



## Situating Buddhist Modernism within a Global Context: The Global Spread of Fo Guang Shan

Dr. Jens Reinke

Director, Institute for the Study of Humanistic Buddhism,  
University of the West

Only in the last decades has modern Buddhism become a serious topic of academic investigation. Today, however, the field is flourishing. Modern Buddhism in its many forms is studied in many languages and disciplines. Despite this recent advancement, the subject of investigation is not always that clear. What are we talking about when we are speaking of modern Buddhism? This paper aims to tackle this question by considering the global spread of Fo Guang Shan from a transnational perspective. Transnationalism describes a recent advance within the social sciences and humanities to move away from a research approach that examines its object of interest solely by placing it within the context of one nation state. In contrast to the notion of “international,” which according to the transnational perspective refers to the relationship between states, “transnational” refers to the sustained linkages and ongoing exchanges among non-state actors that cross national borders.<sup>1</sup> Thus, if we apply the transnational lens to the study of modern Taiwanese Buddhism, it follows that instead of examining the religion by solely placing it within the boundaries of the ROC, we also consider the many border-crossings, linkages, and movements between Taiwan, China, Japan, Southeast Asia, and the rest of the world that have together shaped its current state.

How does one go on to achieve this goal as a social scientist who conducts qualitative research? In the past ethnographers have often confined their research

1. Steven Vertovec, *Transnationalism (Key Ideas)* (London: Routledge, 2009), 3.

to a small bounded space such as an aboriginal village in a remote forest. They have spent long periods of time living amongst the locals, sometimes for many years, aiming at producing a comprehensive description of what they observed. While this approach was very important for the development of ethnography as a research method, it has its limitations if applied to the study of our modern, globalized, and interconnected world. Ethnographers today rarely go off to the jungle to study isolated tribes. Instead, they study government institutions, transnational companies, environmental activists, or, as I did for my dissertation project, the global development of the Taiwanese Buddhist order Fo Guang Shan. None of the above subjects takes place within the boundaries of an isolated space, such as the remote village in the forest, but instead, they enfold in today's mobile, global, and connected world. In order to understand today's global phenomena, researchers have to be as mobile as the things they study. Multi-sited ethnography was developed as a response to this new situation.<sup>2</sup>

Multi-sited ethnography as a research approach is not conducted at one place, but instead at a selection of field sites that is carefully chosen by the researcher. In the case of my own research project it was clear from the beginning that Fo Guang Shan's global trajectory could not be appropriately studied by conducting field work at only one of the order's overseas temples. Yet, considering the immense scope of Fo Guang Shan's global endeavors, it would have also been impossible to conduct fieldwork at each and every single one of the order's overseas temples. In fact, Venerable Master Hsing Yun's biographer Fu Zhiying has calculated that if a researcher would spend ten days, including travel time, at each of Fo Guang Shan's overseas temples, she or he would need more than three years to complete the whole trip.<sup>3</sup> I, therefore, had to create a selection of temples to conduct fieldwork at. Based on criteria such as temple size, geographical location, and importance within the global temple net, I have chosen four different field sites for my study. First, in order to build a foundation for my research I have spent five months at Fo Guang Shan temples, practice centers, and facilities in Taiwan.

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2. George E. Marcus, "Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24, no. 1 (1995): 95–117.

3. Fu Zhiying, *Bright Star, Luminous Cloud: The Life of a Simple Monk* (Hacienda Heights, CA: Buddha's Light Publishing, 2008), 137.

Hereafter, I went on to spend nine weeks each in South Africa, the United States, and the People's Republic of China, where I conducted ethnographic fieldwork at the Nan Hua Temple, Hsi Lai Temple, Da Jue Temple, and other temples, practice centers, and facilities of Fo Guang Shan.

By placing the study of Fo Guang Shan within a global framework, the seemingly simple question posted at the beginning of this paper (“What are we talking about when we are speaking of modern Buddhism?”), suddenly becomes more complicated. The first problem arises when we consider the question in regard to time. When we talk about modern Chinese Buddhism, do we thereby refer to the period that in the Chinese language is called *jindai* 近代, the period after the Opium War? Or, do we mean the Republican era, beginning with 1911? What about the decades after 1949, when Venerable Master Hsing Yun and many other monastics from the mainland translocated to Taiwan? What about today, what is sometimes called the contemporary period? At first glance, by situating the question of time within the context of space, or a certain bounded locality such as the nation-state, the answer seems simple: modern is what has emerged during the last hundred or so years through a critical examination of the past. What happens today, is then just the contemporary actualization of the modern. According to this rationale, when we study the history of Buddhism in China and Taiwan, Fo Guang Shan would be the contemporary actualization of Republican era Humanistic Buddhism that has emerged as a critical response to the Chinese Buddhist tradition. So far, that seems correct.

The problem arises if we expand our research on Fo Guang Shan to its overseas temples. Fo Guang Shan temples and practice centers are of course not only located in Taiwan, but the order has expanded over significant parts of the globe. If we take up a book that places Humanistic Buddhism within the context of Chinese history, we will most definitely find a lot of information about its contributions to the modernization of Chinese Buddhism. Yet if we read studies on American Buddhism, the term modern Buddhism is almost exclusively used for Buddhism as it is practiced by Buddhists of European descent. In these studies, “modern” Buddhism as practiced by (mostly) white Westerners is then often juxtaposed with a supposedly “traditional” Buddhism practiced by Americans of Asian descent. Other terms that come up for the Buddhism practiced by

Asian Americans are “ethnic Buddhism,” “cultural Buddhism,” and “baggage Buddhism.”

This assessment of who is modern and who is not is less based on actual empirical knowledge of the multitude of different Asian Buddhist traditions, but on a claimed dichotomy of modern and traditional. This dichotomy is, of course, not exclusive to studies on modern Buddhism. A whole tradition of scholarship has thought of modernity as something that was initiated in Europe and that will eventually spread over the whole globe. In this teleological understanding of modernity, the non-Western parts of the world lag behind and need to catch up; to be modern is to be Western. However, Fo Guang Shan Humanistic Buddhism is undeniably modern. In fact, modernization is one of the key tenets of Humanistic Buddhism! How come that by just changing the geographical setting, from Taiwan to the US, Fo Guang Shan transforms from Buddhist modernism to a representative of tradition? Just because Humanistic Buddhism differs from how modern Buddhism looks like (or is supposed to look like) in the perspective of scholarship on American Buddhism, does that mean that Humanistic Buddhism is not modern? Is Humanistic Buddhism just not modern enough? Or is there a spatial dimension, which the claimed universality of a Western-centric notion of modernity overlooks?

China historian Tani E. Barlow has criticized the teleological understanding of modernity. She particularly disagrees with the idea that modernity is a thing in itself that is understood as being prior to colonialism. She argues that “the modernity of non-European colonies is as indisputable as the colonial core of European modernity.”<sup>4</sup> To stress her point, she introduces the notion of “colonial modernity,” a notion that does not approach history through positively defined units, such as nation states, stages of development, or civilizations, etc., but sees it as “a complex field of relationships or threads of materials that connect [and] multiply in space-time and can be surveyed from specific sites.”<sup>5</sup> Barlow argues that this new perspective allows us to see what has been obstructed by the older

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4. Tani E. Barlow, “Introduction” in *Formations of Colonial Modernity in East Asia*, ed. Tani E. Barlow (Durham, N.C., London: Duke University Press, 1997), 1.

5. *Ibid.*, 6.

dichotomy of modern and traditional: contemporary Asian modernities, or, in our case, to recognize the obvious modernness of Buddhist religiosities from the beginning of the last century in China on and to detect how this modernness has shaped Fo Guang Shan's Humanistic Buddhism today. Thus, instead of thinking modernity as one all-encompassing entity that is disseminating from a European core, it is something that emerges out of global connectivity and that occurs in the plural. Thinking of "modernities" then allows us to incorporate the many diverse modern developments that occurred outside of "the West."

The idea of multiple modernities is, of course, associated with the sociologist S.N. Eisenstadt. Eisenstadt argues that although modern societies, Western as well as non-Western ones, all tend to develop towards structural differentiation, a multiplicity of institutional and ideological patterns emerge from these processes.<sup>6</sup> There is thus not just one modern society that serves as a universal standard for others to be measured with, but there are multiple variations of modern societies. By examining Buddhism in the modern period from a spatial perspective, one that acknowledges multiplicity and difference, we can abandon the idea of one mode of Buddhist modernism that serves as a standard for all and instead recognize the diversity of modern Buddhist religiosities.

Multiple modern Buddhist religiosities have developed in different parts of the world as a result of that "complex field of relationships or threads of material" Barlow speaks of. During the era of European colonialism, these multiple modern Buddhist religiosities, although informed by global linkages and relationships, have still primarily developed at specific sites, often as newly emerging national traditions that are linked to processes of nation-state building. Examples include modern Chinese Buddhism, but also modern Thai Buddhism, modern Korean Buddhism, and so on. The processes of nation-state building outside of the West, and with them the end of formal colonialism, but also the end of a socialist alternative to our capitalist modernity, together have formed our current era where capitalism and market economies have expanded over the whole globe. Under this new condition—a condition some researchers have called "global

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6. S. N. Eisenstadt, "Multiple Modernities," *Daedalus* 129, no. 1 (2000): 1–2.

modernity”—mobility, connectivity, and exchange are increasingly enhanced.<sup>7</sup> Modern Buddhist religiosities that in the first half of the last century have mostly been confined to the spatial configuration where they emerged, are today developing on a global scale. Humanistic Buddhism is the perfect example for this process. Before 1949, Master Taixu and others were primarily active within the borders of China. Fo Guang Shan temples, on the other hand, can today be found all over the globe. The order maintains a presence on every continent besides Antarctica. In our current age of global modernity these multiple modern Buddhist religiosities increasingly become aware of each other; they meet, they co-exist, and they interact at a multitude of spaces.

The modern Buddhist religiosities that have developed in Asia and all over the globe and that are often linked to a particular national culture are slowly adjusting to this new situation. Through their global mobility, Humanistic Buddhists, such as other modern Buddhists from, for example, the US or Southeast Asia, are not exclusive representatives of modern Buddhism but all represent one modern Buddhist religiosity amongst others. Their modernness represents one particular example of a modern Buddhist religiosity under today's global condition. The term “globalization” is often used in order to refer to today's enhanced degree of mobility, connectivity, and exchange. Within this context, globalization is sometimes understood as a neoliberal attempt of faceless multinational companies to standardize the world after a Western image. Yet being global does not mean that everything and everyone becomes identical. To acknowledge the globality of the current state of modernity, globality that is characterized by multiple and diverse modernities, allows us to take seriously the high level of plurality that characterizes today's global condition of the world. From this perspective, globalization is not one monolithic enterprise, but instead is a highly complex and multifaceted process that is generated by a multitude of actors, Western and non-Western, and their multiple globalization projects. Within this context, Fo Guang Shan Humanistic Buddhism constitutes one non-

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7. Arif Dirlik, *Global Modernity: Modernity in the Age of Global Capitalism*, The radical imagination series (Boulder, Colorado: Paradigm Publications, 2007), 62; Prasenjit Duara, *The Crisis of Global Modernity: Asian Traditions and a Sustainable Future* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 91–118.

Western example of a globalized modern Buddhist religiosity.

The modern Buddhist religiosity of Humanistic Buddhism, a religiosity that is characterized by social engagement in the fields of culture, education, charity, and religious cultivation, has developed within the particular context of modern Chinese and Taiwanese history. Yet today this religiosity occurs under the conditions of a global, multifaceted, and pluralistic modernity. Fo Guang Shan Humanistic Buddhists contribute to the societies of many nation states. Although the majority of Fo Guang Shan Buddhists are ethnic Chinese, they are also global. The order's overseas temples serve a complex and layered diaspora community that consists of ethnic Chinese from all origins, including Taiwanese, Chinese from the People's Republic of China, Southeast Asian Chinese, and the second and later generations of ethnic Chinese migrants worldwide. In addition, we also encounter non-Chinese at the order's overseas temples. Some just visit to enjoy the architecture or the food, others are students of the order's educational institutions or are recipients of the order's many charities, others again are fellow Buddhists from other traditions who come to meditate or pay homage to the Buddha, and finally, some even come to join the Buddha's Light International Association (BLIA). In order for Humanistic Buddhism to further diversify within and beyond the global diaspora communities there is no need to neglect its "Chineseness." If the notion of Chineseness promoted by Humanistic Buddhists is an open, inclusive, and cosmopolitan one, one that is aware of the diversity of modern Buddhist religiosities under today's global condition, Humanistic Buddhists in the future will not only be modern but also be truly global Bodhisattvas.

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Devotees make their first incense offering for the Lunar Chinese New Year at Fo Guang Shan Temple of Toronto. (Photo by Zhuan Po)