

# GUANYIN CAN UNDERSTAND PALI: CROSS-TRADITIONAL PRACTICES OF INDONESIAN BUDDHISTS WHO WORSHIP GUANYIN THROUGH PALI PARITTA

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## ABSTRACT

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In the 1960s–1990s, Buddhism in Indonesia had to adapt significantly to state policies. Chinese cultures and Mahayana Buddhism were marginalized because they were seen as obstacles to assimilation into Indonesian identity. This resulted in significant growth of Theravada Buddhism. This article addresses two questions: (1) how did Chinese communities who were forced to adopt Theravada Buddhism maintain their beliefs in public areas? and (2) how have Buddhist monks in the Buddhayana organization, the largest and most adaptable Buddhist group in Indonesia, adjusted their teachings to serve the needs of Chinese communities? The research is based on document study of Buddhist magazines published since the 1960s and ethnographic fieldwork conducted through residence in Buddhayana temples in Java for two years (2021–2022). The figure of Guanyin, in terms of history, development, and worship in Indonesia, serves as the central theme to illustrate the adaptation of Buddhist rituals using the concepts of hybridity and interspirituality. The study has two major findings. (1) Although Chinese Buddhists chant in Pali, the veneration of Guanyin has not been abandoned. The Theravada Paritta is used as a medium to worship the Mahayana Bodhisattva. (2) While other Buddhist groups may view this practice as a form of mixed or syncretic Buddhism, Buddhayana followers interpret it as a cross-tradition practice rather than syncretism. For them, true Buddhism lies in its teachings, not in rituals, which may be contextually adaptable. The adaptive approach of Buddhayana monks aligns with the Mahayana ideal that Guanyin can manifest in any form to help sentient beings. The commitment to liberate beings from suffering should not be confined by language or culture. Ultimately, this article argues that Guanyin symbolizes not only a cross-gender and cross-national deity but also a cross-sectarian figure that enables practitioners to transcend boundaries of religious traditions.

**Keywords:** Buddhayana; cross-tradition practice; Guanyin; syncretism

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the relationship between Chinese Buddhists and Guanyin (central deity in Chinese beliefs) during the Sukarno era (1950–1967) and the Suharto regime (1967–1998) in Indonesia. It describes how Chinese Buddhists preserved their traditional Chinese beliefs in the private sphere, while at the same time promoted Theravada Buddhism to satisfy government expectations and to integrate into Indonesian national identity in the public sphere. The worship of Guanyin serves as the central focus for exploring the dynamics of Buddhism in Indonesia because Chinese deities and cultural traditions have long been safeguarded within *kelenteng* (Chinese temples). Even when Chinese culture was marginalized or excluded from public spaces, *kelenteng* private homes continued to play a vital role in maintaining these traditions. Therefore, understanding their religious resilience requires not only examining public expressions of Buddhism but also observing the everyday practices of Chinese Buddhists in their private lives.

This study has two objectives. First, it describes the resilience and negotiation of Indonesian Chinese communities in the private sphere to maintain their beliefs when the public sphere has been dominated by restrictive government policies and the popularity of Theravada. Secondly, it elucidates the flexible identities of Buddhayana members in interpreting Buddhism to serve the religious needs of the Chinese communities, and it analyzes the ways in which they respond to criticisms of syncretism and identify themselves as adherents of Buddhism.

## 2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employed a mixed-method approach. Primary sources such as Buddhist books and magazines including *2500 Buddha Jayanti* (1956) and *Waicak* (1959) provided valuable insights into the everyday religious life of Indonesian Buddhists during that period. In addition, various Buddhayana publications issued to disseminate the movement's ideology were analyzed to understand how its teachings and practices evolved in response to social and political contexts. Additionally, a two-year ethnographic study was conducted in Java. The first author, Jesada Buaban, stayed in Buddhayana temples for two years (2021–2022), participating in ceremonies in the temples and in the homes of laypeople. During this time, in-depth interviews were conducted with Buddhayana members in an informal manner.

Buddhayana was selected as the case study for this research because it represents the largest Buddhist movement in Indonesia, and it has played a significant role since the 1950s. Most importantly, the movement identifies itself as non-sectarian, allowing Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana monks, as well as lay followers, to coexist within the same temple (Dharmawimala, 2012, p. 10). This inclusive orientation makes Buddhayana one of the most flexible and adaptive Buddhist organizations in Indonesia. Moreover, Buddhayana appears to show particular sympathy toward the Chinese community, actively supporting their efforts to preserve traditional beliefs and practices within the broader framework of Indonesian Buddhism.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This paper is organized into five sections. The first section provides a brief background of the development of Buddhism in Indonesia during the periods that the government heavily interfered in its practice (1950–1998). During those eras, Buddhists had to interpret Buddhism to meet the criteria of being a state-recognized religion alongside the growth of Theravada Buddhism and the marginalization of Mahayana Chinese Buddhism. The second section describes the significance of Guanyin as a cross-border and cross-gender goddess. The third section explains the popularity of Guanyin among women and beyond Buddhist communities. It examines the dynamics of Guanyin from his/her origin in India to China and beyond, showing how Guanyin has been perceived, interpreted, and worshiped in different places. The fourth section explains how Guanyin functions a cross-traditional goddess for Indonesian Chinese communities. The fifth and final section discusses the trans-sectarian practices of the monks and other members of the Buddhayana organization. It argues that their responses to criticism of syncretism are examples of cross-traditional approaches.

### 3.1 Indonesian Buddhism in its religious-political context

The arrival of overseas Chinese in the Indonesian archipelago can be traced back to the thirteenth century (Wang, 1996, p. 1). However, they appear to have established permanent settlements beginning in the sixteenth century (Sutrisno, 2018). Naturally, religion was among the cultural elements they brought with them to their new homeland (Chia, 2020). Mahayana Buddhism, practiced under the umbrella of the “Three

Teachings" (*Tridharma*) in Indonesia, has traditionally shared the same temples (*kelenteng*) with Taoism, Confucianism, and other forms of Chinese popular religion. Among the deities enshrined in these temples, Guanyin remains one of the most beloved and enduring figures, worshipped both in *kelenteng* and in household altars to this day. For many Chinese Indonesians, the *Tridharma* represents an integrated way of life rather than distinct religious affiliations. They have never felt compelled to choose exclusively between Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism, as all three traditions coexist harmoniously within their religious worldview.

Efforts to distinguish the three traditions were evident in the early twentieth century. The Chinese community in Batavia (now Jakarta) established the Chinese Association (*Tiong Hoa Hwee Koan*) in 1900 to promote Confucian rituals and teachings (Sutrisno, 2018). Meanwhile, the Javanese Buddhist Association, which had close ties to the International Buddhist Mission of Myanmar, was founded and focused on the study of Theravada Buddhism. In 1934, Kwee Tek Hoay initiated a new organization called the Association of Three Religions (*Sam Kauw Hwee*) on the grounds that the Chinese should preserve all three religions (Yulianti, 2022).

The rise of Theravada Buddhism in Indonesia is particularly noteworthy. The global spread of rationalist interpretations of Buddhism influenced by developments in Sri Lanka and the Vipassana meditation movement in Myanmar paved the way for the ordination of Ashin Jinarakkhita (1923–2002), the first Indonesian monk, in Myanmar in 1954 (Buaban et al., 2024, p. 101). During Suharto's regime, the state ideology of *Pancasila* required all recognized religions to affirm belief in a Supreme God (*Tuhan Yang Maha Esa*). Under Jinarakkhita's leadership, Buddhists interpreted *Sanghyang Adi-Buddha* as this supreme being, thereby aligning Buddhist doctrine with state requirements. This reinterpretation ultimately led to the official recognition of Buddhism as a religion in Indonesia in 1975 (Chia, 2018, p. 58).

In 1958, Chinese residents in Indonesia were forced to choose between Chinese and Indonesian citizenship (Setiono, 2008, p. 751), and in 1959 they were prohibited from engaging in business outside the city limits (Buaban, 2025, p. 1). Cultural assimilation policies of the 1970s led many *kelenteng* to affiliate as Buddhist (Suryadinata, 2014, p. 32). During this period, Buddhayana monasteries such as Buddha Prabha published a magazine entitled "Dharma Prabha" (1987–2007) to spread the teachings of Theravada Buddhism (Nadiwana, 1987). However, Buddhayana, the largest Indonesian Buddhist organization from 1955, was expelled from the Indonesian Federation of Buddhist Trustees (*Perwalian Umat Buddha Indonesia*: Walubi) in 1995 for promoting Chinese culture and syncretic Buddhism (Steenbrink, 2013, p. 12).

The trend in contemporary Buddhism, both Theravada and Mahayana, has been to emphasize rational interpretations of Buddhist teachings, often articulated in scientific and psychological terms in dialogue with Western knowledge (McMahan, 2008). At the same time, it has fostered a growing concern with religious identity within Asia itself. This concern has led to an emphasis on authenticity, where monks are expected to adhere to a single, uniform tradition. Consequently, cross-traditional practices such as Theravada monks chanting Mahayana sutras, as observed among Jinarakkhita and Buddhayana members—are often criticized as heretical (Buaban, 2025). This situation has heightened the self-awareness of Buddhayana members regarding their religious flexibility. In response, they have continued to support and preserve Chinese traditions, including the worship of Guanyin, particularly within the private sphere, where cultural continuity can be maintained without external scrutiny.

### 3.2 Guanyin as a cross-border and cross-gender goddess

Previous studies have depicted Guanyin, the Chinese deity, as a trans-border and trans-gender goddess. Buddhism first came to China during the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), and it spread across the region during the Tang dynasty (618–907) (Yu, 2020, p. 14). In addition to Buddhist texts from India (Sanskrit) being translated into Chinese languages, some Buddhist rituals and cultures were also transmitted and adapted to this new land. The transformation of the deity Avalokitesvara into Guanyin provides an example. According to Huang Lele (2022, p. 2), Avalokitesvara originated in Indian art in the Gandhara and Mathura periods in the second century CE. He was illustrated in the form of Padmapani, an Avalokitesvara who has a lotus in his hand and Amitabha Buddha in his crown. Lele added that in India itself, during the post-Gupta period (up to 750 CE), a large amount of Avalokitesvara statues were produced, which suggests that the veneration of Avalokitesvara became more and more significant in India. Moreover, during this period Avalokitesvara figures began to be depicted with more heads and hands probably due to the influence of the Tantra tradition (Lele, 2022, pp. 3–7).

Xu Yuji (2023, p. 1) argued that Guanyin Bodhisattva gained popularity in China after Sanskrit scriptures were translated into Chinese, for example the *Lotus Sutra* or *Miaofalianhua Jing* by Kumarajiva in 406 CE. This Mahayana scripture seem to serve villagers in everyday life since Guanyin's story involved saving human beings from suffering. Meanwhile, other scriptures, such as *Vimalakirti Sutra* or *Weimojie Jing*, tended to serve elites for scholarly purpose because their contents focused on philosophical teachings of Buddhism. Kim Jeong-Eun asserted that the story of Guanyin appears in the 25th chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*, so the text transmitted to China also transmit the iconic figure. However, due to the popularity of Guanyin, Buddhists often

publish the twenty-fifth chapter of Lotus Sutra separately, naming it the *Guanyin Sutra* for the sake of chanting on its own. Regarding terminology, Avalokitesvara in Sanskrit and Guanyin in Mandarin share the same meaning, “the one who observed the sounds of the world.” The worship of Guanyin, according to Kim (2001), can be traced to the fourth century. This cult could be found in the caves of Dunhuang, Western China, in the form of wall painting (Kim, 2001, p. 17).

In Lele’s (2022) study, Guanyin took a female form during the Tang dynasty. She was portrayed not only as a female form of a male Bodhisattva, but the face of Guanyin also resembled lady of the Tang dynasty court (Lele, 2022, p. 9). The flattened chest of this figure does not affect its identification as a man or woman. In Confucian tradition, especially in rituals, breasts, genitalia, and other private body parts could not be shown in art. Instead, gender differences can be seen from the figure’s clothing, jewelry, makeup, facial hair, skin color, and other characteristics. From a sociological perspective, the main factor in making Avalokitesvara into a woman was the supporters of Guanyin. Most of Guanyin’s followers were women, so they consciously or unconsciously wanted to integrate their gender identity, leading the artisans who designed Guanyin Bodhisattva statues to follow this preference (Lele, 2022, pp. 11–13). Paul Hedges (2011, p. 206) argued that, among the various versions of Guanyin, the white-robed Guanyin became the most popular due to her power to grant sons, making her a child-giving deity. To fulfill this compassionate mission, Guanyin gradually came to be depicted in female form. Among the many local interpretations, the story of Princess Miaoshan, which emerged around the twelfth century, is the most well-known indigenized version of Guanyin. In this tale, Miaoshan, a young woman who refused marriage and chose a monastic life, demonstrated her profound compassion by sacrificing her own eyes and hands to heal her gravely ill father, a selfish king. Her selfless act was celebrated as the highest expression of filial piety, embodying both Buddhist values of compassion and Confucian virtues (Hedges, 2011, p. 209).

### 3.3 The popularity of Guanyin among women and beyond Buddhist identity

It is important to note that not all worshippers of Guanyin identify themselves as Buddhists. Some devotees may have little familiarity with Buddhist doctrines, but they know and revere the story of Princess Miaoshan (Kim, 2001, p. 18). In this legend, although Miaoshan entered a monastery and lived a celibate life, she was not depicted as an ordained Buddhist nun. Consequently, the figure of the compassionate goddess extends beyond the boundaries of Buddhism. This broader appeal demonstrates the successful localization of Guanyin in China, where people from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds venerated her for different purposes and meanings. Yu Chun-fang (2001, p. 163) proposed the hypothesis that Guanyin’s two attendant deities originated from the Golden Boy and Jade Girl, who have served as attendants to the Jade Emperor in Taoism since the Tang dynasty. More importantly, the status of women and female deities in Taoism is generally regarded as higher than in Buddhism. Within Taoist cosmology, goddesses and women are revered as manifestations of the pure cosmic force of *Yin*, which is equal and complementary to *Yang*, the masculine principle (Xu, 2023, p. 2). In contrast, many Buddhist traditions, such as the Pure Land school, have viewed women as inferior. It is noted that when women attain rebirth in the Western Paradise (*Sukhavati*), their gender is transformed into male, reflecting a traditional Buddhist notion of male superiority in the spiritual hierarchy (Gross, 1993, p. 65).

According to Mark Meulenbeld (2016, p. 693), Guanyin also became popular due to her depiction as a demonic spirit figure. In demonological perspective, the death of Guanyin was horrible since her hands were cut and her eyes were gouged out. Therefore, it can be interpreted that she has been worshiped as a demonic spirit, as many other local deities in Chinese traditions. Other Buddhists claim that Guanyin is a Bodhisattva who has been identified with the Chinese word “*pusa*”, which has been applied to all divinities, including Buddhist, Taoist, and even Christian. For Meulenbeld (2016, p. 695), Guanyin could become a figure for veneration because her story can be transformed into a deity who died prematurely, and her powers are in line with the demonic paradigm. Therefore, we should not assume that Guanyin is worshiped because she belongs to Buddhism only.

This argument is supported by Hendri, an Indonesian Catholic interviewed in 2022, who joined the *Ullambana* ritual, which is conducted in the seventh month of the Chinese lunar calendar to intercede for ancestors, in Sakyawanaram, Bogor. Hendri viewed Guanyin worship as a Chinese tradition, not necessarily referring to Buddhist, Confucian, Taoist, or other local beliefs. In the *Ullambana* ritual, chanting of the *Sutra of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva (Ti Cang Cing)*, was conducted in Mandarin for three days. Hendri explained that Buddhism and Catholicism share similar beliefs such as Guanyin and Mary as symbols of compassion. Both groups also use candles and incense in rituals, and most importantly, both traditions teach that even after ancestors have passed away, their descendants still should remember and intercede for them (Hendri, personal communication, August 12, 2022).

During the early stages in the development of Mahayana Buddhism in China, Guanyin was the most popular in the Pure Land tradition, even more than Amitabha, the Buddha who is worshiped by Guanyin. In

Pure Land temples, the Guanyin statue is the most visited object (Hedges, 2011, p. 204). However, not all groups in Mahayana Buddhism worshiped Guanyin from the beginning. The Chinese Chan or Zen Buddhism seems to have adopted Guanyin during the Song dynasty (960–1127). Before this, Chan was known as Chinese Reform Buddhism, which emphasized meditation, reduced worship, and rejected traditional practices. As a result, Guanyin was seen as a formless or embedded symbol of compassion. In *Surangama Sutra (Shou Lengyan Jing)*, composed in China in 705, the Tantric Bodhisattva Guanyin was depicted as having eleven heads and a thousand hands. However, Chan Buddhism had not yet adopted this Bodhisattva as a deity statue for worship. In 952, Chan masters accepted that Guanyin and her power could be included in Chan texts, such as one entitled *Anthology of the Hall of the Patriarchs (Zutangji)* (Levering, 2006, pp. 3–7). It can be said that the popularity of Guanyin as the most worshiped goddess made Chan Buddhism adapt. At least since the seventeenth century, *mantra* or *dharani* chanting to appreciate Guanyin became a daily practice in morning and evening chanting of monks and nuns in Chan temples (Levering, 2006, p. 11).

The relationship between Guanyin and female devotees who used their hair in embroidery has been studied by Yuhang Li (2012). Growing one's hair for embroidery of Guanyin's image is considered a sacrifice and effort by using their womanly skill and parts of their bodies (Li, 2012, p. 132). It is recorded that women in both gentry and lower classes committed themselves to this practice during the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties, which made the embroidery of Guanyin in this period quite unique. It was a spiritual devotion based on their gender and social roles, corresponding to the ideal Confucian woman as a good wife and righteous mother, where women may ask Guanyin to solve their problems and help them to fulfill their filial duties (Li, 2012, p. 137). As mentioned above, one of the purposes for worshiping Guanyin is to ask for children. In *Lotus Sutra* Chapter 25, it is written:

If any woman wanting to have a baby boy, pays homage and makes offerings to Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, she will bear a baby boy endowed with good merit and wisdom. If she wants to have a baby girl, she will bear a beautiful baby girl who has planted roots of good merit and will have love for all sentient beings (Kumarajiva, 2007, p. 295).

### 3.4 Guanyin as a cross-tradition goddess for Chinese Indonesians

In Indonesia, statues of deities, especially Guanyin, are commonly placed in *kelenteng* and in people's houses. In terms of organizations, Sam Kauw Hwee (Association of Three Religions) was founded by Kwee Tek Hoay in 1934 with the aim to promote Chinese religions (Yulianti, 2024, p. 109). Prawati Soepangat (1932–2016), one of the earliest female disciples of Jinarakkhita, wrote an article "Motherhood in Buddhism (*Keibuan dalam Buddha-Dharma*)". In this article, she used Guanyin as an example to persuade Buddhist women to be moral women and to be kind to all beings. She mentioned that people around the world worship Guanyin, and that *vihara* and *kelenteng* in Indonesia are full of Guanyin statues and women who worship Guanyin (Soepangat, 1956, pp. 155–158).

Traditionally, the prayer to venerate Guanyin is called *Saddharma Pundarika Sutra* or *Phu Men Phin* in Mandarin. In general, only the chapter of *Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva Samanta Mukha Varga* has been selected and published as a booklet (KBI, 2024). As mentioned above, Mahayana Buddhism was perceived as related to the Chinese identity during Suharto's regime, while the Theravada tradition was emphasized until the Pali *Paritta* become a mainstream chanting guidebook for Indonesian Buddhists, especially within Buddhayana. After that time, the Pali *Parittas* were chosen for chanting not only in the public sphere, such as the Waisak ceremony, but also in the private sphere, such as individual worship in homes or *kelenteng*. According to Bapak Sutono, a Buddhayana follower, in the 1970s, large statues of Guanyin, along with other deities such as Buddha, and a *Paritta Suci* prayer book, were placed on altars in many homes (personal communication, July 15, 2024). Worshippers chanted in Pali in front of the statue of Guanyin, even though some people still spoke primarily in Chinese dialects such as Hokkein or Hakka with their relatives. This is because they were more fluent at chanting in Pali rather than Mandarin because it was different to their local dialects.

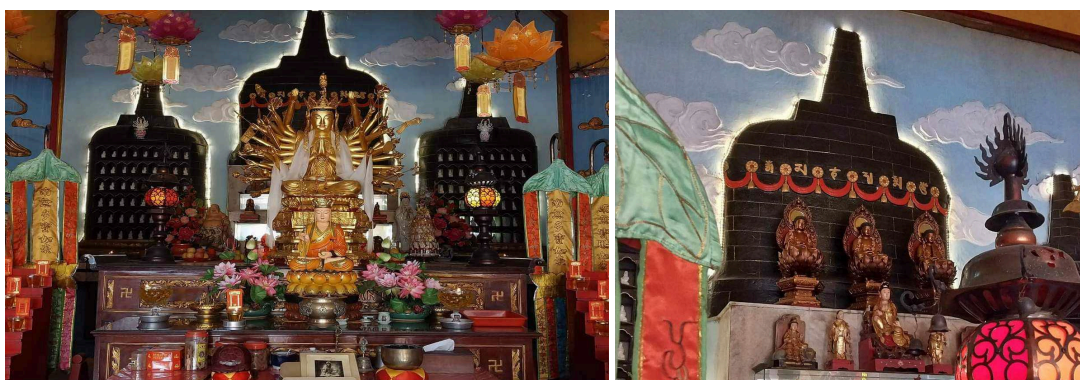
*Paritta Suci*, a Pali-language book of Buddhist chanting, was imported from Sri Lanka in the 1950s after Jinarakkhita became a Theravada monk (Dharmawimala, personal communication, July 18, 2023). It includes the *Vandana* (Namo Tassa Bhagavato, Araham Samma), *Pancasila* (Panatipata), *Mangala Sutta* (Asevana), *Sacca Kiriya Gatha* (Natthi Me), *Karaniya Metta Sutta* (Karaniyamattha), *Jayamangala Gatha* (Itipiso, Bahum) and so on (Sadono, 1959, pp. 45–55). From the introduction of the *Paritta Suci* in 1959 to 1975, Buddhayana followers would chant "Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma Sambuddhassa" (I pay homage to the Blessed One, the Worthy One, the Fully Enlightened One) similar to other Buddhist groups. The Enlightened One refers to Sakyamuni Buddha. After 1975, when Buddhayana interpreted *Adi-Buddha* as the Supreme God to make Buddhism recognized by the government, Buddhayana differentiate themselves from other Buddhist groups by adding "Namo Sanghyang Adi-Buddhaya" (I pay homage to Adi-Buddha, the Supreme God) in the first sentence of the *Vandana*. This change in language demonstrates how Buddhayana identity has evolved over time.



### 3.5 Cross-tradition, not syncretism

Many Buddhayana temples developed from *kelenteng*, so their main function remains to support rituals for Chinese religious traditions. However, one effect of the assimilation policy of the 1960s made a number of *kelenteng* to adopt the Theravada form of Buddhism (Suryadinata, 2014, p. 32). Vihara Buddha Prabha in Yogyakarta and Vihara Sasana Santi in Semarang are examples of this assimilation. In the post-Suharto era, Indonesian Buddhists gained greater freedom to manage their temples independently, often through legally recognized foundations (*yayasan*). Nevertheless, maintaining affiliation with the Buddhayana organization (or other Buddhist groups) remained advantageous, as it ensured the participation of monks in major temple rituals, such as leading chants and delivering sermons. This engagement is particularly important given the limited number of monks and nuns in Indonesia. Such arrangements represent a form of negotiated autonomy, where temple members enjoy considerable freedom in organizing their own activities, yet they are still expected to observe the four major annual ceremonies recommended by Buddhayana—Maghapuja (February), Waisak (May), Asadha (July), and Kathina (November). During these occasions, Buddhayana monks and nuns from affiliated centers are typically invited to participate, reinforcing both ritual unity and institutional ties within the broader Buddhist community.

One example of this relationship is the Vihara Sasana Santi in Semarang. In 1993, the vihara was renovated from its origins as a small *kelenteng*, which had been used for the annual *Ulambara* ceremony and daily worship of the local Chinese community. Beginning in the 1950s, Mahayana monks were invited to Semarang and stayed in the vihara in August, which is the Seventh month of the Chinese Calendar. This invitation was facilitated by the Chinese merchants (Pekin, personal communication, July 12, 2024). The Guanyin statue was considered the most important statue in this temple and was enshrined in the center amongst many other Buddha and deity statues in the main hall. In fact, the Buddha statue is placed above the Guanyin statue, but it is overshadowed by Guanyin because it is placed at the front (See Figure 1). Even though the name of the temple was changed to a Pali word, *Sasana Santi* (peaceful religion), the temple is widely known as a Mahayana Buddhist temple, with Sunday chanting conducted in Mandarin. According to Utari (personal communication, July 12, 2024), devotees who visit the temple today predominantly chant in Mandarin, while Pali chanting is reserved for major ceremonies conducted by Buddhayana monks. Notably, during these occasions, the Pali *Paritta* is recited in the main hall directly before the statue of Guanyin. This practice symbolizes the harmonious coexistence of Theravada ritual forms and Mahayana devotional practices within the same sacred space.



**Figure 1:** Main altar in Vihara Sasana Santi, Semarang  
Photograph by Jesada Buaban (2022)

A similar practice can be found in the Vihara Buddha Prabha (*kelenteng* Fuk Ling Miao or Gondomanan according to its location) in Yogyakarta. This temple was renovated in 1974, and it kept the form of *Tridharma*, with altars for practices of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism. Its name was changed to Vihara Buddha Prabha, and it was registered under the Buddhayana movement. However, at the time of this research, the vihara also holds four major ceremonies based on the Theravada tradition. Bhante Badrabalo, a leader of the Sangha of Yogyakarta, and other novices from Vihara Jhina Dharma Sradha are regularly invited to give sermons. The main altar has statues of the Buddha and Guanyin. Even though the Buddha statue is larger than Guanyin, its golden color makes the statue blend into the backdrop of the golden pagoda. The Guanyin statue, though smaller, becomes a central object on the altar. In fact, that part of the altar belongs mainly to Chinese deities, with the only the Sakyamuni Buddha statue coming from the Indian tradition. Therefore, it seems that the temple members have negotiated with the government and Buddhayana organization to adopt some practices of Theravada Buddhism while still focusing on Mahayana Buddhism and the veneration of Guanyin (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2:** Altar in Vihara Buddha Prabha, Yogyakarta  
Photograph by Jesada Buaban (2022)

In addition to the chanting in Pali to Guanyin mentioned earlier, Theravada monks from the Buddhayana organization were also invited to chant Chinese scriptures—known as *Liam Keng*—in *kelenteng* and crematorium to serve the needs of Chinese patrons. Phao Krishnaputra, a senior Buddhist leader in Medan, Sumatra, noted that it was commonplace for Theravada monks in Medan to participate in Mahayana rituals, and vice versa. This phenomenon, however, is not confined to Medan; similar cross-tradition practices are also observed in Java, particularly within Buddhayana temples and communities. According to Dhammayano (personal communication, February 4, 2022), even during the Suharto regime, it was considered unproblematic for Theravada monks to perform Mahayana rites. The situation, however, began to change in the 1990s, as Buddhist organizations in Indonesia grew more institutionalized and conservative, leading to a period of criticism and debate over cross-traditional practices.

Many Buddhayana monks prefer not to identify themselves strictly as Theravada or Mahayana, but rather simply declare, “we are Buddhayana”. In 1976, when the Dalai Lama asked Ashin Jinarakkhita, “which sect do you belong to?”, he replied, “I am just a servant of the Buddha” (Juangari, 2022, p. 210). Similarly, Bhikkhu Jatiko explained in an interview:

“Monks are service providers (*pelayan*) who facilitate Buddhists’ access to the Dhamma. Let people come and practice as they wish and in ways that suit them. There is no wrong way—rituals and traditions can change.” (Jatiko, personal communication, November 24, 2023)

Jatiko’s perspective highlights the inclusive and pragmatic approach of Buddhayana monastics toward Buddhist practice. In the same spirit, Bhikkhu Dhammayano referred to the Lotus Sutra (Kumarajiva, 2007), emphasizing that Guanyin can manifest in any form according to context because she embodies infinite compassion. Therefore, he concluded, “we should learn to be more flexible and compassionate so that we can help others, even if they are different from us, rather than trying to convert them from Mahayana to Theravada” (Dhammayano, personal communication, February 4, 2022).

Dharmawimala (personal communication, July 18, 2023) also observed that Buddhayana monks are often invited to chant Mahayana *Sutras* at Chinese funerals. For many people born before 1950, their religious identity was fluid, as they did not necessarily adhere to a single religious affiliation. Consequently, those who were familiar with *Tridharma* traditions or Mandarin prayers often found the use of Mandarin during ceremonies comforting, both for the deceased and their families. This explains why Chinese Buddhists tend to use Mahayana chanting for funerals, while in daily practice they recite Theravada Pali *Paritta*, and they reserve the Theravada traditions for major ceremonies.

Based on this analysis, it can be argued that the commonly accepted definition of Buddhayana as “a platform or *Sangha* where monks from the Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana traditions can reside together in the same temple, each following their respective robes, rules, and ritual styles” (Kimura, 2003, p. 60) is in fact a newly constructed characteristic of the movement. Evidence from both the past and the present suggests that cross-traditional practices have been an integral and accepted part of Buddhayana since its inception.

Regarding the issue of religious syncretism, when asked whether Buddhayana represents a mixed or syncretic form of Buddhism, Krishnaputra firmly denied such a notion. He argued that there is no “pure” Buddhist tradition, as all forms of Buddhism—even Theravada, which often claims authenticity were written down roughly five centuries after the Buddha’s passing. Krishnaputra further illustrated his point by noting that Theravada Buddhism in Thailand differs from that in other countries, thus challenging the idea that any single form can be regarded as the “true” Buddhism. As Krishnaputra reminded fellow Buddhists:

There is only one way, so why do we want to choose another way (traditions)? (*jalurnya cuma satu, jadi kenapa kita mau pilih jalur?*). The basic teachings amongst different traditions are similar, only the rituals, languages, and ways of practice are different. So, what should be considered as Buddhism is the teachings like Four Noble Truths, Noble Eightfold Path and so on (Racheman, 2011, pp. 76–77).

According to Krishnaputra, the essence of Buddhism lies in its core teachings, while ritual performances, monastic robes, and the languages used in chanting are contextual traditions that can be adapted. Consequently, Buddhayana practitioners do not regard cross-traditional practices as problematic, since they do not mix doctrinal teachings but merely adopt trans-traditional rituals and practices to uphold the same fundamental principles. For instance, Bhikkhu Dhammayano (personal communication, February 4, 2022) compared the *Karaniya Metta Sutta* from the Theravada tradition and the *Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva Samanta Mukha Varga* from Mahayana scriptures. Although the former is recited in Pali and the latter in Mandarin, both convey the same essential message of lovingkindness (*cinta kasih*). Therefore, Dhammayano emphasized that it is unnecessary to identify strictly as Theravada or Mahayana; what truly matters is understanding the Dhamma and cultivating compassion toward all beings.

Conceptually, the encounter of different traditions could pave the way for hybridity, a concept developed from Homi Bhabha's concept of an "in-between space". Previously, this idea tended to signify the combination of two things, and it can also be used to explain the mixture of multiple cultures. The case study of Thai Hindu-Buddhist rituals by Peter Jackson (2020, p. 12) suggested that hybridity does not necessarily lead to the mix of rituals and ideas, or to a synthesis. Instead, it sometimes creates an opportunity for people from different religions to choose their own way of worship. The interaction did not lead to newly designed images of Hindu deities such as Brahma and Genesh, nor to a new prayer. Buddhists continued to use the Pali *Paritta*, and Hindus chanted their Sanskrit *mantra*. Instead of creating new statues or rituals, what is created is a space that allows people to practice diverse traditions.

Following Krishnaputra's argument above for not creating a new tradition, Buddhayana members have not created new prayers that mix Pali, Sanskrit, or Mandarin. They continue to use their distinctive *mantras* and worship Guanyin or Buddha. Where a third space occurs, it is a shared space of practice for different, such as where Theravada monks chant the Pali language *Paritta* in front of Guanyin statues. There is no evidence syncretism in the area of teaching. More importantly, Buddhayana members do not view their actions as cross-sectarian practices because Buddhayana as an organization promotes a non-sectarian practice of Buddhism.

The worship of Guanyin can also be understood through the lens of interspirituality, a concept referring to the religious engagement of individuals whose spiritual identities are fluid or work across traditions. As Marian de Souza (2016, p. 359) notes, interspiritual practitioners tend to draw upon selected elements from two or more religious traditions without necessarily adhering to a single doctrinal system. Similarly, while Buddhayana followers may formally identify as Buddhists and their understanding of Buddhism centers on the core teachings of the Buddha, their everyday religious practices are expressed as contextual cultural traditions rather than fixed doctrinal expressions.

The Pali *Paritta* serves as a medium through which Chinese devotees can maintain their relationship with Guanyin, particularly when chanting in Mandarin becomes challenging. Monks from both Theravada and Mahayana traditions have been trained to preserve these chants and to perform cross-traditional rituals that bridge linguistic and sectarian boundaries. This article argues that Guanyin represents not only a cross-gender and cross-national border deity, as noted in previous studies, but also a cross-sectarian symbol that enables practitioners to transcend established religious divisions. Moreover, this article proposes that the encounter between different cultural and religious traditions does not necessarily produce a new syncretic form; rather, it creates a shared space where individuals may employ diverse methods to approach and express their faith.

#### 4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Guanyin has been portrayed by previous studies as a cross-gender since her gender has been changed to be ambiguous or female when she moved to China. Also, Guanyin is an example of a cross-border goddess, who became the popular in Asia and continues to be worshiped by diaspora Chinese and Chinese-descendant communities, as well as some other communities, in many countries. This research argues that the veneration of Guanyin also symbolizes a cross-sectarian practice since she has been worshiped not only by Mahayana but also by Theravada followers in the Buddhayana movement. The emphasis on Theravada tradition in post-Independence Indonesia made the Pali *Paritta* a primary book used in worship by Indonesian Buddhists as they became familiar with the Pali-language chanting and to worship Guanyin. However, in line with her mission to save all miserable human beings in distress, Guanyin should understand any language uttered or



prayed by people. At this stage, language can be seen as a tool or part of a tradition, not as the core teaching of religion, as asserted by Krishnaputra and Dhammayano. Therefore, chanting in Pali in front of Guanyin and chanting in Mandarin by Theravada monks can both be considered as cross-traditional practices, but they cannot be called as syncretism. This interpretation may have helped Buddhayana to appeal to people from different backgrounds, and to help preserve Chinese traditions in the private sphere during the periods of the Sukarno era and Suharto regime, a tradition that continues into the 2020s.

In terms of recommendations, this study primarily focuses on Chinese Buddhists, most of whom are affiliated with the Buddhayana movement. Future research should also include the perspectives of other Buddhist groups, particularly the *Indonesian Theravada Sangha*, which is closely associated with the *Dhammayuttika* tradition of Wat Bowonniwet Vihara. Although Theravada monks generally do not encourage laypeople to worship Guanyin, and some may even express reservations toward Mahayana deities, they cannot completely reject Guanyin due to the economic and social influence of their Chinese patrons. It would therefore be valuable to investigate how Theravada monks negotiate this, particularly how they interpret, accommodate, or reposition Guanyin within their doctrinal and ritual frameworks.

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