship to religious conversion, is a subject that warrants further research and is noticeably absent from the work of scholars. Tong (2007, 3), for example, sidesteps the issue with his comment that "as the number of Singaporeans who attend mission schools is quite small, it is not sufficient to account for the massive growth in the number of Christians in Singapore." Robbie Goh (2008) remains the authority on Singapore Christian mission schools, and Lim Guan Hock (2019) provides an excellent overview of Chinese education in Singapore from 1819 to 1979 but says nothing about Buddhist mission schools.

15) Of the 11, eight were primary schools, two were secondary schools, and one was a polytechnic (Chang and Yan 2005, 338). There were other non-clan Chinese schools as well: according to Tay Lian Soo (2001, 38), there were a total of 349 Chinese schools in 1949.

During the six years of implementation of Religious Knowledge—from 1984 to 1989¹⁶⁾—Buddhist Studies quickly became the most popular choice for three reasons: (1) the perceived need for “cultural continuity” by Chinese parents for their children (Kuah-Pearce 2009, 208); (2) its relative ease of study vis-à-vis Confucian Ethics, which was the only other included Chinese “religion” (Tan 1997, 615); and (3) the omission of Taoism as a Religious Knowledge option even though 29.3 percent of the population—the largest group at the time—self-identified as Taoists in the 1980 census (Khoo 1981, 3, Table 9.1). Since nominal Buddhists are not discriminating with regard to the different Chinese religions, as explained above, the only tenable choice for their children—with Taoism out of contention and the relative difficulty of Confucian Studies—was Buddhist Studies.

Buddhism was thus unwittingly propelled into the national consciousness through its inclusion in the official syllabus. The availability of Buddhist Studies in English (as well as Mandarin) also helped lessen its association with the Chinese language, which by the 1980s had been de-emphasized through the closure of all Chinese medium schools or their conversion to English medium schools. In other words, this curtailed the aforementioned “pull” factor of Christianity for its affiliation with the English language.

Early Reformist Monks

Any elation stemming from the Religious Knowledge initiative proved to be short-lived when the government decided to scale down the initiative starting in 1990, which led to enrollment in these classes plummeting. In one school, for example, students taking Buddhist Studies dropped from six full classes in 1990 to only 15 students in 1992 (*Straits Times*, June 28, 1992).¹⁷⁾

Along with the dismal Buddhist representation in public education, the dire situation of a “zero-sum game” (Tong 2007, 78) taking place between religions gave urgency to the need for religious education to be conducted by the Buddhist organizations themselves. This led to much soul-searching as Buddhist organizations combated dwindling membership driven by the two factors of disillusionment of existing adherents and what

16) Religious Knowledge was gradually phased out beginning in 1990, when it became a non-compulsory subject, and in 1995, when it was no longer admissible as a subject for pre-university admission.

17) Although this affected all Religious Knowledge subjects equally, the impact stemming from its withdrawal affected Buddhists more significantly because, as mentioned previously, Buddhist mission schools were disproportionately outnumbered by Christian mission schools; and without any alternative avenues for the dissemination of Buddhism, Buddhist leaders feared that any fledgling interest in schooling teenagers in the religion would wane.

appeared to be en masse conversion to Christianity, which began as early as the 1950s, especially with the introduction of para-church groups whose “primary mission was the proselytization and conversion of Singaporeans” (Tong 2007, 78).

The confluence of the above circumstances forced traditionally non-proselytizing Buddhism to reform principally in two areas: (1) a broadening of Buddhist organizations’ social welfare programs, and (2) the intellectualization of Buddhist organizations’ religion. The former was pivotal in endearing Buddhism to the populace since religious organizations have been called upon by the government to “walk the talk” by assisting the needy, sick, or elderly (Kuah-Pearce 2009, 244–246). Some such actions are extremely high-profile: for instance, the annual Ren Ci Hospital Charity Show, which taps national television coverage and celebrity endorsement that serve to further publicize and legitimize the religion.¹⁸⁾

The intellectualization of Buddhism was a three-pronged effort to revamp the religion through doctrinal education; simplification or extirpation of rituals and customs; and modernization of its institutions, including greater involvement of the laity. Accordingly, Buddhist temples and organizations began holding regular dharma classes in English and Chinese, discussion groups, seminars, lectures, and even holiday camps (Tong 2007, 129–130; Kuah-Pearce 2009, 234–240), amounting to what the sociologist Tong Chee Kiong called the “Christianization” of Buddhism (Tong 2007, 130).¹⁹⁾

The emphasis on doctrinal education was part of a demythologization exercise to exorcise Buddhism from other Chinese religions, prompted in part by the efforts of a second generation of modernist-leaning Chinese monks who had migrated to Singapore seeking refuge from the ravages of the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945) and the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. These migrant monks, including Kong Hiap (Guangqia 广洽, 1901–94), Hong Choon (Hongchuan 宏船, 1907–90), and

18) The charity show, first held in 2003, contributed to half of the hospital’s revenue. It was suspended in 2008–9 following a high-profile embezzlement scandal involving its founder and then CEO Mingyi but was reinstated in 2010.

19) Some scholars view this phenomenon as mirroring certain common Christian practices such as outings, camps, and Sunday Bible classes. Tong (2007, 130) calls it “Christianization” not only to show that these activities span most Christian denominations in Singapore, but also to distinguish it from another concept encapsulated by the phrase “Protestant Buddhism.” Coined by Gananath Obeyesekere (1970, 46–47), the term first referred to cultural borrowing or intercultural mimesis between Buddhists and Protestants in nineteenth-century Sri Lanka but has since been revised by others to denote attributes of Buddhism in many modern societies and is related to the notion of Buddhist modernism (McMahan 2008, 7–8). The majority of Christian denominations in Singapore are Pentecostal, followed by those belonging to non-Pentecostal evangelical congregations, and lastly Catholic churches, with Protestants outnumbering Catholics two to one according to Daniel Goh (2010, 55).

Yen Pei (Yanpei 演培, 1917–96), either directly received their education from or were inspired by the progenitors of what is now called “Humanistic Buddhism” (Renjian Fojiao 人间佛教). These progenitors included famed Republican-era Chinese venerables such as the reformist monk Taixu (太虚, 1890–1947) and the artist-musician turned monk Hongyi (弘一, 1880–1942), also known by his lay name, Li Shutong (李叔同).²⁰⁾

Taixu, who visited Singapore in 1926, 1928, and 1940, had advocated “a revitalization of Buddhism through institutional reorganization, modern education, compassionate social action, and ecumenical cooperation in global mission” (Pittman 2001, 2). Taixu’s reform activities in China were considered so advanced that a well-circulated Christian newsletter at the time encouraged its clergy to “learn from them” (*Chinese Recorder* 1933, 12, 797, quoted in Tarocco 2007, 121).

On the other hand, Hongyi, who was a peer of Taixu but never visited Singapore, was the spiritual master of Kong Hiap, the subject of the Kong Hiap Memorial Museum in Singapore. Besides his calligraphic works, Hongyi is extolled for composing the music to Taixu’s lyrics for the “Three Jewels Song” (*Sanbaoge* 三宝歌), which has become a Buddhist anthem of sorts for Chinese Buddhists (Tarocco 2007, 121). However, unlike Taixu, Hongyi was not interested in institutional Buddhism and did not take up any administrative duties or leadership positions. While Hongyi is now often thought of as leading the ascetic life of a wandering *dhutanga* (*toutuo* 头陀), he also traveled to, stayed at, and lectured in various monasteries. His practice of Buddhism integrated the traditions of Pure Land, Huayan, and Vinaya (Buddhist monastic disciplinary rules) (Xu 2009). Of these, it was the Nanshan (南山) Vinaya school of Daoxuan (道宣, 596–667 CE) that he was most intent on reviving, in response to a widely perceived decline in monastic discipline; this can also be seen as an effort to demythologize and strip Buddhism of superstition (Ritzinger 2017, 54, 59–60). Hongyi’s prodigious use of calligraphy with photography, for instance, exemplified the process of constructing a Chinese modernity informed by tradition in conjunction with new technologies (Birnbaum 2017, 194). Thus, Hongyi’s modernity “did not consist of abandoning a Chinese past, so much as finding different roots in tradition and eventually combining this with the new currents of the age” (Birnbaum 2003, 101).

Other monks who visited Singapore include Huiquan (会泉, 1874–1943), the founder of the Minnan Buddhist Institute (Minnan Foxueyuan 闽南佛学院) in Xiamen, China, who gave dharma talks at Leong San Temple in 1939. Cihang (慈航, 1895–1954), a graduate of the Minnan Buddhist Institute, visited Singapore in 1940 as part of Taixu’s

20) The literature on Humanistic Buddhism is vast, but see the recent introductory Yü (2020, 215–216). For Taixu, see Pittman (2001); for Hongyi, see Birnbaum (2003; 2007; 2017); and for Hongyi and Humanistic Buddhism, see Wang (2008).

entourage and stayed there until 1948, during which time he established the Leng Foong Bodhi Institute (Lingfeng Puti Xueyuan 灵峰菩提学院) and gave daily teachings there. These and many other pioneering monks, while steeped in traditional rituals, brought with them notions of modernizing Buddhism. They sowed the seeds for a later generation of monks to take up their mantle when confronted with the need to stem defections resulting from the onslaught of Christian proselytism and widespread dissatisfaction associated with the advent of the national education system.

Buddhist Intellectual Reforms

As explained earlier, the intellectualization of Buddhism took the form of education, simplification of rituals, and institutional modernization. Tong (2007, 127–128) explains that the “intellectualization of religion refers to a process where individuals shift from an unthinking and passive acceptance of religion to one where there is a tendency to search for a religion that they regard as systematic, logical, and relevant.” Beginning in the immediate post-war period, reform-minded monks realized the importance of religious education for the laity not only for religious indoctrination but also as a form of social responsibility. These efforts manifested mainly in three ways: (1) the establishment of secular and religious schools, (2) the introduction of regular “Sunday dharma classes,”²¹⁾ and (3) the inception of extracurricular Buddhist societies in institutes of higher learning.

The first school established by a local Buddhist organization—the Singapore Chinese Buddhist Association—was the Chinese Buddhist Association Free School, with an enrollment of a hundred students from 1946 to 1961 (McDougall 1956, 38; Shi *et al.* 2010, 315–316). In 1957 the association bought a 3,400-square-foot three-story building at 73 Neil Road to use as its permanent base and school premises. Unfortunately the school closed in 1961, due allegedly to its shabbiness and failure to abide by the stringent hygiene requirements of the Ministry of Education (Ji 2008, 75–76).

The Singapore Girls Buddhist Institute (Xinjiapo Nūzi Foxueyuan 新加坡女子佛学院), which also no longer exists, was established in 1962 by the layman Lin Taxian (林达坚) (Shi *et al.* 2010, 412). Officially registered with the Ministry of Education in February 1962 as a private religious school, which meant it did not receive any government funding, it provided secular as well as religious education from primary to above second-

21) I am utilizing the nomenclature for such classes although they may not, strictly speaking, be held on Sundays. They may be organized on weekdays (usually in the evenings), although the majority are likely to be on weekends.

ary levels for its mix of local and overseas, lay and ordained students.²²⁾ It changed its name to Singapore Buddhist Institute (Xinjiapo Fojiaoxueyuan 新加坡佛教学院), likely in 1977 (*Nanyang Siang Pau*, May 27, 1977).²³⁾ Possibly due to low enrollment, by 1977 or 1978 it was operating as a Buddhist mission kindergarten during the day and holding youth classes in English and Chinese in the evening (*Nanyang Siang Pau*, May 10, 1978).

Two Buddhist primary schools, Maha Bodhi School and Mee Toh School, were founded in 1948 and 1954 respectively.²⁴⁾ Manjusri Secondary School, the last entrant on the scene of vernacular Buddhist mission schools, took in its first students in 1982.²⁵⁾ Both Manjusri Secondary School and Maha Bodhi School are now administered by the Singapore Buddhist Federation, while Mee Toh School is a government-aided school with ties to the local chapters of the Taiwan-based Tzu Chi (Ciji 慈济, lit. Compassion Relief) and Fo Guang Shan (佛光山). Mee Toh School is also the brainchild of Kong Hiap, the subject of a hagiographic Buddhist museum, who abandoned his plans for a new temple in favor of building a school on the adjacent grounds of Leong San Temple.

The Buddhist and Pali College of Singapore was set up in 1994 by the Mangala Vihara Buddhist Temple, located at 30 Jalan Eunus. Affiliated with the Buddhist and Pali University of Sri Lanka, from where its certificates are issued, it offers programs leading to a diploma in Buddhism as well as bachelor's and master's degrees in Buddhist Studies. Since 2007 the Buddhist Library Graduate School at 2 Lorong 24A Geylang has offered a postgraduate diploma in Buddhist Studies as well as a master's program in Buddhist Studies in collaboration with the University of Kelaniya, also in Sri Lanka. The syllabi of both these schools are based on the tenets of Theravāda Buddhism.

In 2006 the Buddhist College of Singapore, housed within Kong Meng San Phor Kark See Monastery (Guangming Shan Pujue Chan Si 光明山普觉禅寺), opened its doors to its first batch of students. Specializing in Chinese Buddhism, it is open for admission only to the ordained. Its bachelor's and master's programs are offered in Chinese and English. The college is not affiliated with other universities; it awards its own degrees. Chia (2009) suggests that this college can be seen as a product of reformist Buddhism.

22) Its enrollment was very low: in 1970, for example, it had only four nuns and six lay students in its higher-level class, and three nuns and ten lay students in its primary-level class (Singapore Girls Buddhist Institute Management Committee 1970, 29–30).

23) *Nanyang Siang Pau* (南洋商报) was a daily Chinese-language newspaper that operated from 1923 to 1983, when it merged with another local newspaper to form the present-day *Lianhe Zaobao*.

24) *Mahā bodhi* means “great enlightenment” in Sanskrit (Ch: *Da puti* 大菩提) and in this context refers to the Buddha's enlightenment. Mee Toh (Mituo 弥陀) is the abbreviated name of a celestial Buddha popular in Mahāyāna Buddhism called Amitābha (Amituofo 阿弥陀佛), meaning “limitless light” (see Karashima 2009). This Buddha is the main object of devotion for Buddhist Pure Land practitioners.

25) Mañjuśrī is the name of the Bodhisattva in Mahāyāna Buddhism symbolizing wisdom.

Table 2 Singapore Buddhist Schools

Year Opened	Name of School	Programs	Premises	Affiliation
1948	Maha Bodhi School	Primary education	Has its own independent premises	Singapore Buddhist Federation
1954	Mee Toh School	Primary education	Has its own independent premises	Nil
1982	Manjusri Secondary School	Secondary education	Has its own independent premises	Singapore Buddhist Federation
1994	Buddhist and Pali College of Singapore	Diploma in Buddhism BA in Buddhist Studies MA in Buddhist Studies	Mangala Vihara Buddhist Temple	Buddhist and Pali University of Sri Lanka
2006	Buddhist College of Singapore	BA in Buddhist Studies MA in Buddhist Studies	Kong Meng San Phor Kark See Monastery	Awards its own degrees
2007	Buddhist Library Graduate School	Postgraduate Diploma in Fundamental Buddhist Studies MA in Buddhist Studies	Buddhist Library	University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka

The extant Singapore Buddhist schools are listed in Table 2.

Concomitant with the development of schools was the widespread beginning of Sunday dharma classes from the 1940s onward (Ong 2005, 118–119). This category of education arguably reaches the highest number of Buddhists since almost every Buddhist temple or center today offers some form of dharma classes. I present here, by way of example, the case of the Sunday dharma classes organized by the Fuhui Auditorium (Fuhui Jiangtang 福慧讲堂).²⁶⁾ Yen Pei, the center's immediate past abbot, a graduate of the Minnan Buddhist Institute in China and the subject of a museological memorial hall, strongly felt the need for Buddhist education for the laity in the early 1970s. Accordingly, he and his heart disciple (closest student, usually the designated successor), Venerable Kuan Yan (寬嚴, 1947–)—the present abbess, whom he ordained in 1969—initiated Sunday dharma classes in Singapore on April 22, 1973, at the Leng Foong Prajñā Auditorium. The duo restarted classes at the Fuhui Auditorium in Punggol when it was completed in 1985.

Currently divided into morning and afternoon sessions on Sundays, the two-hour-long lessons conducted in Mandarin Chinese range from kindergarten to adult levels. They are taught by a mix of nuns and adult volunteers who graduated from the program themselves. Yearly enrollment is perpetually full, with several parents being turned away and their children put on waiting lists. For instance, the enrollment for the 2013 cohort

26) The information and data presented here was gathered during my employment as a senior operations and program executive at its Buddhist Cultural Center from July 2013 to January 2014, which involved supervising, planning, and managing the Sunday class program.

was 293 for children's classes (kindergarten to primary levels), ninety for youth classes (secondary level and above), and 255 for adult classes, for a total of 638 students. These figures remained quite constant from 2009 to 2013. The entire Sunday program is run like a formal school with its own syllabi, textbooks, assemblies prior to classes with the singing of the school song, monthly teachers' meetings, year-end examinations, initiation and graduation ceremonies, and holiday youth camps at rented Ministry of Education sites.

While data for similar programs in other temples is generally not available publicly, it would not be too far-fetched to postulate that similar figures exist for large Buddhist organizations such as the Singapore Buddhist Federation, Singapore Buddhist Lodge, and Kong Meng San Phor Kark See Monastery, and on a diminishing scale relative to the size of the Buddhist centers.

Beginning in 1959, Buddhist groups were also set up in local public universities and polytechnics (Ong 2005, 115–116). These provide a last-gasp “catchment” forum for teenagers before they enter the workforce. Incorporated as students' societies in tertiary institutions, these groups serve as indirect legitimation for Buddhism, which has traditionally been negatively associated with educational level (Kuo and Tong 1995, 21). While Buddhist Studies is not offered as a full-fledged course of study or discipline at these institutions, the opportunity to explore Buddhism in a leisurely way as a young adult in the absence of parental or peer pressure—as may be the case at home or in primary and secondary schools—means that individuals can boldly enter into more “mature” and rational conversations about the religion with the groups' spiritual adviser, who is usually a local sangha or respected lay preacher. By meeting and forming camaraderie with like-minded highly educated Buddhists of a similar age and background (Tong 1989, 18), the person is vindicated in his choice and no longer worries about being disadvantaged socio-economically. Indeed, it has been noted that Buddhism is becoming a “viable option” (Kuo *et al.* 1988, 40) and thus has enticed a greater number of learned and younger Chinese (Kuo *et al.* 1988, 27; Kuo and Tong 1995, 57). Echoing these findings, then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong commented in a 1997 speech at the annual dinner of the Sagaramudra Buddhist Society that more “younger and better-educated Singaporeans” were now attracted to Buddhism because Buddhist organizations had distinguished themselves from other Chinese religions through intellectualization (*Straits Times*, August 3, 1997).²⁷⁾

Through such multifaceted pedagogical efforts, nominal Buddhists are systemati-

27) Tong Chee Kiong (2007, 89, 92) opines that better-educated Singaporeans are more likely to change from their traditional religions to Christianity or Buddhism, and that religious change is positively correlated with socioeconomic status.

cally “transformed” into “doctrinal” Buddhists. As Peter Jackson (1999, 261) explains in the context of Thai Buddhism, doctrinal Buddhists are those who “imagine their religion as a standardized, internally coherent set of beliefs and related practices” and are concerned with “orthodoxy, or correct doctrinal belief.” Accordingly, Buddhists in Singapore self-identify as Buddhists rather than Taoists or Shenists (Kuo *et al.* 1988, 24, 27–28; Tong 2007, 250). This has partly accounted for the phenomenal increase in those professing to be Buddhists—from 27 percent in 1980 to 31.2 percent in 1990 and 42.5 percent in 2000, although the number declined to 33.3 percent in 2010 (Wong 2011, 13). As Buddhists become more knowledgeable about their faith, they see it as a “logical, systematic, and relevant religion,” which satisfies their search for meaning in life (Tong 1989, 17).

The second intellectual reform that Buddhists undertook was the simplification, paring down, or abandonment of overly ritualistic practices and droning chanting (Clammer 1991, 87). Anecdotal observations suggest that numerous temples have downplayed these, which are principally practiced by the older generation (who are still an important source of financial support for the organizations), and adopted easier and shorter prayers for younger attendees. These prayers, if conducted at all, are usually followed or supplanted by a sermon, meditation, or discussion class. Y. D. Ong (2005, 192) describes these as the “singing of hymns in Sunday classes, choir groups, question and answer sessions.”

The third practice implemented by reformist Buddhist centers was institutional modernization. The administration of temples is now performed by a bureaucracy that is governed by its own constitution and follows the rules of the Registrar of Societies (Kuah-Pearce 2009, 95–99). Accounts are subject to audit and scrutiny, and any impropriety is promptly reported by the authorities and brought before the courts, as evidenced by the high-profile 2007 scandal involving Ren Ci Hospital and Medicare Center (Renci Yiyuan 仁慈医院). Its then CEO, Mingyi (明义, 1962–), best known for undertaking extreme physical feats during televised fundraising events, was found guilty of inappropriate use of temple funds and eventually sentenced to six months in jail (*Straits Times*, May 28, 2010).

Coupled with this bureaucratization is the greater involvement of lay Buddhists. The trend of including the laity began with the introduction and growth of lay Buddhist organizations (Ong 2005, 76–78, 107–110), which in itself was a radical trend since Buddhist centers have traditionally been monasteries populated exclusively by the ordained. The first lay Buddhist organization in Singapore was the aforementioned Singapore Chinese Buddhist Association, founded in 1927, whose claim to fame is its association with the monk Taixu but which has otherwise stayed relatively small over the years.

The second, established in 1934, was Singapore Buddhist Lodge (Hue and Dean 2016, 179), which has risen to be one of the biggest local players in Buddhism.

In brief, in response to religious competition, criticism of irrelevance, and desertion among their ranks, Buddhist organizations reacted by shifting their focus from ritualistic chanting to a more systematic study of the Buddhist doctrine and meditation. Besides embarking on educational programs for their lay community, they sought to reframe themselves as modern, state-of-the-art, and relevant to contemporary society. To elicit wider public awareness, and inspired by the mammoth efforts of transnational Buddhist groups such as Tzu Chi—a socially engaged Buddhist organization well known for its global disaster response teams—they made social welfare activities and charitable fundraising a major part of their *modus operandi*. They also introduced English Buddhist classes and secular recreational programs such as yoga, vegetarian cooking, and Chinese calligraphy classes. These legitimated their existence and drew on a larger pool of Chinese who otherwise might have apostatized the religion.

Dubbed as reformist Buddhists, they were a significant counterforce to the perceived popularity of Christianity, so much so that they were seen as the force behind a so-called Buddhist revivalism (Kuo *et al.* 1988, 6) and viewed as the main threat to the expansion of Christianity (Rice 2003). They were also touted as the main reason why, while Christians increased by 1.9 percent between 1990 and 2000, Buddhists grew 11.3 percent (Tong 2007, 80). After that, however, according to the 2010 census, the number of Buddhists fell 9.2 percent while the number of Christians continued its ascent by 3.7 percent (Wong 2011, 13).

Eminent Monks in Singapore

The trend of Buddhist reforms gathered force and came to a head when, beginning in the early 1990s, multiple key second-generation monks and nuns passed away (see Table 3). By then, these clerics had acquired fame and prestige almost equivalent to those regarded as Buddhist saints in other countries. Kawanami Hiroko (2009, 214–215) describes three types of charismatic monks in Myanmar: scholarly monks who have been awarded state recognition; learned dharma teachers; and arhats, those considered to have achieved the final goal of the Theravāda path. In his seminal study of medieval Chinese sangha, John Kieschnick (1997) lists three types of esteemed monks: the ascetic, the thaumaturge, and the scholar-monk. Drawing on these studies but adjusting for the local context, I posit that the following categories apply to Singapore Buddhist sangha:

Table 3 Eminent Singapore Chinese Buddhist Sangha Who Passed Away in the 1990s

Name	Positions Held and Awards Received	Deceased On
Ven. Siong Khye (Changkai 常凯) (1916–90)	President of the Singapore Buddhist Federation (1988–90) Founder of Manjusri Secondary School Founder of Buddhist Free Clinic (1969) Founder of Qie Tuo Temple (伽陀精舍) BBM (1985) (first Buddhist monk in Singapore to be given this award) Education Service Medal from MOE (1990)	September 7, 1990
Ven. Hong Choon (Hongchuan 宏船) (1907–90)	Founder of the Singapore Buddhist Federation - Vice-President (July 1949 to June 1964) - President (June 1964 to May 1984) Abbot of the Kong Meng San Phor Kark See Monastery (1947–90) “Supreme Chinese Monk” Award from Thai King (1987)	December 25, 1990
Ven. Yiu Tam (Youtan 优昙) (1908–93)	President of the Singapore Buddhist Federation (1990–92) Abbot of Beeh Low See Buddhist Temple (1987–93)	July 30, 1993
Ven. Kong Hiap (Guangqia 广洽) (1900–94)	Vice-President (1972–85) and President (1986) of the Singapore Buddhist Federation Abbot of Leong San Temple (1952–94) Founder of Mee Toh School (1954) BBM (1988) Meritorious Award from MOE (1990)	February 24, 1994
Ven. Tat Inn (Huiping 慧平 a.k.a. 达贤) (1912–94)	Founding Abbess of Tse Toh Aum Nunnery (1957), the largest nunnery in Singapore President of the Singapore regional center of the World Fellowship of Buddhists	April 26, 1994
Ven. Guang Ghee (Guangyi 广义) (1920–95)	Co-founder of Nanyang University Buddhist Society and Kwan-In Welfare Society Founder of Mahaprajna Buddhist Vihara	November 9, 1995
Ven. Yen Pei (Yanpei 演培) (1917–96)	Abbot of Leng Foong Prajñā Auditorium (1963–79) Abbot of the Kong Meng San Phor Kark See Monastery (1991–94) Founding Abbot of the Fu Hui Auditorium and Singapore Buddhist Welfare Services (1981–96) PBM (1986), BBM (1992) Buddhist Representative of the 1st Presidential Council for Religious Harmony (1992)	November 10, 1996
Ven. Songnian (松年) (1911–97)	Abbot of Mahabodhi Temple (formerly known as Poh Tai Kok Temple) (1964–97) Esteemed Chinese calligrapher and painter	August 16, 1997
Ven. Guangjing (广净) (1909–97)	Abbot of Leong San Temple (1994–97) Co-founder of Mee Toh School (1954)	August 23, 1997

Notes: PBM: Public Service Medal
BBM: Public Service Star
MOE: Ministry of Education

- (1) The state- or peer-recognized monastic
- (2) The scholar-monastic
- (3) The engaged Mahāyāna monastic

An outstanding sangha may, in practice, possess more than one of the above characteristics, but this taxonomy will help to explain why early reformist monks in Singapore exuded charisma and holy appeal, thus becoming worthy of memorialization. The three features are not arbitrarily designated but are based on empirical observation of what constitutes eminence for monks in Singapore. For instance, the highly regarded Yen Pei, as we will see later, received state awards, was a prolific writer, and was heavily involved in social welfare. In line with the need to stay relevant in society, these external achievements are prized over intangible qualities such as asceticism, clairvoyance, supernatural powers, meditational prowess, or even nirvāṇa, because these belong to the sphere of “mythical and supernatural elements,” which are discouraged by reformist Buddhists (Kuah-Pearce 2009, 8–9). The emphases are reflected in the official narratives in the museums, which generally eschew any references to otherworldly achievements.

With respect to the first category, many of the second-generation monks have been recognized by the state through honorary awards—not as religious figures but as persons who contributed greatly to the betterment of civil society. The most common awards they have received are the Public Service Medal and Public Service Star, known by their abbreviations PBM (Malay: *Pingat Bakti Masyarakat*) and BBM (Malay: *Bintang Bakti Masyarakat*) respectively. Three of the nine monks listed in Table 3 and some of the Buddhist leaders alive today were given these awards. As mentioned earlier, there is no central authority in Singapore governing the sangha, and so most local monks do not possess ecclesiastical titles. However, a handful have received such awards and honorary degrees from overseas. In the eyes of the public, these awards further legitimize and raise the allure of these monks. Yet, the Buddhist doctrine of renunciation proscribes striving for worldly goals, and these awards may instead undermine their holiness (Kawanami 2009, 224). It was apparently for this reason that Hong Choon, who developed Kong Meng San Phor Kark See Monastery into the largest temple in Singapore (Ho 2012, 947) and was considered by Chinese Buddhists in Singapore in the 1980s to be their “highest religious leader” (Inter-Religious Organisation Singapore 1990, 13, quoted in Chia 2008, 870), was rumored to have refused any awards offered by the government.

The second classification refers to the monks’ scholarly output and oratorical ability in teaching the dharma. As graduates from esteemed Buddhist seminaries in China, these

monks were not only skilled in rituals, which was crucial in meeting the simple needs of the laity, but also in giving authoritative sermons, writing, and publishing articles. Yen Pei, who studied under Taixu and was especially close to Yinshun (印顺, 1906–2005) (Chia 2020, 80–86, 101–102, 104), was famed as a learned monk. His scholarly output (estimated at more than eight million words) was ultimately collected as a 34-volume set called *Mindful Awareness Full Works* (*Diguan quanji* 谛观全集) and an addendum comprising 12 tomes called *Sequel to Mindful Awareness* (*Diguan xuji* 谛观续集).²⁸⁾ These were reprinted as a 45-volume set on the tenth anniversary of his passing away. As a result of the publications, Yen Pei became known as one of the “foremost scholar-monks of Chinese Buddhism in Southeast Asia” (Chia 2020, 105).²⁹⁾

The last category alludes to the Mahāyāna motivation and engagement in compassionate actions of benefiting others. Despite the hardship and austerity experienced by many eminent monks in Singapore due to conflicts, unrest, and the tumults of wartime and post-war Singapore,³⁰⁾ these monks unstintingly organized social assistance efforts and—not forgetting the spiritual needs of the laity—founded temples, monasteries, and dharma centers (see Table 3) where they imparted knowledge and led rituals. These endeavors became the foundations upon which major Buddhist organizations such as Kong Meng San Phor Kark See Monastery and Singapore Buddhist Lodge now stand. “Engaged Buddhism” has been described as the “effort to express the ideals of Buddhism—nonviolence, loving-kindness, and the rest—in practical action” (King 2009, 26). Examples of the myriad social welfare programs implemented by Buddhist organizations

28) See Chia (2020, 77–116) for a detailed biography and achievements of Yen Pei. The individual volumes in the two sets were not published simultaneously: the *Full Works* were published starting from 1978, while the volumes belonging to the *Sequel* were published from 1982. The former also went through different publishers (Chia 2020, 169–173, Appendix C).

29) In 1982 he was also roped in by the government, together with Sheng Yan (圣严, 1930–2009) from Taiwan, Chao Chen (超尘, 1918–2017) from Hong Kong, and the local Long Gen (隆根, 1921–2011), to train the inaugural batch of more than 150 secondary school teachers in the implementation of the Religious Knowledge subject. According to Kuah-Pearce Khun Eng (2009, 127), this appointment “firmly established him as one of the main scholar monks in Buddhism in the Singapore society.”

30) This may be viewed as their “ascetic” phase of spiritual development. While some medieval Chinese monks practiced asceticism voluntarily (Kieschnick 1997, 33–35), the Singapore Chinese monks experienced austerity, wars, and general unrest in China in the early twentieth century. Many of them were war refugees when they reached the relative safety of colonial Singapore. Coupled with the upheavals of the Japanese occupation and subsequent nation building in Singapore, the monks were more focused on providing critical wartime and postwar material and spiritual relief than engaging in asceticism or prolonged meditational retreats. As a result, none of these monks were particularly known as ascetics or meditators although they went through periods of hardship together with the general populace.

to relieve the suffering of the destitute, sick, and elderly are plentiful. Almost all large Buddhist centers in Singapore today have a social welfare component that caters to the less fortunate. This may be categorized into six areas: (1) care for the elderly, (2) care for the destitute, (3) care for the intellectually challenged, (4) student care, (5) medical assistance, and (6) financial assistance. Through these various altruistic accomplishments the monks are seen as embodying the qualities of a Bodhisattva, although humility—another important Buddhist attribute—dictates that they will never call themselves or be called Bodhisattvas.

While the Buddhist clergy in Thailand and elsewhere may be venerated for what Max Weber (1968, 241) would call persons “endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities,” the decidedly rational, skeptical, and secular Singaporean context prescribes that these characteristics, even if genuinely possessed, should not be publicized or admitted publicly.³¹ This relates to the secularism of the Singapore state, depoliticization of religions, and prescription from the government for religions to advance positive social values and support (Tong 2007, 236–237, 241). Nonetheless, this has not prevented information of unknown sources from percolating through the grapevine: Hong Choon, for instance, was supposedly a formidable clairvoyant *fengshui* (風水) grandmaster who had connections with the leading politicians and wealthy individuals of his time.

In summary, the second-generation monks were charismatic because they engaged in selfless social welfarism, intellectual reforms, and educational initiatives, which garnered recognition from the state and their peers. Some were also erudite exegetes, eloquent preachers, and prolific authors. Although the scholarly histories of many of these monks remain to be written, anecdotal evidence suggests that their accomplishments will be a hard act to follow for their successors.

Memorialization of Buddhist Masters and Education

When these eminent monks passed away, Buddhist organizations proceeded to memorialize them according to tradition through the preservation and display of the monks’ personal effects, writings, and—most significantly—relics from the cremation of their bodies. As in the case of the Thai monks discussed earlier (Gabaude 2003a, 181; 2003b, 116), the presence of these relics gave followers a renewed sense of Buddhist religious fervor since they were a form of afterlife authentication of the holy status of their deceased

31) None of my informants alluded to this aspect when discussing the eminence of monastics.

masters. Eager to display their devotion and armed with a renewed sense of commitment to the Buddhist cause, the monks' successors—the third-generation Buddhist elites—embarked on a near-frenzied phase of building stūpas, memorial halls, and museums. These well-traveled Buddhist leaders modeled the memorials on Buddhist museums and heritage sites they had encountered during their own pilgrimages to overseas Buddhist sacred sites. For example, Venerable Chuanguan (传观, 1973–), the spiritual adviser at Kong Meng San Phor Kark See Monastery, revealed that “they visited many other museums way before this [Venerable Hong Choon Museum] was built” and were directly or indirectly influenced by their visits.³²⁾ In a similar vein, Lee Bock Guan (Li Muyuan 李本源, 1945–2015), the former president of the Singapore Buddhist Lodge and one of the individuals responsible for the Kong Hiap Memorial Museum, “has seen many in China such as the Hongyi Memorial Hall located within Dakaiyuan temple (大开元寺) [and] . . . observed how they displayed the items.”³³⁾ The efforts of third-generation Buddhist elites were assisted by the comparatively longer history of Buddhism (together with other Chinese religions) in Singapore (Tong 2007, 50), which in turn allowed these elites to tap into and showcase the religion's rich local cultural heritage.

Paul Connerton (1989) explains that commemorative places such as memorials and museums can serve as crucial collective social memory sites for a community lamenting the loss of its pioneers.³⁴⁾ They are also effective as pedagogical tools when experienced as leisure activities. Since the formation of the first public museum, calls have been made for museums to be actively involved in education (Munro 1933; Forbes [1853] 2008), and the use of museums as an educational tool is one of the earliest professed functions of public museums (Hein 2006, 340–341). Eilean Hooper-Greenhill (2007) finds that one of the most effective didactic methods is to integrate trips to the local museum into school curricula. Others highlight that museums also function as places of leisure (Stephen 2007). Thus, by utilizing museums as “edutainment” sites (places that blend educational and entertainment elements), Buddhist organizations can make education more effective for those who are unable or unwilling to attend formal dharma classes.

The theme of education loomed large in the responses from my informants. Almost all of them agreed that one of the main functions of the museums they had established or planned to construct was the dissemination of Buddhist knowledge. This was expressed most succinctly by His Holiness Dromtug Rinpoche (Zhongtu Renboqie 种菟

32) Interview by author, March 30, 2015.

33) Interview by author, March 15, 2015. Dakaiyuan temple is in Quanzhou (泉州), China.

34) Strictly speaking, many of the monks and nuns discussed in this paper were not pioneer monks in the sense of being the first monks to arrive in Singapore, but they were pioneers in founding many temples or initiating multiple programs.

仁波切, 1963–), the spiritual director of the Kadhampa Buddhist Association in Singapore, which has had ambitions to establish a Buddhist relics museum since 2006. He said, “The purpose [of the museum] is to propagate the spirit and education of Buddhism and hope that everyone learns the Buddha’s mind of great compassion, love, and bodhichitta.”³⁵⁾

Sharing similar views, the lay chairman of the Kadhampa Buddhist Association, Teng Hong Hai (丁宏海, 1956–), acknowledged that the “main goal [of the museum] is to promote the dharma.”³⁶⁾ Venerable Yongguang (永光, 1971–), the soft-spoken director of the Kong Hiap Memorial Museum, said that “indirectly the museum helps to publicize Buddhism and provides the general public with some knowledge of Buddhism, especially Buddhist arts.”³⁷⁾

Likewise, the docents whom I interviewed or interacted with assured me that they would provide religious information when asked. They would defer to the venerables-in-residence or senior volunteers if they were unable to answer the questions posed by visitors. This didactic function extends also to non-Buddhists, as echoed by Lee Bock Guan: “Sometimes we have non-Buddhist foreigners who visit and understand more about Buddhism.”³⁸⁾

The most explicit manifestation of pedagogy in Buddhist museums can be found in an exhibition put up by the short-lived and now-defunct Hai Yin Culture and Arts Research Gallery (Haiyin Wenhua Yishuguan 海印文化艺术馆) from January 9 to March 28, 2010, where panels on general Buddhist ideology and the history of Buddhism in Singapore were displayed together with fine art pieces.

In brief, hagiographic Buddhist museums serve the dual functions of memorialization and education, with one leading naturally into the other—the visitor may be inspired to follow the esteemed venerable’s footsteps, that is, the Buddhist path. The pedagogical aspect was corroborated in the visitor surveys I conducted in 2015 at the Venerable Hong Choon Museum and Kong Hiap Memorial Museum—both hagiographic museums—where a whopping total of 86.9 percent or 53 ($n = 61$) felt that the museums could influence their visitors and 72.1 percent or 44 ($n = 61$) thought that visitors may become more empathetic toward Buddhism, even though only 39 per cent or 23 ($n = 59$) answered positively when asked whether the museums could cause someone to become a Bud-

35) Interview by author, August 1, 2015. Bodhichitta refers to the Mahāyāna altruistic aspiration to attain enlightenment for all sentient beings.

36) Interview by author, March 15, 2015.

37) Interview by author, March 1, 2015. He mentioned Buddhist arts because the Kong Hiap Memorial Museum mainly displays artworks by Republican-era Chinese literati, artists, and monks.

38) Interview by author, March 15, 2015.

dhist.³⁹⁾ While influences from visiting a museum can be readily discerned, it would take more than a cursory visit to convert a visitor to Buddhism, according to my surveyees.

Hagiographic Museums as Heuristics

For hagiographic museums, the educational function takes on a special significance because the visitor is able to learn about and potentially be influenced by the lives of deceased religious persons. Kieschnick (1997, 7) finds that one of the functions of sacred biographies of medieval Chinese monks is the promotion of Buddhism, while Francesca Tarocco (2007) explains that popular media was used for proselytizing Buddhism in Republican China (1912–49). Chia (2015) focuses on how an eminent monk’s biography portrays him as a “worldling bodhisattva” in media such as comics and videos.

The concept of hagiography, as Massimo Rondolino (2019, 4–5) explains, is a “heuristic device” “by which a given community constructs the memory of individuals who are recognized as the embodied perfection of the religious ideal promoted by the community’s tradition and socio-cultural context.”

As mentioned above, the deceased venerables in Singapore led exemplary lives, initiated reforms, produced tomes of work, and were rewarded with local and foreign accolades (see Table 3). For example, Hong Choon was the co-founder and president of the Singapore Buddhist Federation who initiated the grand development of Kong Meng San Phor Kark See Monastery during his abbotship (more so than its founder and first abbot, Zhuandao [转道, 1871–1943], who was memorialized with a stūpa) and was awarded the title of “Supreme Chinese Monk” by the Thai king in 1987 (Ho 2012, 949). He was also pivotal in the reestablishment of relations between China and Singapore (Chia 2008). In this respect, Hong Choon and other eminent monks such as Yen Pei and Kong Hiap were “living” examples of perfected Buddhist saints worthy of the highest veneration and serving as models for future aspirants.⁴⁰⁾ Similar to the Ashin Jinarakkhita Memorial Hall in Indonesia (Chia 2017), hagiographic Buddhist museums in Singapore perform the dual pedagogical functions of providing not only Buddhist doctrinal

39) Surveys were conducted on-site at the two museums for seven days each between February and August 2015. Due to the anticipated low attendance rate, all museum-goers who visited on those days were asked just before departure for their voluntary participation in a study about Buddhist museums using a standardized survey form. The surveys resulted in a convenience sample comprising 58 and 25 adults aged 18 and above at the Venerable Hong Choon Museum and Kong Hiap Memorial Museum respectively.

40) The biographies and activities of other monks, except for Hong Choon (see Chia 2008; 2013) and Yen Pei (see Chia 2020, 77–116), await further scholarly treatment.

knowledge—in one case as introductory panels⁴¹⁾—but also the biography of one who has made the journey to perfection, similar to the Buddha himself. Thus, the revelation of this path may inspire visitors, especially Buddhists, to follow in the venerable’s footsteps.

The function of influencing viewers by displaying sacred biographies in museums was corroborated by my interlocutors. The curator for Nei Xue Tang, Wu Yi (吴弋, 1970–), said that Buddhists “feel that the life stories of the masters can inspire them to practice and aim for a goal, to make effort.”⁴²⁾

Her sentiments were echoed by Liu Sheng Hwa (刘升华, 1948–), the public affairs executive at Kong Meng San Phor Kark See Monastery charged with supervising the Venerable Hong Choon Museum, who lamented:

There is a need to make new devotees understand what Buddhism is. If they practice to a certain level, they will be an exemplar for others. It will have educational value. Some young people think, “I practiced Buddhism for so long, why can’t I be like this master?” So they can understand how the masters practice, their hardships, and results [from this museum].⁴³⁾

Furthermore, Dromtug explained: “A memorial museum is only to remember one person, but we need to learn his lifestyle and model. As such, we learn the Buddha’s spirit and his teachings.”⁴⁴⁾

This dual function was explicitly alluded to by Sheng Hwa, who—when queried on the importance of attendance at the Venerable Hong Choon Museum—exclaimed:

On one hand, we are here to promote Buddhism. On the other hand, we also want to promote the love and compassion of Venerable Hong Choon because he had contributed much to Buddhism and the country. We want to promote his spirit. We are happy if more people visit, but this is not important.⁴⁵⁾

At the Buddhas of the World Museum, the protagonist “speaking” in first-person narratives on the panels is none other than the founder of Buddhism, Śākyamuni Buddha, who is the model par excellence for Buddhists of all traditions (Goh 2016, 120; McDaniel 2017, 143). By eschewing conventional hagiographies of eminent monks and focusing on the well-known biography of Śākyamuni with an accompanying chamber containing his supposed somatic relics, this museum situates itself as the “mother” of all Buddhist

41) At the Venerable Hong Choon Museum, the original plan called for visitors to view panels about Buddhism and Buddhist Gandhāran art displayed along a long corridor leading to its official entrance.

42) Interview by author, April 21, 2015.

43) Interview by author, April 11, 2015.

44) Interview by author, August 1, 2015.

45) Interview by author, April 11, 2015.

hagiographic museums.⁴⁶⁾ Alluding to the pedagogical function described above, the executive director of the temple in which the museum is located affirms that the function of Buddhist art lies in its “value to tell a story, to educate, and to inspire visitors” (McDaniel 2017, 135).

Hagiographic Museums as Skillful Means

In addition, the Buddhist museum represents an explicit attempt by Buddhist organizations to disseminate the doctrine tacitly, which can be seen as an integral part of the heuristic project explained above. Through the museum’s nonverbal and professionally designed displays in a modern air-conditioned environment, visitors develop positive associations with Buddhism (Goh 2016, 119). When they establish museums, Buddhist institutions also make an effort to link up with schools, community centers, and other nonaffiliated Buddhist centers⁴⁷⁾ (*Lianhe Zaobao*, May 1, 2005). Larger museums with ample resources produce guides and have staff or volunteers trained to handle devotees, casual visitors, tourists, and schoolchildren. This strategy ties in well with Singapore’s educational system, which favors a nonpartisan approach toward religions following an abortive attempt to introduce religious education in schools in 1984–89 (Gopinathan 1995, 20–26), as explained above. Teachers are frequently tasked to inculcate interreligious tolerance and understanding by going beyond textbooks and the classroom environment. The existence of a less overtly religious place where students can learn about a religion, such as a museum, is greatly sought after by educators who may otherwise face objections from the parents of their pupils. The issue at hand is significantly more sensitive than described here: many pupils and parents have strong inhibitions about entering and abiding in places of worship of other religions. The apparent neutrality represented by museums goes a long way toward assuaging such concerns.⁴⁸⁾

The doctrine of skillful means (Skt: *upāyakauśalya*; Ch: 方便善巧) was first intro-

46) In the Buddha Tooth Relic Temple, where this museum is located, a separate museum called the Eminent Sangha Museum was created on its mezzanine level to display brief single-panel-per-person information on various eminent monks, including the founder and ex-abbot of the temple, Fazhao (法照, 1959–). It remained skeletal until 2014, when wax figures were finally added, thus completing Fazhao’s original vision for this museum. See McDaniel (2017, 141–142).

47) In this context, nonaffiliated Buddhist centers refer to those not under the aegis of the parent organization of the Buddhist museum.

48) There has not been any study on the motivations of non-Buddhists visiting Buddhist museums, although research on non-Buddhists visiting a Buddhist temple shows that they are inspired by two factors: to learn more about a different religion and culture from their own, and to seek peace and quiet (Choe *et al.* 2015).

duced in Mahāyāna Buddhism as a means to advance the new tradition vis-à-vis pre-Mahāyāna schools and to reconcile apparent contradictions between the two (Federman 2009). It denotes the use of methods, sometimes even trickery or white lies, that differ from their literal meanings in order to guide the faithful onto correct paths. The most famous parable illustrating this stems from the *Lotus Sutra* and tells the story of a rich father enticing his children, who are engrossed in play, to leave their burning house by promising them wonderful gifts outside the house (Pye 2003, 37–38). In the case of Buddhist museums (including hagiographic museums), skillful means refers to their structural forms modeled after Western museums, which appear to be secularized, sophisticated, and modern, with air conditioning and English-language labels—a far cry from the incense-smoke-filled and dimly lit temples associated with rituals, superstition, backwardness, and irrationality. Through the visit, which may not have occurred if the place was styled like a traditional Chinese temple, the viewer is not only influenced subtly by the religion but also impressed by the sense of modernity exuded by the museum.

In fact, the second most frequently cited function for museums by my informants is as a form of skillful means.⁴⁹⁾ Chuanguan claimed unequivocally that

setting up a Buddhist museum is, in a way, incorporating secular methods, and also, we can consider that as a skillful means. . . . The best way is for people to simply practice the teachings, but the Buddhist museum is a skillful means to guide people in that direction.⁵⁰⁾

Similarly, Yongguang averred that through seeing the artworks and information provided in the Kong Hiap Memorial Museum, visitors would “naturally become connected with Buddhism through having karmic imprints in their mind streams. This is akin to the skillful means of connecting someone to the dharma.”⁵¹⁾

When asked about the purpose of the Kadhampa Buddhist Association’s proposed museum, Hong Hai framed it as part of a strategy of employing various different cultural activities “to help and connect with others.”⁵²⁾ Dromtug went so far as to claim that the visitor “will be influenced subtly. He will become a Buddhist.”⁵³⁾

Thus, as Buddhist organizations implement reforms to appeal to an educated, younger, and more sophisticated audience, those with the requisite resources and opportunity aim toward setting up modern museums that replace or supplement traditional

49) It should be noted that since the parent institutions of hagiographic Singapore Buddhist museums discussed here are Mahāyāna, the allusion to skillful means is not unexpected.

50) Interview by author, March 30, 2015.

51) Interview by author, March 1, 2015.

52) Interview by author, March 15, 2015.

53) Interview by author, August 1, 2015.

Buddhist memorializing instruments such as stūpas or pagodas.⁵⁴⁾ These are then positioned as biographical portrayals of personages worthy of respect by all religions—despite their primary identity as Buddhist monks—due to their national or regional contributions, such as in the arenas of interreligious harmony (Hong Choon), education (Kong Hiap), social welfare (Yen Pei), or Chinese painting and calligraphy (Songnian). The methodology, whether intended consciously or not, is analogous to the Buddhist concept of skillful means in which the form of a museum showcasing the biography of an acclaimed cleric is utilized as a site “where the dead are regarded as a weapon in the battle for Dharma” (Gabaude 2003a, 183).

Conclusion

While the form of the memorial hall is a well-known trope in Chinese Buddhist history, the modern Buddhist museum, gallery, or museum-like memorial hall is a pedagogical innovation by reformist Buddhists in Singapore reeling from a perceived en masse defection caused by aggressive Christian proselytization and general disenchantment with Chinese traditional religions. The impetus to erect hagiographic museums—as a subcategory of Buddhist museums—was further encouraged by the demise of prominent monks in the 1990s, which demanded of their respective organizations proper posthumous treatment. Propelled by modernist trends and the urgent need to make present the now-absent venerables bemoaned and sorely missed by the Buddhist community, parent organizations with the wherewithal chose to break away from or complement traditional Buddhist entombment practices, and display hagiographic narratives and relics in demythologized spaces designed to elicit approval and visitation from Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike.⁵⁵⁾ There has been no collective decision to establish Buddhist museological memorial spaces, which makes their consecutive emergence in Singapore in the first two decades of the twenty-first century even more intriguing. There were four museums dedicated to individual deceased local monks at the peak of memorial building, but one has since closed (see Table 1).⁵⁶⁾ The museums’ effects on viewers are

54) Some Thai Buddhist museums are in fact shaped like stūpas, amalgamating the two forms (see Gabaude 2003a, 174–176; 2003b, 114).

55) The topic of the display of relics in Buddhist museums is beyond the scope of this article, but it should be noted that all the hagiographic museums listed in Table 1 showcase somatic relics except for 80 Gallery and the Eminent Sangha Museum. Nei Xue Tang, a non-hagiographic Buddhist museum, also displays relics from multiple sangha.

56) I exclude the Eminent Sangha Museum, which showcases the biographies of many monks. 80 Gallery closed in 2016.

influential, didactic, and yet construed as subtle, prompting allusions to the Buddhist concept of skillful means.

The hagiographic Buddhist museums in Singapore are instances of a broader trend beyond the confines of the island-state. As mentioned before, senior monks often pay visits to overseas memorial halls and museums as part of a transnational religious network. Nonetheless, the causal conditions outlined here may not be readily found in other countries.

In China, the Buddhist landscape is played out as a tussle between monastics and laity striving to maintain their sacred spaces, and governmental authorities keen to convert temples into touristy museological sites to generate revenue (Nichols 2019), a process some have called “museumification” (Fisher 2011). It remains unknown how many of these Buddhist temple-museums are hagiographic sites, how many Buddhist memorial halls have been “museumified,” and how many Buddhist institutions have erected museums instead of traditional memorial halls. Some evidence suggests that apart from figures in the distant past such as Confucius (Kongfuzi 孔夫子, 551–479 BCE) (Flath 2016) and Xuanzang (玄奘, 602–664 CE) (Brose 2016, 151–152), Chinese authorities are loath to valorize the country’s religious figures. Insofar as official biographical museums are concerned, secular figures, revolutionary heroes, political leaders, and literati are accorded greater attention (Denton 2014). However, there are exceptions. At least four memorial halls are dedicated to Hongyi, including a lotus-shaped museum at Pinghu, Zhejiang.⁵⁷⁾ Given Hongyi’s prominence as one of the leading monks in Republican China, it is not surprising that temples and cities capitalize on his prestige—but the futuristic museum in Pinghu takes its name from his secular name, Li Shutong, and not his monastic name. Pending further research, it appears that even in cases where notable Buddhists are lauded, they are celebrated for their cultural achievements rather than their religious appeal, which alludes to China’s “Buddhism as culture” policy (Ji 2011, 33–37).

If memorialization of esteemed monastics is a time-honored Buddhist tradition, the findings of my study complicate the notion that eminence necessarily leads to memorializing permanent institutions. The list of clergy in Table 3 is long, but not all are memorialized in memorial halls or museums. The 80 Gallery mentioned in the introduction was even “liquidated” when its lease expired.⁵⁸⁾ A systematic archival and

57) The other three are in the Zhejiang Hangzhou Hupao monastery, Quanzhou Dakaiyuan monastery, and a “residence” memorial hall in Tianjin.

58) The word “liquidated” was used by a Mahabodhi Temple staff member who also said that the items from 80 Gallery were in storage with no plans to display them (personal communication, August 4, 2016).

ethnographic approach can uncover nuances for each case, furthering our knowledge of these thought-provoking establishments and what they say inductively about their wider communities. Future studies can examine Buddhist museums in other parts of Asia besides Singapore, not only to document country-specific practices but also to extend the cases here and uncover any regional commonality or heterogeneity in Buddhist memorialization.

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