Article

The Birth of Buddhist Organizations in Modern Indonesia, 1900–1959

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Abstract: In the early twentieth century, Indonesia was a predominantly Muslim majority colony under the Dutch Christian colonial authorities. The 1930 *volkstelling* (census record) conducted by the Dutch colonial government recorded four religions being practiced in the archipelago; Buddhism was not one of them. Nevertheless, sources such as newspapers and private magazines published by various organizations showed that Buddhism was being practiced in Java. In the 1930s, several organizations published books and translations on Buddhism. The first organization that exclusively identified itself as Buddhist, the Java Buddhist Association, was established in 1929 by Dutch Buddhists in West Java. Five years later, Peranakan Chinese in Batavia established a second Buddhist organization. This article seeks to explore two issues, namely: the history and development of Buddhist institutions during the late colonial and early post-Independence Indonesia; and the transnational networks of these institutions in the promotion of Buddhist knowledge in modern Indonesia.

Keywords: Buddhist organization; modern Indonesia; Dutch East Indies; Peranakan Chinese

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1. Introduction

Buddhism in modern Indonesia experienced a resurgence in the early twentieth century, when the Indonesian archipelago was under Dutch colonial rule. Iem Brown's (2004) research is one of the very few studies that has paid attention to the social history of Buddhism in Modern Indonesia. In her work, Brown attributed the cause of the revival to European individuals who were involved in the scientific study of religion, including Buddhism. She points out the role played by the European Buddhist community within the study of Buddhism that started in the late nineteenth century in South and Southeast Asian regions. One of the crucial factors in its revival was the increasing number of translations of Pali and Sanskrit text into European languages, such as English, German, and Dutch, by European scholars (Brown 2004, p. 45). The translation of the Buddhist texts into European languages also made these accessible to colonial society. This situation, according to her, was a contributing factor to how colonial society in the Indonesian archipelago regarded Buddhism. Yoneo Ishii (1984), a Japanese historian, in a brief historical narrative of Buddhism in South and Southeast Asia, describes this period as Buddhist evangelism. Ishii and Brown's arguments relate to the revival phenomenon within the Buddhist world in South and Southeast Asia regions that took place in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. During this period, the regions in South and Southeast Asia which had a predominantly Buddhist population fought against colonial rulers by using Buddhism as a unifying identity.

The resurgence of Buddhism in Indonesia in the early twentieth century is a part of this wider regional revival of Buddhism. The coming of Theravada Buddhism through interactions with international organizations and individuals affiliated with Theravada resonated with the Peranakan Chinese community which, at the same time, was seeking the revitalization of their Chinese identity (Yulianti 2020). The study of Buddhism in

Indonesia during this period also opens up a new perspective about the scope of Theravada Buddhism in the Southeast Asia region. The first insight from this study is that Theravada Buddhism is not limited to the mainland region of Southeast Asia. The case in colonial Indonesia shows that Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism are found within the same Buddhist community: the Peranakan Chinese.

In his book on “South China Sea Buddhism” Jack Meng-Tat Chia (2020) observes that most of the studies on Buddhism in Southeast Asia have mainly been focused on countries such as Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos; hence, the term Southeast Asian Buddhism has been equated to Theravada Buddhism. Such a perspective has resulted in a failure to recognize the diversity in Buddhist schools practiced in Southeast Asia, both on the mainland and in archipelagic regions such as in Singapore, Malaysia, as well as Indonesia. Chia also further stresses that such a dichotomy is problematic because it fails to show the presence of Buddhism in maritime Southeast Asia and its position in Chinese diasporic and indigenous communities (Chia 2020, p. 7). The dichotomy that Buddhist scholars and historians on Buddhism in Southeast Asia have theorized between Theravada and East Asian Buddhism is again widened by using the language of Buddhist text as fragmentation tools. Theravada Buddhism is equal to the Pali language, whereas other languages are used for Mahayana Buddhism. Justin McDaniel also argues that Buddhism in Southeast Asia regions is not homogenous and that Mahayana practices can be found both in mainland Southeast Asia and archipelagic regions such as in Singapore and Malaysia (McDaniel 2010).

This article gives an historical explanation of the emergence and nature of Buddhist organizations and their inter-relationship between 1900 and 1950s. It aims to understand how interconnected Buddhist actors and transnational networks have accelerated the formation of modern Buddhist organizations in the late colonial period. I argue that Buddhist organizations were established during this period to cater to the formation of a new Buddhist community, meeting the needs of members from various national and ethnic backgrounds. In colonial times, Buddhist organizations were established as a response to the rise of modern Buddhism developing in Sri Lanka and mainland Southeast Asia which, at the time, was partly under colonial rule. In Indonesia archipelago, which was under Dutch colonial rule, the organizations emerged in conjunction with the rise of nationalist sentiment in the Peranakan Chinese community, who at the time sought to revive their cultural legacy. Buddhism was regarded as one of Chinese religions by the Peranakan Chinese in Batavia (present day Jakarta); therefore, Buddhism resonated with members of this community, and became a catalyst that helped them define their Chineseness. Arguably, this resurgence of Buddhism in early twentieth century Indonesia took a different path from that which has developed in present day Indonesia. Rather, the emergence of Buddhism in the early twentieth century is largely connected to the geopolitical situation in the colonial period. For the Peranakan Chinese, their access to transnational Buddhist networks has meant direct access to modern Buddhism. Hence, in this research, tracing how and why Buddhist organizations were formed reveals the dynamics working to accelerate their development in Indonesia during the colonial period. In this study, Buddhist organizations are the crucial point of entry to examine transnational Buddhist interaction for Mahayana dan Theravada Buddhist traditions. The Peranakan Chinese community was the social group which engaged actively in the study and disseminated Buddhist knowledge through becoming members of the Theosophical Society, which studies religious organizations, and a Theravada Buddhist organization called the Java Buddhist Association. Later, this community established its own Buddhist organizations. Interestingly, Buddhist organizations established by the Peranakan Chinese community in the late colonial era and after independence distinguish between the schools; they welcomed all Buddhist affiliations. This period was very accommodating, non-sectarian, and did not take issue with schools practicing different religions simultaneously.

This study also seeks to contribute to the historiography of Indonesia, especially during the late Dutch colonial period and early independence. In the former period,

the encounters of Buddhists in colonial society on Java provided an opportunity for the Peranakan Chinese to manifest modernity through establishing Buddhist organizations, institutions whose establishment was inspired by colonial modernity and the awakening of a sense of nationalism at the time. In this research, I rely mainly on print publications produced by the Peranakan Chinese community.

2. Buddhism during Dutch Colonial Period in Indonesia, 1900–1949

Exploring the resurgence of Buddhism in Indonesia in modern times necessitates remaining aware about the historical presence of Buddhism in the same region. Traces of Buddhism are evidenced by the archaeological evidence which remains, such as temples and inscriptions. Andrea Acri specifically discusses a form of Buddhism called Esoteric Buddhism that developed from the 7th to the 13th century in Java dan Sumatra (Acri 2016, p.10). These regions, according to Acri, were crossroads and nodal points of Buddhist interactions. Iain Sinclair provides an informative study about a Chinese-named Buddhist monk called Bianhong who travelled to Tang China and connected with the transmission of Tantric Buddhism to Tang China (Sinclair 2016). Veronique Degroot, an archeologist, found that Buddhism in Java is evidenced in the temple of Ratu Boko. She points out the cultural links between Sri Lanka and Java existed, as evidenced in an Abhayagiri inscription dated 792–793 AD. The inscription indicates the building of a Buddhist monastery by King Dharmmottungadewa and named after the Sri Lankan Buddhist temple called Abhayagiri. The inscription also reveals the type of Buddhism that was practiced in the region around the Ratu Boko temple at the time (Degroot 2006, p. 63). The ninth century Buddhist temple, Borobudur, in central Java, speaks to the early period in the history of Buddhism in Indonesia and indigenes' interactions with Indian Buddhists. This evidence shows that Buddhists in Java are intertwined with the Buddhist world in Asia, such as Buddhism in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia regions. The connection that occurred again in the modern period was, therefore, not new. Nevertheless, the span of time and historical background around the early twentieth century have presented interesting changes and models with regard to the text, actors and places in which Buddhism has re-emerged in twentieth century Indonesia.

Based on the *Volkstelling* (census record) conducted by the colonial government in 1930, Buddhism was not included as one of the recognized religions in the Indonesia archipelago. In the census, Islam and Christianity, including Catholicism, are recognized, and the numbers of adherents are recorded. However, there is one category that was labeled as *geen goddienst* (non-religion). This category referred to all religions that were considered by the colonial government as not based on a belief in a God. There is no specific explanation, however, as to why Buddhism was not mentioned as a category, despite having adherents. In her dissertation, Yulianti presents evidence of Buddhism being practiced, found in various newspapers. Brown also states that many Peranakan Chinese were Buddhists (Brown 2004).

Trade and contact between China and the archipelago dates back to the tenth century. Chinese immigrants started to form a community from the sixteenth century onwards (Sutrisno 2018). According to the colonial records of 1844, there were 108,275 Chinese people living on the island of Java. Most of them lived in Batavia, Surabaya, and Semarang (Chia 2020). The Chinese population spread to other islands, and according to the colonial census of 1920, the population did not only reside on Java, but on other islands as well, including Sumatra, Kalimantan, and Bangka. The spread of the Chinese population outside Java was related to the opening of tobacco and rubber plantations. Ten years later, the colonial census recorded that the Chinese population had grown to 1,233,214, or 2.0% of the total population (*Volkstelling: Census of 1930 in Netherlands India, deel VIII 1936*; Yulianti 2020). The Chinese population in colonial Indonesia became the second largest racial group after the natives (Regering Almanak 1910; Yulianti 2020). Chinese communities in colonial Indonesia are commonly classified into two groups, namely, the Peranakan Chinese and the Totok (Chia 2020; Willmott 1960; Williams 1960). Peranakan Chinese refers to the Chinese

group who are born in colonial Indonesia and speak the local language, with most lacking proficiency in Chinese. Meanwhile, the Totok group comprises those who are born in mainland China and are new immigrants (Chia 2020). The Peranakan group is dominant in number, representing 63.5% of the total Chinese population, with most of them residing on Java and Madura Islands (Chia 2020; Yulianti 2020).

On account of Chinese immigration to Southeast Asia, Chia addresses the interesting subject of how these immigrants brought their religious practices to new settlements. According to Chia, the Chinese immigrants brought their religious beliefs and practices with them and became active agents in spreading Chinese beliefs in Southeast Asia (Chia 2020). Deities were an important part of their belief system, and Chinese migrants brought religious materials or relics with them in the form of ashes or statues of their patron deity for their protection; therefore, this belief system meant that these immigrants built temples in their new country (Chia 2020). Between the seventeenth and early nineteenth century on Java, there were at least seven temples built, which were locally known as *klenteng*. These temples are Klenteng Kim Tek Ie, Klenteng Tiao Kak Sie, Klenteng Tay Kak Sie, Klenteng Tien Kok Sie, Boen Tek Bio, Klenteng Ban Tek Ie and Tjoe Tak Bio (Chia 2020). Klenteng Kim Tek Ie (presently known as Klenteng Jinde Yuan or Vihara Dharma Bhakti) is the oldest, and was established to venerate Buddha and Bodhisatvas. Since the 17th century, these places of worship have also served as places for Buddhist monks to live (p. 22). In addition to being used for religious purposes, *klenteng* also served as centers for education, and were used for cultural performances and ceremonies (De Haan 1935; Yulianti 2020).

In the early twentieth century, the Peranakan Chinese community in colonial Indonesia was influenced by a Chinese nationalist movement and its revitalizing of a Chinese identity. The movement passed through colonial Singapore to the island of Java, where a revival of Confucianism was also occurring. In 1900, the Chinese community in Batavia established *Tiong Hoa Hwee Koan* (The Chinese Association) (Sutrisno 2018). The main concern of this organization was to revitalize the religious customs of the Peranakan Chinese through the reform and purification of Chinese religion and a transformation from ritual to a focus on the teachings of Confucianism (Sutrisno 2018). The introduction of Confucianism in colonial Indonesia was then followed by an institutionalization of Chinese religion. In 1923, a separate organization called *Khong Kauw Hwee* (Confucianism Association) was established on Java. It was dedicated to the defense of Confucianism as the Chinese religion (Yulianti 2020). However, Confucianism is not the only religion practiced in this community. A Peranakan Chinese figure, Kwee Tek Hoay objected to *Khong Kauw Hwee* positioning Confucianism as the sole religion in the Peranakan Chinese community; rather, three religions, namely, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism (*Sam Kauw*), should be recognized. Kwee Tek Hoay gave form to his argument on Chinese religion by establishing a new organization called *Sam Kauw Hwee* (Association of Three Religions) in Batavia in 1934. Kwee Tek Hoay's forming of *Sam Kauw Hwee* was a crucial point for the beginning of the institutionalization of Buddhism in this period, as discussed below. The idea of having a unified platform of three religions was also a reflection of Kwee Tek Hoay's association with an international organization called The Theosophical Society, where he had encountered the study of Buddhism and had a meeting with international Buddhists such as the founder of the Java Buddhist Association, Willem Josias van Dienst. The two organizations were also known for their affiliation to Theravada Buddhism.

The following section discusses the history of organizations that played a major role in the introduction of Buddhism in late colonial Indonesia and later on in the early independence period. During the colonial period, the organizations discussed are not only exclusively Buddhist organizations, but also earlier organizations deemed crucial to the study and dissemination of Buddhism. These organizations are the Theosophical Society, the Java Buddhist Association, *Sam Kauw Hwee*, and the Batavia Buddhist Association. In the post-independence period, the organizations discussed are Buddhist organizations, established in the 1950s. The discussion is limited to the 1950s because Buddhism in In-

Indonesia was not yet stressed under choices between following a certain school of Buddhism under one prominent Buddhist leader named Ashin Jinarakkhita.

2.1. Theosophical Society

The first organization that influenced Buddhism's development in modern Indonesia was the Theosophical Society. The leaders of the Theosophy movement had visited Indonesia during the colonial period several times, but the establishment of the Theosophical Society in the East Indies did not happen until eight years after the Theosophical Society's formation in New York. It was in 1883 that the first Theosophy lodge was established in Pekalongan, led by a German, Baron van Tegnagell (Nugraha 2011, p. 9; De Tollenaere 1996, p. 36).

A second Theosophical movement was established in 1901 in Semarang by a Dutchman, A.P. Asperen Van de Velde, according to Iskandar Nugraha. He started it by distributing brochures inviting others to join the movement. At first, the membership of the movement only comprised seven persons, but the movement's influence started to flow into other cities in Indonesia, such as Surabaya (1903), Yogyakarta (1904), and Surakarta (1905). Van Asperen, for his efforts in promoting the movement, was bestowed the title of "De Geestelijke Vader der Lodge" (The Spiritual Father of the Lodge). However, a somewhat different version of the spread of the movement is discussed in the work of De Tollenaere, who states that five lodges existed in the East Indies in 1903, namely, in Bandung, Jakarta, Klaten, Medan, and Malang (De Tollenaere 1996, p. 281). Based on De Tollenaere's statement, the activities of the Theosophical Society, as well as their membership, were mostly concentrated in Java. Thus, the Theosophical influence in Indonesia made itself felt not only among the Dutch and Indonesians, but also the Chinese living on Java. The Theosophical Society in Indonesia was growing steadily and received a positive response from the people. In 1912, the Theosophical Society headquarters in Adyar, Chennai, India, granted Indonesia autonomous chapter status (Besant 1912, p. 327). However, despite the autonomous management, administratively, the Theosophical Society in Indonesia was mostly led by Dutchmen.

With regard to Buddhism, the Theosophical Society in modern Indonesia provided a channel through which intellectuals on the island of Java, both native Indonesian and Peranakan Chinese, had access to the knowledge and practice of Buddhism. In her dissertation, soon to be published, Yulianti studies how the Theosophical Society worked toward the development of Buddhism in two ways, namely, the resacralization of religious sites and the study and dissemination of Buddhism (Yulianti 2020, p. 69). The first role indicated in this research highlighted the involvement of the Theosophical Society in instigating a practice of performing Buddhist rituals at the Buddhist temples of Borobudur and Mendut. The Theosophical Society, represented by Mangelaar Meertens, concerned itself with reviving the use of these Buddhist temples so as to become centers for Buddhist practices. The conduct of Buddhist rituals at Borobudur in the 1920s brought Buddhist practice into public display. The first public Vesak performed at the Borobudur was organized in 1927 (*Theosofie in Nederlandsch Indië* 1927, p. 20; Yulianti 2020). The second role of the Theosophical Society was in developing Buddhism in late colonial Indonesia, manifesting as the study and dissemination of Buddhist knowledge in the archipelago, especially on Java. As part of the Theosophical Society's efforts to promote Buddhism, they held a series of lectures on Buddhism in their various lodges. One example is the weekly courses on Buddhism given by Mej. Jochems at Theosophical Society lodge in Batavia in 1920 (*Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad*, 27 November 1920).

The third role of the Theosophical Society in the development of Buddhism in late colonial Indonesia was as an international organization, which made it a role model from which the Peranakan Chinese community sought to learn. With regard to this, Kwee Tek Hoay openly declared that the Theosophical Society had inspired him to set up an inclusive organization in which people of various ethnicities and spiritual interests could come together. Kwee Tek Hoay explicitly claimed that his organization "Sam Kauw Hwee

is comparable to [the] Theosophical Society but working in a smaller scale, although it does not encompass all religions and only for the three religions known as the Chinese Religions" (*Sam Kauw Gwat Po*, November 1934, pp. 1–7). Sam Kauw Hwee tried to bring together the followers of the three Chinese religions into one organization in the same way as the Theosophical Society facilitated the study of various religions. Kwee Tek Hoay further explained that by becoming a member of *Sam Kauw Hwee*, Buddhists would be able to participate in the lectures or any other religious activities organized by Confucians; in the same manner, the Confucians also had the opportunity to partake in Vesak celebrations. In the house of *Sam Kauw Hwee*, both Confucian and Buddhist leaders could be invited to deliver their teachings in an environment conducive to learning.

Given this intent, Peranakan Chinese were drawn in to becoming members of the Theosophical Society. Yulianti (2020, p. 67) noted that in 1935, there were at least 191 Peranakan Chinese who became members of the Theosophical Society. The founder of the *Sam Kauw Hwee* and the Batavia Buddhist Association, Kwee Tek Hoay, approached Soekirlan, Kadiroen Mangoenpoernomo, and Soetardjo, who were Javanese Theosophists, to deliver Buddhism at Klenteng Kwan Im Tong every two weeks (*Sam Kauw Gwat Po*, November 1936). In such a way, the Theosophical Society not only became a source for learning about Buddhist teachings but also lent its support to the establishment of a new Chinese religious organization, *Sam Kauw Hwee*, as well as a Buddhist Organization, named the Batavia Buddhist Organization.

2.2. Java Buddhist Association (JBA)

In July 1929, the Association for the Propagation of Buddhism in Java was established in Batavia. This organization is closely affiliated with the International Buddhist Mission based in Thaton, Burma. In keeping with its name, the association's central aim was the propagation of Buddhism in Indonesia. The organization was chaired by E.E. Power and Willem Josias van Dienst.¹ However, to avoid causing religious tensions, the name of the organization was changed to the Java Buddhist Association. The new title rather implied a membership of those who were already practicing Buddhists or those who were simply interested in Buddhism; the latter in fact comprised the majority of new members. During its short existence, the association produced a journal called *Nama Buddhaya*, a four-page magazine in Dutch (Ishii 1984, p. 109). The J.B.A. was succeeded by the *Het Central Boeddhistisch Instituut voor Java* (The Central Buddhist Institute for Java), which also published a very concise four-page bulletin in Dutch, called *De Dhamma in Nederlandsch-Indië*, in August and September 1934.

The association was chaired by Van Dienst, mostly using the Dutch language as its medium of communication. The choice of language implies that Van Dienst was communicating mostly with those within the Dutch community and those Indonesian elites who had access to and understood Dutch and were interested in Buddhism. For instance, the bulletin called *Nama Buddhaya*, *De Dhamma in Nederlandsch-indie*, and many other publications written by him, were all in Dutch.² This includes his work wherein he discusses two perspectives of Buddhism (Mahayana and Theravada), entitled *Mahayana Boeddhsme Als Moderne Wereldbeschouwing*. In this specific publication, of note is that he discusses several concepts and how they are understood in Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism. He states that Mahayana Buddhism deserves the attention of Western readers because its substance is not different from Hinayana Buddhism (Theravada Buddhism) (Van Dienst 1935). Moreover, it seems that Van Dienst was seeking to bring together the Mahayana Buddhism practiced in Indonesia with Theravada Buddhism.

Another interesting activity that Van Dienst undertook in his promotion of the study and practice of Buddhism in Indonesia was related to the Theosophical Society. The *Maandblad*, "Het Nieuws van de Dag," published on 25 January 1930, details his lecture on "Waarom ben ik Boeddhist?" (Why Am I a Buddhist?) that was delivered in the Lodge of the Theosophical Society called The Star in the East (*De Ster in het Oosten*).³

Van Dienst also appears to have established a good relationship with local Chinese Buddhists and had initiated discussion forums with this Chinese community in Batavia. Such activities are recorded in detail in the *Moestika Dharma* monthly magazine. For instance, on 16 January 1934, Van Dienst visited the head of Klenteng Kwan Im Tong in Prinsenlaan in Batavia. The head of the Klenteng, Rev. Lin Feng Fei, received Van Dienst with other *hwesio* (Buddhist priests), one of whom was named Mr. Chiu Yin Ho, a graduate from Shanghai College and a resident of Klenteng Kwan Im Tong. The first meeting seems to have had no significant results, except for discussing the plan for the next meeting with other Buddhists scheduled one week later. The main topic of this meeting was the need for improving various function of the klenteng. During this visit, Van Dienst was accompanied by Kwee Tek Hoay. However, it is said that Kwee tek Hoay was not present at the second meeting, due to having to attend business in Tjitjoeroek.

One week later, on 21 January, the next meeting was held. Van Dienst (wearing a Buddhist priest's white garments) arrived in the company of two Chinese Indonesians, named Tjiam Kim Hoat and Tjoa Hin Hoeij. Upon his arrival, the Chinese Buddhist priests greeted Van Dienst. He performed a gesture of respect in front of the statue of Buddha. Van Dienst opened the discussion with the topic on "The Existence of Allah." Speaking as a priest in the Theravada Buddhist tradition, Van Dienst argued that a belief in God should not be expressed by asking for a blessing, or good luck. In the discussion, Van Dienst criticized the common act performed by Buddhists who visited the klenteng merely for the purpose of asking for worldly gains.

At the end of the meeting, Van Dienst and the members of klenteng reached the understanding that they would work together to promote the study of Buddhist philosophy. They also agreed to use klenteng as centers of learning for Buddhism. For that purpose, they planned to establish Buddhist schools and a better equipped library. However, evidence of whether these plans were implemented have not been found during the course of this research. The last records of their partnership were the time they initiated the Vesak, the meeting with the Theosophical Society, and other elements.

2.3. Sam Kauw Hwee and the Batavia Buddhist Association

According to Kwee Tek Hoay, the founder the Batavia Buddhist Association, Buddhism grew in prominence following the formation of the Chinese modern movement, THHK (*Tiong Hoa Hwee Koan*) (Hoaij 1969). THHK was formed as a consequence of the political situation in China, particularly in 1895. THHK itself was originally founded with the intention of promoting Chinese culture among the Chinese migrant community in Indonesia. Its efforts were particularly focused on Confucian thought and conduct for the reform of Chinese Peranakan practices and behavior. To this end, the organization promoted a new style of education in elementary schools, including teaching Mandarin which soon spread across the archipelago (p. 62). THHK had a few core objectives: (a) to improve the customs of the Chinese by utilizing Confucianism to civilize conduct and to broaden the knowledge of Chinese in language and literature; (b) to establish and maintain in Batavia and in other places in the Netherlands Indies quarters to serve as meeting places for the member of the association to discuss the affairs of the association, matters of general interest, and to maintain schools to serve the association's purposes without violating the colonial rules; and (c) to build up a collection of various books useful in acquiring knowledge and understanding (p. 7). At this point in time, Kwee Tek Hoay viewed that THHK's primary objective was to promote Chinese traditions by fostering the principles of Confucianism (Coppel 1981, pp. 179–96).

Given these developments, the question emerges: Was there space for Buddhism to grow? Although THHK, as mentioned above, was largely concerned with Confucianism, the appearance of other forms of Chinese organization in the following years enabled Buddhism to have close connections with Chinese immigrants. Brown (2004, p. 47) opines that "If Buddhist revival had nationalist political connotations, these were linked to China, not to 'Indonesia'". Although Brown does not develop this view in detail, Yulianti's

research (2020) affirms that the Chinese society's role was central to Buddhist developments in modern Indonesia.

It was not until the 1930s that Confucianism was strongly distinguished as the only kind of Chinese religion. The situation remained so until Kwee Tek Hoay, started to establish a new organization called *Sam Kauw Hwee*. With regard to the claim that Confucianism was the true Chinese religion, Coppel has shown that Lie Kim Hok⁴ distinguished the teaching of Confucius as 'the true religion of the Chinese' from 'the usual or everyday religion of the Chinese' which was the 'Confucian religion mixed with Buddhism and Taoism' (Coppel 2002, p. 234). The strong defense was an outcome of the debate that took place between Confucianists and Christians. Hence, through that period of time, it can be assumed that Buddhism was technically invisible, being overshadowed by Confucianism that was officially designated as the Chinese religion (by THHK) (Coppel 1989).

However, this situation appears to have changed when Kwee Tek Hoay, who was formerly a protagonist for THHK, formed a new organization in 1934 that led to Buddhism becoming more visible. This organization was called *Sam Kauw Hwee* (Three Religions Association). Unlike THHK, that claimed Confucianism to be the most relevant Chinese religion, Kwee Tek Hoay came with a new perspective on Chinese religions within what is now Indonesia. For him, the Chinese religions are Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism or what is called *Sam Kauw*. The introduction of *Sam Kauw* by Kwee Tek Hoay to Peranakan Chinese was mainly to defend Chinese cultural identity from possible erosion from Christianity.⁵

Kwee Tek Hoay's level of commitment in promoting *Sam Kauw* can be seen in his published writing. In one of his writings, *Pemandangan Sam Kauw atas Karaja'an dan Oepat-jara Taon baroe Tionghoa Imlek, Pamoedja'an dalem Klenteng-Klenteng Tionghoa, dan Machloek-Machloek Soetji jan diPoedja Menoeroet kabiasa'an dan Kapertjaya'an dari Agama Tionghoa* (Sam Kauw's views of the State and the Chinese New Year Ceremony of Imlek, Worship in Chinese Temples, and Holy Creatures Worshipped according to Customs and Beliefs in Chinese Religion) (1941), he stated a firm objective to introduce the perspective and philosophy of *Sam Kauw*, namely, Buddhism (*Hoed Kauw*), Confucianism (*Khong Kauw*), and Taoism (*Too Kauw*). In addition, he noted that further related issues would be published. It is evident that Kwee Tek Hoay was strenuously promoting the idea of *Sam Kauw*. In the same year (1941), Kwee Tek Hoay also published his 'Small Book' (*boekoe ketjil*), an important work which explains the meaning of *Sam Kauw* as practiced in Tiongkok. This publication was motivated by what he calls the cause of the failure of *Sam Kauw Hwee* in Java and other places in the archipelago. In his opinion, this was due to insufficient knowledge on what *Sam Kauw* is among Chinese people. More specifically he criticized people's limited knowledge about how to manage and organize *Sam Kauw*, its purposes, its teachings, and the responsibility of the members and supporters. Hence, the book was launched to address these problems. The book itself is a transcription of a lecture given by Kwee Tek Hoay at the Batavia Buddhist Association in Klenteng Kwan Im Tong, Batavia.

Kwee Tek Hoay reiterates in his book that *Sam Kauw* can also be called the Chinese Religion (*Agama Orang Tionghoa*). According to him, *Sam Kauw* consists of Chinese beliefs and the religions of their ancestors. In this respect, therefore, Buddhism, as a belief system, was being practiced in the Chinese community, particularly amongst those who joined *Sam Kauw Hwee*.

2.4. Batavia Buddhist Association

The Batavia Buddhist Association (BBA) was founded in 1934 and was established as a response to the increasing interest in Buddhism in the Peranakan Chinese community (Yulianti 2020, p. 105). Ishii (1984) views that this association was founded in order to separate itself from European influence (referring to the Theosophical Society). Brown (2004, p. 51) observes that the Batavia Buddhist Association is the result of a transformation of what was formerly called the Java Buddhist Association. It is also argued that the formation of the Batavia Buddhist Association indicates disagreement with the Java Buddhist

Association; the Batavia Buddhist Association followed Mahayana Buddhism, whereas the Java Buddhist Association is largely influenced by Theravada Buddhism.

After it was established on 17 May 1934, the Batavia Buddhist Association actively engaged in various Buddhism-related activities. The Batavia Buddhist Association itself had been formed with the agreement of seventy people with different ethnicities. Its president was Kwee Tek Hoay, the honorable president was Hwesio Lin Feng Fei (a Mahayana Buddhist monk also the head of Klenteng Kwan Im Tong), Vogelpoel was vice president, and its members had also been members of the Java Buddhist Association ([Gunadharma n.d.](#), p. 148).

Kwee Tek Hoay with regard to the establishment of the Batavia Buddhist Association offered the following reasons: (1) the number of people who were interested in Buddhism had grown significantly in Batavia; and (2) the Java Buddhist Association had experienced difficulty in handling this growing level of interest, particularly with the numbers of people attending the lectures. Based on these reasons the Batavia Buddhist Association was finally formed. Kwee Tek Hoay also sought to maintain a friendly relationship with the Java Buddhist Association, stating that: (1) although the Batavia Buddhist Association did not have a direct affiliation with the Java Buddhist Association, it would maintain a close relationship with it; and (2) the separation was, in fact, only intended to better organize its work. Furthermore, to show a good relationship between the BBA and the JBA, Van Dienst (the head of the JBA) led the ritual during the Vesak celebration at the headquarters of the BBA, Klenteng Kwan Im Tong ([Gunadharma n.d.](#), p. 148).

With the establishment of the Batavia Buddhist Association, Buddhist activities significantly increased. More lectures were being conducted at the klenteng. As mentioned in the report, important occasions such as Vesak celebrations and regular lectures were attended by people of different ethnic groups (*roepa-roepa bangsa*), such as Chinese, European, Indian, and also native Indonesians, both men and women. These people of different groups were described as working together in making preparations for the Vesak celebration.⁶

Acting as the priest was Van Dienst. The prayer was recited in different languages, including Pali, Dutch, and Malay. Following the ceremony and prayer, Van Dienst delivered a sermon about the significance of Vesak to the audiences. The sermon was in Dutch, but was translated into Malay by Jo Oe Liong ([Gunadharma n.d.](#), p. 150). There are some interesting facts that show Batavia Buddhist Association was not just serving the needs of the Chinese Buddhist community. The names of the preachers give clues of their backgrounds, indicating European, Javanese, and Chinese origins. On Vesak day in 1937, the celebration was held in Klenteng Kwan Im Tong, Batavia. E.E. Power, Kadiroen Mangoenpoernomo, and R. Soekirlan gave sermons. The other speakers were M. Soetardjo and Kwee Tek Hoay, who also preached on a similar topic but on different occasions. Kwee Tek Hoay and Soekirlan appeared to have given lectures several times (in the lecture series held from May until June) (*Sam Kauw Gwat Po*, Juni 1937).

Vesak day in 1937 was held on Thursday 25 May in Klenteng Kwan Im Tong. Kwee Tek Hoay reported that it was one of the biggest celebrations to date. People who attended the event were from different backgrounds, such as European, American, Indonesian, Chinese, Hindu, and Singhalese, with the majority being Chinese Buddhists. The Batavia Buddhist Association also maintained a good relationship with other Buddhist institutions, and in some series of *Sam Kauw* publications, it notes that some theosophists gave lectures at the headquarters of the Batavia Buddhist Association. There is also interesting evidence that the Batavia Buddhist Association, through its secretary, Visakha Gunadharma Tjoa Hin Hoaij⁷, maintained regular communication via letters with a Sri Lankan monk named Bhikkhu Narada who had visited Indonesia in 1934. It appeared that Visakha Gunadharma Tjoa Hin Hoaij, interestingly, had close relationship to the Narada. This relationship is seen in a letter sent by Narada to Visakha Gunadharma Tjoa Hin Hoaij, and printed in the same edition. In Narada's letter is pictured a clear example of how he tried to infuse the spirit of Buddhism and to continue working for its development in Indonesia. He cited the efforts of Christian missionaries in Sri Lanka, who worked hard to propagate their religion.

3. Buddhist Organizations in Post-Independence Indonesia, 1949–1959

After Indonesia gained independence, Buddhists who were then part of the new nation reorganized themselves. The first step was reviving the organizations that had once been active during colonial times. The first one to be reinvigorated was *Gabungan Sam Kauw Indonesia* (Federation of the Indonesian *Sam Kauw*–GSKI). The organization was the amalgamation of several *Sam Kauw* organizations (Three Religions Association). The second was the *Persatuan Upasaka-Upasika Indonesia* (Indonesian Buddhist Laity Association–PUUI), discussed below. The two organizations played a pivotal role in at least three ways: (1) The *Gabungan Sam Kauw Indonesia* was an organization that continued to support the development of Buddhism in Indonesia since the colonial era. Before the PUUI was established, the GSKI became the platform that continued the international networks and connection, such as maintaining good relations with Bhikkhu Narada; (2) The PUUI was the first Buddhist organization established to help accelerate the development of Buddhism by working with members of the *Sangha* (Buddhist monks) and to assist the Buddhist laity. They performed social religious duties such as conducting funeral services, marriage rituals, and so on (Juangari 2016, p. 81).

One of the prominent leaders during this period was Ashin Jinarakkhita, a Peranakan Chinese monk whose birth name was Tee Boan An and was born on 23 January 1923 in Bogor, West Java. Chia (2020) notes that Tee's early encounter with Buddhism was at a Chinese temple where he learnt ritual chants and vegetarianism. As a student at a Dutch secondary school, Tee met the Theosophical Society member Reigh, from whom he learnt about the foundational book of the Theosophical Society (p. 119). Before becoming the leader of the Buddhist community, Tee had been one of the leaders of the Young Theosophical Society. His active engagement in the Theosophical Society led to meetings with young Javanese intellectuals, namely, Parwati Soepangat, Ananda Suyono, and Mangunkawatja, who were also members of the Theosophical Society and who later worked with him on the development of Buddhism (Chia 2018). At the same time, Tee also maintained a good relationship with Buddhist activists from the colonial period, such as Visakha Gunadharma Tjoa Hin Hoeij. Tee later became leader of the *Gabungan Sam Kauw Indonesia* (Yulianti 2020).

3.1. *Gabungan Sam Kauw Indonesia*

The role of *Gabungan Sam Kauw Indonesia* (GSKI) in the history of Buddhism in modern Indonesian is well known. In the late colonial period, the organization was known as *Sam Kauw Hwee*, and had been playing a vital role in the development of Buddhism. Originally established for Chinese religious and cultural purposes, *Sam Kauw Hwee* had facilitated the teaching of three religions, namely, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. Having remained in a vacuum during the Japanese colonialism and Indonesian revolution periods, *Sam Kauw Hwee* was then revived by the *Sam Kauw* community in Jakarta. Tee Boan An, (who later became known as Ashin Jinarakkhita), Visakha Gunadharma Tjoa Hin Hoeij, the daughter of Kwee Tek Hoay (the founder of *Sam Kauw Hwee* in the 1930s), and Ong Tiang Biau all became key leaders in the GSKI (Tri Budaja: *Madjalah Bulanan Gabungan Sam Kauw Indonesia* 1, p. 10).

GSKI was established in February 1951 (Menteri Kehakiman R.I No. JA. 5/31/13, 9 April 1953; Tri Budaja 1, p. 3; Yulianti 2020, p. 220). The organization was first led by Tee Boan An until he left for Burma to receive a higher ordination at Tathana Yeiktha in Rangoon. Between 1954 and 1954, there were at least forty-six organizations which became members of the GSKI, including *Kong Kauw Hwee* (Association of Confucianism), *Sam Kauw Hwee* (Association of Buddhism), *Persatuan Buddhist Tengger* (in East Java), and *Persatuan Buddhist Denpasar* (Bali) (Tri Budaja: *Madjalah Bulanan Gabungan Sam Kauw Indonesia* 6, p. 10).⁸ Hence, it is plausible to claim that GSKI was the earliest platform which included Buddhist organizations in their program before more specific Buddhist organizations such as PUUI and Perbudhi came into being.

The Federation of *Sam Kauw* continued to be the most active religious organization in the Chinese community, and it promoted Buddhist activity in independent Indonesia. The

organization also played a role as an ambassador for Indonesia in international Buddhist gatherings. The GSKI also maintained a good relationship with Burma. In 1954, together with the official representative of the Indonesian ministry of religions, GSKI, represented by Visakha Gunadharma Tjoa Hin Hoeij, Ong Tiang Biau departed for Burma to attend the Sixth Buddhist Council of Buddhism, known as *Chattha Sanghayana* (*Tri Budaja: Madjalah Bulanan Gabungan Sam Kauw Indonesia* 6, p. 4). During this historic council gathering, Ong Tiang Biau and Tee Boan An delivered speeches about Buddhism in Indonesian to around 2000 Buddhists from across the world (p. 4; Clark 2015).⁹ The attendance of GSKI members in the *Chattha Sangayana* was the first time Indonesian Buddhists had left the territory of Independent Indonesia for such a gathering.

Following the sixth Buddhist council, GSKI continued to receive positive attention from Burmese Buddhists. In February 1955, through Ashin Jinarakhita, a GSKI member in Tjianjur, Sam Kauw Hwee, received a Buddha statue and Buddhist flag from former Burmese prime minister U Tin. The flag is said to have been taken from the site where the sixth Buddhist council was held (*Tri Budaja: Madjalah Bulanan Gabungan Sam Kauw Indonesia* 6, p. 12).

In addition to the connection with Burma, GSKI also proved to have good relationships with other Buddhist communities from India, Thailand, and Ceylon. Most of the interactions with Buddhists from these countries can be seen during the Vesak celebration and on other special occasions; for instance, when the Thai ambassador offered a Buddha statue to the GSKI which took place at Klenteng Kong Hoa Sie in Jakarta on March 1955. The ceremony was attended by Indian and Burmese ambassadors (*Tri Budaja: Madjalah Bulanan Gabungan Sam Kauw Indonesia* 12–16, p. 41). In the following year, on the occasion of the Buddha Jayanti celebration in 1956, the GSKI, which was represented by Visakha Gunadharma Tjoa Hin Hoeij together with the Indonesian delegation comprising K.R.H Asnawi Hadisiswaja from the Ministry of Religious Affairs, Purbatjaraka and Ida Kumenoh from Bali, were invited to the Buddhist Symposium held in New Delhi (*Tri Budaja: Madjalah Bulanan Gabungan Sam Kauw Indonesia* 36–37, p. 40). In her report about Indonesian participation in the Buddhist Symposium in New Delhi, Visakha Gunadharma Tjoa Hin Hoeij wrote that the participation of the Indonesian Buddhist delegation in the event had helped Buddhism to gain both national and international recognition as a practiced religion in Indonesia. She added that the exposure to Buddhist international events had provided an opportunity for Buddhists in Indonesia to widen their international networking. In terms of this networking, Visakha Gunadharma Tjoa Hin Hoeij was referring to the meeting with a Buddhist delegation from China, who invited the GSKI to attend a Buddhist event in 1957 (p. 45).

Furthermore, under the leadership of Visakha Gunadharma Tjoa Hin Hoeij, the organization also continued to maintain a close relationship with Bhikkhu Narada from Sri Lanka. In February 1958, Visakha Gunadharma Tjoa Hin Hoeij received a visit from Bhikkhu Narada. This was Bhikkhu Narada's second visit and the first of its kind since Indonesia gained independence (*Buddhis: Madjallah Peladjaran Buddha* 3–4, p. 55). Bhikkhu Narada and Ashin Jinarakkhita made their visit to Sam Kauw Hwee in Blora, Central Java, in 1958 (p. 39). In 1959, together with Buddhist organizations such as *Perhimpunan Buddhis Indonesia* (Indonesian Buddhist Association–Perbudhi), GSKI shared the responsibility of hosting a historical event for Buddhists: the international Vesak and monk ordination in Semarang, Central Java (*Tri Budaja: Madjalah Bulanan Gabungan Sam Kauw Indonesia* 60, p. 2).

3.2. Persaudaraan Upasaka Upasika Indonesia and Perhimpunan Buddhis Indonesia

PUUI was established in 1953 in conjunction with the Vesak celebration in Jakarta. The organization was born with the support of members of the Theosophical Society, *Gabungan Sam Kauw Indonesia*, and the Buddhist laity, as well as with the support of Ashin Jinarakhita (*Buku Peringatan Perajan Waisak* 2503/1959, p. 35). During the PUUI summit held in December 1958 in Semarang, the members declared that the three components or organizations should play major roles to propagate Buddhism in Indonesia. The first is the

role of the monastic members or monks; secondly is the organization of PUUI; and thirdly, the Perbudhi. The organization of *Sangha* functions to give support to the laypeople's work in the organization. Meanwhile, as for the PUUI, with the support of the *Sangha*, it could take responsibility in organizing the propagation of Buddhism, the establishment of Perbudhi in various regions in the Indonesian archipelago, and offer guidance and leadership at vihara across the country (*Buddhis: Madjalah Bulanan Gabungan Sam Kauw Indonesia* 3–4, p. 7). In return, the Perbudhi, which was under the guidance of PUUI, worked for the existence, state recognition, and welfare of Buddhist societies and organizations in Indonesia. In terms of these objectives, the Perbudhi was responsible for proposing Vesak be officially accepted as a Buddhist holiday by the Indonesian government and also to gain its financial support, particularly for the vihara. The organization was also responsible for establishing communications and building networks with the international Buddhist community (*Buddhis: Madjalah Bulanan Gabungan Sam Kauw Indonesia* 9, p. 20).

The PUUI was a Buddhist organization with many branches located in various places. By 1958, PUUI branches had been formed in forty-five cities on Java, Sumatra, Sulawesi, and Bali (*Buku Peringatan Perajan Waisak 2503/1959*, p. 35). The PUUI branches were formed in regions where Buddhism had gained interest. The establishment of PUUI mostly took place during the Dhammic visits of Ashin Jinarakkhita; thus, the branch organization was officiated in his presence. For instance, during his visit to Mojokerto, East Java, he attended the formation of PUUI at Klenteng Hok Sian Kiong. In Bali, a branch of PUUI was established in December 1958 in Denpasar. The organization was chaired by Upasaka Id. Ketut Djelantik (*Buddhis: Madjalah Bulanan Gabungan Sam Kauw Indonesia* 8, 39). As the name of the organization suggests, the formation of PUUI is also mostly concerned with the official initiation of lay followers as *Upasika* and *Upasaka*. The new Buddhist followers, called Upasika and Upasaka, are then given Pali names, sometimes referred to as Buddhist names. The Buddhist names were mostly placed before the Upasaka or Upasika's given name, such as Upasika Prajnakuti Njoo, Dharmasuriya Tan (p. 40). The use of Pali names among the Buddhist laity in Indonesia was common during this decade and had become a new practice among Buddhists. This practice was firstly introduced by Bhikkhu Narada and then popularized by Ashin Jinarakkhita as part of his propagation work in the 1950s.

Perbudhi Djakarta was formed in 1958, and its memberships included important representatives from several nations, including the ambassadors of Burma, India, Ceylon, Japan, and Vietnam, who were honorary members. Its advisory board members included Ashin Jinarakkhita, Purbatjaraka, Ong Tiang Biau, R. Soemardjo, and Soekanto. Its Chairs were Saltono Yodoprabiro, Khoe Soe Khiam, and Ida Bagus Mantra, and its executive included Visakha Gunadharma Tjoa Hin Hoeij (*Buddhis: Madjalah Bulanan Gabungan Sam Kauw Indonesia* 5, p. 56). In 1959, the Perbudhi held its first national congress in Jakarta, under the leadership of Sariputra Sadono (*Buddhis: Madjallah Peladjaran Buddha* 9, 20). Branches of Perbudhi were subsequently established in seventeen regions in Java, Bali, and Sulawesi (*Buku Peringatan Perajan Waisak 2503/1959*, p. 35).

3.3. Buddhist Study Club

The Buddhist Study Club was another Buddhist organization that focused on the study of Buddhism. It was established in Yogyakarta in October 1957, founded by Buddhist youths and students. It was chaired by Upasika R.A. Parwati and Upasaka Oka Diputhera.¹⁰ The organization was the first Buddhist organization ever to be founded in Yogyakarta. In 1958, Bhikkhu Narada, together with Ashin Jinarakkhita, visited members of the organization and delivered a lecture (*Buddhis: Madjallah Peladjaran Buddha* 3–4, p. 21). A Buddhist Study Club was also established in Surabaya, with its main aim being to promote Buddhism in the region. The organization was established as a response to a growing interest in Buddhism and as response to a PUUI conference choosing Surabaya for the establishment of a Buddhist Organization in East Java. The organization was chaired by a Chinese Peranakan named Tjio Boen Tjay and Tjiam Khee Gie (*Buddhis: Madjallah Peladjaran Buddha* 1, p. 4). This was in addition to the *Perkumpulan Buddha Dharma Indonesia*,

which was also established in Surabaya. The organization appeared to be active in 1958. The *Buddhis* magazine published photographs of various activities of *Perkumpulan Buddha Dharma Indonesia*, such as laypeople, Upasaka dan Upasika wearing long, white robes, reciting Buddhist teachings (*Buddhis: Madjallah Peladjaran Buddha* 6, p. 17).

4. Conclusions

This article concludes that Buddhist organizations established by European and Peranakan Chinese Buddhists were cosmopolitan. The transnational Buddhist networks played a major role in the inception of these organizations. In the first half of the twentieth century, most Buddhist knowledge came from Theravada Buddhism, brought by mostly European and South and Southeast Asian Buddhists. The first international organization that played a major role in fostering the study and practice of Buddhism was the Theosophical Society. The organization became a source of knowledge on Buddhism through its lectures and publications on Buddhism. Many in the Peranakan Chinese community embraced Buddhism because it was part of their cultural and religious identity. This community took the Theosophical Society as a model to develop its own Peranakan Chinese religious organizations. The Theosophical Society's contribution to Buddhism in Indonesia also extended to their role in promoting the Buddhist temple, Borobudur, as a central site for Buddhist ceremonies.

The second organization was the Java Buddhist Association. This organization was the first which was exclusively Buddhist which sought to promote Buddhism. The organization also had a Theravada Buddhist affiliation that worked with the Peranakan Chinese during the colonial times. The third organization, which was also exclusively Buddhist during this period, was the Batavia Buddhist Association. Although the organization was founded by the Peranakan Chinese, it was open to all people from various ethnic backgrounds, nations, and Buddhist schools. The Batavia Buddhist Association was, therefore, the first Buddhist organization to be founded by Peranakan Chinese in late colonial Indonesia. The organization was vital for the implementation of new practices of Buddhism and the study and dissemination of Buddhist knowledge in modern Indonesia.

This research has also shown that after Indonesia gained its independence, Indonesian Buddhists re-established their organizations. The first organization was *Sam Kauw Hwee*, which was then renamed *Gabungan Sam Kauw Indonesia* (GSKI). The organization was vital in facilitating the practice of Buddhism in Indonesia, as well as revitalizing networks with international Buddhists. The GSKI also represented Buddhists for the newly independent Indonesia on the world stage. The GSKI was an organization that had been established by the Peranakan Chinese. The second organization was PUUI. Together with the Perbudhi, this organization was a response to managing a growing number of Buddhists in the Indonesian archipelago. The organization was founded to promote Buddhism in various places in Indonesia and to serve the needs of new Buddhists. Buddhist organizations including GSKI; working together enabled Buddhism in Indonesia to become recognized as a practiced religion by the Indonesian government. During this period, the organization of Buddhism did not become segmented based on Buddhist schools or sects.

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Notes

- ¹ Willem Josias van Dienst was a Dutch Buddhist priest inspired by Burmese Buddhists.
- ² This research discovered seven books written by Josias van Dienst.
- ³ This lecture was also delivered with E.E. Power.
- ⁴ Lie Kim Hok, on behalf of THHK commission.
- ⁵ Similar pattern to defending cultural identity in the form of debate was also happening in Sri Lanka between Buddhist leaders and Christian missionaries.
- ⁶ Translation by the author: “In the afternoon, the Chinese and European women had started to come to the temple in order to help make necessary flower arrangement (on the altar)”.
- ⁷ Tjoa Hin Hoaij was her husband’s name; her original name was Kwee Yat Nio and her Buddhist name was assumed later.
- ⁸ In 1955, Khong Kauw Hwee (Association of Confucianism) withdrew their membership from the GKSI and thus argued that the Sam Kauw Federation should alter the name of the organization to Hoed Kauw Hwee (Buddhist Association). The request was rejected by most of the members of the organization who attended the congress.
- ⁹ The Buddhist council in Burma was held for a duration of two years, from May 1954 to May 1956. It was held by the Buddha Sasana Council (BSC) and was state-sponsored during the reign of U Nu. The council was held in conjunction with the 2500-year anniversary of the death of the Buddha, according to Theravada Buddhist reckoning. The purpose was largely aimed to preserve the purity of Buddhism.
- ¹⁰ Upasika is the Pali term for Buddhist laywomen, whereas Upasaka refers to Buddhist laymen.

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