

The Development of Buddhism through Chinese Cultural Traditions in Sentani, Papua, Indonesia

Endang Wijaya

Vihara Cycloop Dhammajaya Sentani, Papua

*Corresponding author e-mail: phra.kittipanno@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper examines the development of Buddhism in Indonesia through the mediation of Chinese culture, situating the discussion within international discourses on transnational Buddhism, diaspora religion, and cultural contextualization. Historically, Buddhism spread across Asia through migration, maritime trade, and intercultural encounters, producing diverse local expressions while maintaining core doctrinal foundations. In Indonesia, Chinese diaspora communities have played a crucial role in sustaining and reshaping Buddhist life through institutions such as klenteng, ritual practices, and organized religious networks. Employing a qualitative historical approach and library-based research, this study analyzes historical sources, selected discourses from the Sutta Piṭaka, and contemporary scholarship to demonstrate that Chinese cultural traditions function as active religious media rather than merely ethnic or cultural backgrounds. The findings indicate that klenteng and vihāra have served as key sites of religious transmission, ethical education, and community formation, particularly during periods of political restriction and minority marginalization. Textual analysis of the Kālāma Sutta, Mahāparinibbāna Sutta, and Sigālovāda Sutta reveals that Buddhist perspectives on tradition emphasize critical and ethical evaluation oriented toward cultivating wisdom (paññā), moral discipline (sīla), and social harmony rather than unquestioning adherence to inherited customs. The paper further explores contemporary developments through a case study of Vihara Cycloop Dhammajaya Sentani in Papua, illustrating the contextual expansion of Buddhism into non-traditional regions within Indonesia's pluralistic socio-political landscape. Overall, this study contributes to international scholarship by reconceptualizing Chinese culture as a dynamic religious agent in Indonesian Buddhism and enriching discussions on religion–culture interaction and lived Buddhism in multicultural societies.

Keywords: Chinese Indonesian Buddhism; Klenteng; Vihāra; Social–Political Dynamics; Papua Buddhism

Introduction

Buddhist teachings transformed local cultural practices through complex, multi-directional networks of transmission that adapted dynamically to regional contexts across Asia. The evidence reveals that Buddhism was not a monolithic system, but a fluid cultural force (Tansen Sen et al., 2014). Maritime and overland routes facilitated extensive exchanges, with Buddhist ideas circulating through "pervasive and sustained multidirectional" networks (Andrea Acri et al., 2018). By combining "unique hybrid combinations" of indigenous and cross-cultural knowledge, local traditions integrated Buddhist precepts (C. Salguero et al., 2018).

Specific transformations included integrating local deities into Buddhist cosmology, developing region-specific ritual practices, and negotiating Buddhist identities within diverse sociopolitical contexts (A. Heirman et al., 2018) (Todd T. Lewis et al., 2025). This process of cultural adaptation continued from premodern periods through contemporary times, demonstrating Buddhism's remarkable capacity for localized reinvention.

As an active medium for understanding and institutionalising Buddhist teachings, Chinese culture was vital to the development and worldwide dissemination of Buddhism. The research reveals that upon Buddhism's arrival in China during the early Common Era, the tradition underwent significant adaptation through dialogue with Confucianism and Taoism (Widiyanto Widi et al., 2021). This process created unique forms of Chinese Buddhism that were both religiously profound and culturally rich.

The Chinese diaspora became a critical mechanism for Buddhist transmission, with migrants carrying their religious and cultural traditions across Asia (Sugiri Kustedja et al., 2016). The adaptability of Chinese Buddhist culture allowed it to remain consistent while simultaneously being universally accessible, demonstrating its remarkable capacity for cultural translation and preservation (Joko Adi Pradana et al., 2025).

The Chinese community plays a crucial role in preserving and developing Buddhism in modern Indonesia, despite the fragmented academic research on the subject. The evidence suggests a deep cultural integration: shows how Chinese cultural elements like Cap Go Meh celebrations unite Buddhist communities and local residents. (Widiyanto Widi et al., 2021) further reveals that Chinese cultural traditions have high religious value and can complement Buddhist practices, with both traditions potentially creating a harmonious religious life. (Joko Adi Pradana et al., 2025) supports this by highlighting how Buddhist principles have shaped Indonesian social values. However, academic studies remain predominantly focused on either classical Nusantara Buddhist history or the Chinese

community's sociopolitical dynamics, often overlooking the nuanced religious significance of Chineseinfluenced Buddhist practices.

The research identifies critical gaps in understanding Buddhism in Indonesia, proposing an integrative approach that repositions Chinese culture as an active religious medium rather than merely an ethnic background. The study highlights three key research gaps: (1) limited research on Chinese culture as a religious agent, (2) insufficient integration of religious, cultural, and Buddhist studies, and (3) inadequate contextualization of historical and contemporary Buddhist practices (Joko Adi Pradana et al., 2025 & 1 others).

The proposed research aims to analyze Buddhist development through Chinese cultural mediums, examining how Chinese cultural practices contribute to preserving Buddhist teachings, establishing religious institutions, and transmitting Buddhist values across generations Widiyanto Widi et al., 2021. This approach is particularly significant in Indonesia's pluralistic context, potentially enriching interfaith dialogue and religious understanding (Tri Lestari et al., 2023).

Contents

History of Chinese Migration and the Spread of Buddhism in Indonesia

Chinese diaspora communities in Indonesia developed complex syncretic religious practices through gradual cultural adaptation, transforming their religious traditions to integrate with local cultural contexts.

While direct evidence for the 7th-19th centuries is limited, later studies reveal a pattern of religious syncretization. (Samsul Hidayat et al., 2012) documented how Chinese Indonesians modified worship practices, blending Confucian, Taoist, and local cultural elements. (L. Suryadinata et al., 1997) noted that Chinese minority religions became "highly Indonesianised while retaining some Chinese characteristics."

The Tridharma tradition emerged as a prime example of this adaptive process, (Irwansyah et al., 2025) describing it as "not simply a theological interaction" but a "creative response to historical repression" that reconfigured religious identities.

However, the specific mechanisms of religious transmission between the 7th and 19th centuries remain underexplored in the provided sources, suggesting a need for further historical research.

During the Dutch colonial period, Buddhism in Indonesia underwent a distinctive development through klenteng institutions, which functioned as the primary religious and cultural centers of the Chinese community, particularly in the absence of formal Buddhist

vihāra. Klenteng served as a “last bastion” for the preservation of various forms of culture, including philosophical worldviews, ritual practices, and artistic expressions (Herwiratno et al., 2007). These institutions functioned not only as sites of worship but also as social hubs, centers of moral education, and mechanisms for the preservation of Chinese–Buddhist cultural identity.

Buddhist teachings were maintained through institutional mechanisms encompassing devotional rituals, Buddhist iconography, and the celebration of religious festivals. Chinese cultural traditions exhibited a close correlation with Buddhism, particularly in practices such as ancestor veneration, which in Buddhist contexts is recognized as Ullambana (Praptiyono et al., 2019). This phenomenon demonstrates that the dissemination and preservation of Buddhism during the colonial era occurred not solely through textual transmission or formal doctrine, but also via the Chinese community's social and cultural institutions. Klenteng thus became a central medium for the transmission of Buddhist teachings, enabling Buddhist values to remain vibrant and be passed down across generations despite existing as a religious minority under colonial rule.

Klenteng as Cultural and Religious Media for the Transmission of Buddhism

Klenteng in Indonesia serve as crucial cultural and religious transmission centers for Chinese Buddhist diaspora, functioning far beyond traditional worship spaces. Multiple studies reveal klenteng's multifaceted roles: (M. Rokib et al., 2019) demonstrates their complex religious practices, while (Titin Listiyani et al., 2013) shows how these temples facilitate social interactions across ethnic and religious boundaries.

These temples uniquely blend Buddhist teachings with traditional Chinese deity worship, representing an adaptive religious approach (Sugiri Kustedja et al., 2016). By incorporating local languages and encouraging non-Chinese community participation, klenteng become critical spaces for cultural dialogue and religious preservation (Tri Lestari et al., 2023).

Their significance lies not just in religious transmission, but in creating inclusive, integrative spiritual environments that maintain Buddhist traditions while embracing local cultural contexts.

Socio-Political Dynamics and Buddhist Identity

The Chinese Buddhist community in Indonesia underwent a significant identity transformation, strategically adapting to state policies from strict institutionalization to a more pluralistic religious expression.

During the New Order era (1966-1998), Chinese Buddhists responded to cultural restrictions by formally institutionalizing their religious identity, emphasizing Buddhism as a universal religion to align with state recognition policies (Zaenal Abidin Eko Putro et al., 2020). This was a common survival strategy for minority religious communities facing regulatory pressures.

Post-1998 Reformation, political liberalization and renewed recognition of Chinese culture enabled a more open revitalization of Chinese Buddhist cultural and ritual expressions (Wasino Wasino et al., 2019). This shift marked a crucial transition from a tightly controlled religious identity to a more contextual and diverse religious representation.

Chinese Buddhism and Contemporary Indonesian Buddhism

In the global context, contemporary Buddhism exhibits dynamic pluralism in its traditions and practices as a result of cross-cultural mobility and globalization, a pattern that is also evident in Indonesia. According to the latest population registration data, the number of Buddhists in Indonesia exceeds 2 million people, accounting for approximately 0.7–0.8% of the total national population, with the highest concentrations found in regions such as Jakarta ($\pm 382,130$ individuals), North Sumatra ($\pm 347,752$), and West Kalimantan ($\pm 301,287$), where Buddhist communities are closely associated with Chinese cultural heritage. This distribution reflects the internal diversity of Indonesian Buddhism, in which the Mahāyāna tradition—predominant within Chinese Buddhism—interacts with Theravāda and Vajrayāna traditions within a socially plural environment. The role of Chinese-influenced Buddhism is particularly significant in the management of vihāra-klenteng, religious education, and participation in interfaith dialogue and socio-communal activities, aligning with global trends that position Buddhism as an ethical and social force in multicultural societies. These contributions enrich Buddhist practice in Indonesia and reinforce the country's religious pluralism, thereby opening further analytical space for examining intersectorian interaction and the implications of religious identity in contemporary life.

Safeguarding Tradition from the Perspective of the Sutta Piṭaka

Within the framework of early Buddhist teachings as recorded in the Sutta Piṭaka, the safeguarding of tradition is not positioned as an absolute and unquestionable normative obligation. Rather, tradition is understood as a socio-religious practice that must continually be examined through wisdom (paññā), direct experience, and ethical consideration oriented toward liberation from suffering. The Kālāma Sutta (Aṅguttara Nikāya 3.65), in which the Buddha counsels the Kālāmas not to accept or reject teachings, customs, or religious practices just because they are passed down through lineage, endorsed by religious authority, or validated by long-standing social convention, clearly expresses this critical approach to tradition (Bodhi, 2012). This teaching demonstrates that, in Buddhism, the legitimacy of tradition does not derive from its origin but from its transformative impact on mental qualities and human conduct.

Nevertheless, the Kālāma Sutta should not be interpreted as a rejection of religious or cultural tradition as a whole. On the contrary, the sutta provides clear evaluative criteria for the continuity of tradition. The Buddha emphasizes that a practice is worthy of preservation insofar as it demonstrably reduces greed, hatred, and delusion (lobha, dosa, moha), and promotes well-being and happiness for oneself and others (Bodhi, 2012; Harvey, 2013). Accordingly, tradition in the Buddhist perspective is understood functionally—as a means for cultivating moral discipline (sīla), concentration (samādhi), and wisdom (paññā)—rather than as an end in itself.

This principle has important implications for understanding Buddhist religious practices that have developed through Chinese culture, particularly in the context of klenteng in Indonesia. Rituals performed in klenteng—such as acts of reverence toward the Buddha and bodhisattvas, the recitation of paritta or sūttas, and the observance of Buddhist holy days—may be understood as traditions that function as pedagogical and symbolic media for instilling Dhamma values among practitioners. As long as these practices guide adherents toward the cultivation of wholesome mental qualities and ethical living, they are consistent with the evaluative criteria established in the Sutta Piṭaka (Gombrich, 2006; Tan, 2011).

Textual foundations for the importance of doctrinal and practical continuity are further affirmed in the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta (Dīgha Nikāya 16). In this discourse, the Buddha emphasizes that following his passing, the Dhamma and Vinaya should serve as the teacher (satthā) for the Buddhist community (Walshe, 1995). The Buddha also underscores the significance of reverence for sacred sites and the Saṅgha as elements that

support the continuity of the teaching. This may be interpreted as canonical legitimation for the maintenance of religious institutions and sacred spaces—including vihāra and klenteng—that function as centers for doctrinal transmission, collective identity formation, and the intergenerational reproduction of religious practice.

In the Indonesian context, klenteng function not only as ritual spaces but also as social and cultural institutions that mediate Buddhist teachings with Chinese cultural values and the realities of a multicultural society. This aligns with the social ethical teachings articulated in the Sigālovāda Sutta (Dīgha Nikāya 31), which outlines moral obligations within familial, communal, and societal relationships, including filial piety, social responsibility, and harmony in communal life (Walshe, 1995; Keown, 2017). These values resonate strongly with Chinese cultural emphases on ancestral reverence and social order, which are concretely expressed in klenteng practices through ancestral rituals, social activities, and community-based moral education.

Furthermore, understanding tradition as upāya (skillful means) enables Buddhists to adapt religious practices to socio-cultural contexts without compromising doctrinal substance. Within this framework, klenteng traditions in Indonesia may be interpreted as legitimate forms of Dhamma contextualization, wherein symbols, rituals, and institutional structures are employed to communicate Buddhist teachings in culturally intelligible and socially accepted forms (Gombrich, 2006; Harvey, 2013). This perspective aligns with contemporary Buddhist studies scholarship, which emphasizes that religious traditions are not static but dynamic, continually interacting with the historical and social contexts in which they evolve.

Thus, from the perspective of the Sutta Piṭaka, the safeguarding of tradition in Buddhism—including Chinese-influenced klenteng practices in Indonesia—can be understood as a religious practice possessing both textual and ethical legitimacy. So long as such traditions support the cultivation of virtue, wisdom, and harmonious social life, they are not only compatible with Buddhist teachings but also function as effective means for sustaining the Dhamma within pluralistic and continually changing societies.

The Development of Buddhism at Vihara Cycloop Dhammajaya, Sentani – Papua

The development of Buddhism in Papua has exhibited an increasingly significant pattern of expansion over the past two decades, particularly through the strengthening of religious institutions and processes of social integration centered at Vihara Cycloop

Dhammajaya Sentani, in Jayapura Regency. As one of the principal vihāra serving the Buddhist community in Papua, Vihara Cycloop Dhammajaya Sentani functions not only as a space for ritual and worship but also as an instrument of socio-religious integration within a multicultural society demographically dominated by Christian and Muslim populations. This role positions the vihāra as an important actor in the dynamics of religious pluralism in eastern Indonesia, aligning with global findings that Buddhist temples in minority contexts often serve as centers of social cohesion and interreligious dialogue (Harvey, 2013).

Historically, the existence of a Buddhist community in Sentani preceded the establishment of a formal vihāra. Prior to the availability of a permanent place of worship, Buddhists in Sentani and its surrounding areas regularly held devotional practices, chanting sessions, and Dhamma discussions on a rotating basis in private homes. These weekly activities were grounded in familial and communal values, reflecting a pattern of lived Buddhism characteristic of minority religious settings. Such household-based religious practices are consistent with studies on Buddhist diaspora communities in Southeast Asia, which emphasize the role of informal networks in sustaining religious life prior to institutional formalization (Baumann & Prebish, 2019).

A major milestone in the institutionalization of Buddhism in Sentani occurred in January 2014, when a benefactor lent a private residence to be used as a temporary place of worship. This space became the center for devotional activities and Dhamma learning, although participation fluctuated in response to the community's social and economic dynamics. The situation changed significantly around 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic affected the sustainability of the temporary worship site, particularly as the property owner planned to sell the house. This development prompted the Buddhist community to pursue a more formal institutional pathway through the establishment of the Permata Dharma Agung Foundation, aimed at fundraising for land acquisition and the construction of a permanent vihāra, including support from the Dana Everyday Foundation. To date, the foundation continues to meet its financial obligations related to land ownership, reflecting the structural challenges faced by minority religious institutions.

Institutional strengthening continued in mid-2022 with the construction of a kuti (monastic residence), marking a new phase in the sustained presence of the Saṅgha in Papua. The continuous residence of bhikkhu is a crucial factor in the transmission of Buddhist teachings and the religious education of lay followers, as emphasized in early

Buddhist literature regarding the central role of the Saṅgha in preserving the continuity of the Dhamma (Walshe, 1995). Subsequently, the completion of a temporary Dhammasālā in September 2023—officially inaugurated by the Head of the Thai Dhammāṭa Mission to Indonesia, Venerable Bhikkhu Wongsin Labhiko Mahāthera—further strengthened the religious legitimacy and transnational standing of the vihāra within Southeast Asian Buddhist networks.

Nevertheless, the vihāra’s management observed that improvements in physical infrastructure were not automatically accompanied by increased lay participation. Based on intensive engagement with the Buddhist community over approximately three years, the vihāra leadership under the guidance of Venerable Bhikkhu Kittipaṇṇo identified that many individuals identifying as Buddhists in the Sentani area possessed limited doctrinal understanding and remained strongly attached to religious expressions rooted in cultural traditions and folk beliefs, particularly among lay followers of Chinese ethnic background. This observation is consistent with broader research on Buddhist diaspora communities, in which religious identity is often mediated through symbols, rituals, and ancestral traditions (Sukarti et al., 2019). The findings suggest that religious engagement requires more than infrastructural development, underscoring the importance of cultural sensitivity and targeted religious education to enhance community participation.

In response to these conditions, the Permata Dharma Agung Foundation initiated the construction of a klenteng within the Vihara Cycloop Dhammajaya Sentani complex, beginning in October 2025 to coincide with the Kathina celebration. The klenteng was envisioned as a contextual strategy to facilitate religious expression and traditional practices among predominantly Chinese-background Buddhist followers, while simultaneously serving as a pedagogical medium to connect traditional rituals with Dhamma values. This approach reflects the Buddhist principle of upāya (skillful means), whereby cultural forms are strategically employed to support understanding and internalization of Buddhist teachings (Gombrich, 2006; Harvey, 2013).

Within the broader socio-political context, the growing legitimacy of Buddhism in Papua is also reflected in local government support. The celebration of Vesak Day 2569 BE on 18 May 2025 at Vihara Cycloop Dhammajaya Sentani—attended by the Regent of Jayapura and representatives of the Ministry of Religious Affairs—demonstrated increasing public recognition of the existence and contributions of the Buddhist community in the region (Fajar Papua, 2025). The participation of regional officials in minority religious

celebrations signals a more inclusive socio-political dynamic and indicates that Buddhism in Papua is entering a phase of broader social legitimacy as an integral part of religious diversity in eastern Indonesia.

Vesak celebrations in Sentani thus function not merely as ritual events but also as platforms for affirming Buddhist values such as *paññā* (wisdom) and social *sīla* within the context of community development, where local leaders actively promote interreligious harmony and collective participation in fostering shared well-being (Fajar Papua, 2025). Furthermore, the construction of Kelenteng Dharma Agung Sakti within the Vihara Cycloop Dhammajaya Sentani complex in October 2025 marks an important milestone in the interaction between Buddhism and Chinese tradition in Papua, while also signifying the expansion of religious-cultural infrastructure in eastern Indonesia (Harapan Papua, 2025; Suara Jayapura, 2025). The groundbreaking ceremony led by the Head of the Regional Office of the Ministry of Religious Affairs of Papua Province reflects institutional encouragement for plural religious expression—a phenomenon increasingly evident across Southeast Asia, where minority religions are gaining greater freedom within modern social frameworks.

This development aligns with global trends in religious studies that highlight the expanding role of Buddhist temples as centers of education, collective identity formation, and mitigation of social tensions in multicultural societies (Harvey, 2013). In Papua, the growth of institutions such as Vihara Cycloop Dhammajaya Sentani provides a concrete example of how Buddhist communities—despite their relatively small demographic size compared to majority religious groups—can play a significant role in social dialogue and inclusive human development. The successful implementation of rituals and the establishment of new religious infrastructures in Sentani demonstrate the integration of Buddhist teachings with local dynamics, while offering empirical evidence that Buddhism in Indonesia is not only shaped by Chinese culture in the western regions but is also developing autonomously within distinct geographical and socio-cultural contexts.

Conclusion

This study affirms that the development of Buddhism in Indonesia cannot be comprehensively understood without considering the role of Chinese culture as a historical, dynamic, and contextual medium of religious transmission. Within the global scholarly landscape, contemporary Buddhist studies increasingly emphasize diasporic Buddhism, lived religion, and religion-culture interaction as responses to globalization, migration, and

social pluralism (Harvey, 2013; Baumann & Prebish, 2019). The findings of this article align with these trends by demonstrating that Buddhism in Indonesia has evolved not solely through textual traditions and formal institutions, but also through cultural practices, ritual spaces, and social networks deeply rooted in Chinese communities.

Empirically, demographic data indicate that more than two million Indonesians identify as Buddhists, with significant concentrations in regions historically associated with Chinese communities. The existence of thousands of active *klenteng* and *vihāra*—whether *Mahāyāna*, *Theravāda*, or eclectic in orientation—illustrates that Buddhism in Indonesia operates within a plural and adaptive spectrum of practices. In this context, *klenteng* function not merely as cultural symbols, but as effective religious institutions for transmitting Dhamma values, maintaining the continuity of religious practice, and fostering social cohesion across ethnic and religious boundaries. Analysis grounded in the *Sutta Piṭaka* strengthens the theoretical legitimacy of tradition-preserving practices within Indonesian Buddhism. Texts such as the *Kālāma Sutta*, *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, and *Sigālovāda Sutta* demonstrate that tradition is understood in functional and ethical terms—as a means (*upāya*) for cultivating virtue, wisdom, and social harmony—rather than as a rigid dogma. This perspective resonates globally with contemporary Buddhist approaches that emphasize contextualization without sacrificing normative substance. Accordingly, Chinese-influenced Buddhist practices in Indonesia, including *klenteng* rituals and the institutionalization of *vihāra*, can be understood as legitimate and meaningful forms of Dhamma contextualization.

The case study of Buddhist development at Vihara Cycloop Dhammajaya Sentani in Papua, contributes significantly to understanding the expansion of Buddhism in nontraditional regions. Local government support, interreligious participation in Vesak celebrations, and the construction of new religious infrastructure indicate that Buddhism in eastern Indonesia is developing within an increasingly inclusive socio-political environment. This phenomenon aligns with global findings that Buddhist temples in multicultural societies function as centers for dialogue, moral education, and the promotion of peace-oriented values (Keown, 2017; Harvey, 2013). In this sense, Buddhism in Indonesia not only survives as a minority religion but also actively contributes to social development and public ethics.

Looking forward, this study underscores the importance of an integrative approach to the development of Buddhism in Indonesia—one that combines textual analysis, local

cultural understanding, and contemporary social analysis. For Buddhist education, these findings provide a foundation for designing curricula that are more contextual, inclusive, and aligned with Indonesia's pluralistic reality. For policymakers and religious leaders, the study highlights the need to strengthen Buddhist institutions as spaces for intercultural and interreligious dialogue. Academically, this research opens avenues for further empirical and comparative studies on diasporic Buddhism in Southeast Asia, while enriching global discourse on the relationship between religion, culture, and modernity.

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