

## Mapping Fo Guang Shan and the Spread of Humanistic Buddhism

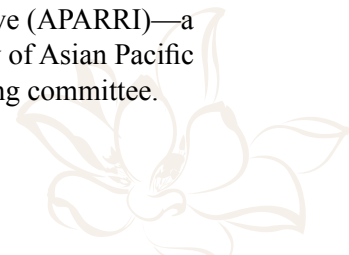


**Jane Iwamura**

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

---

**Jane Naomi Iwamura** is Professor of Religious Studies and the inaugural director of the Institute for the Study of Humanistic Buddhism at University of the West. Dr. Iwamura's research focuses on Asian American religions, race and popular culture in the United States (with an emphasis on visual culture). Her publications include *Virtual Orientalism: Religion and Popular Culture in the U.S.* (Oxford 2011) and the co-edited volume *Revealing the Sacred in Asian and Pacific America* (Routledge 2003). She currently serves as a member of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) Committee on Theological Education and is a respondent on the AAR College-Wide Literacy Project. Dr. Iwamura co-founded the Asian Pacific American Religions Research Initiative (APARRI)—a national scholarly network advancing the interdisciplinary study of Asian Pacific Americans and their religions and currently serves on the steering committee.



## Introduction

With over 250 temples throughout the world, Fo Guang Shan (FGS) has emerged as a global Buddhist movement and significant force in the spread of Humanistic Buddhism. In this talk, I will demo an interactive map of FGS temples (existing and retired) developed by the project team at the Institute for the Study of Humanistic Buddhism at the University of the West. The map is constructed using QGIS technology and includes basic information for each temple (name, address, GPS coordinates) and a sliding timeline by which the user can view the historical spread of FGS temples across the world. QGIS allows for additional layers in which the user can also develop their own components (e.g., Taiwan's population and GDP growth) and visually analyze the relationship of other data to the base map. As such, the interface provides scholars with a powerful research tool and significant starting point that can be used to investigate the geo-social dimensions of Buddhist institutions and understand the factors that have contributed to the growth of Humanistic Buddhism.

*The following is a transcript of Dr. Iwamura's presentation at the 7<sup>th</sup> Symposium of Humanistic Buddhism:*

## About the Mapping Project

Now first of all, you might ask: why map?

As many of us know, maps are a very powerful tool to help us navigate to where we want to go in the world and generally make our way around. We often think of maps in this very utilitarian sense. However, maps can reveal much more. As Peter Greenaway notes, "A map tells you where you have been, where you are, and where you are going—in a sense, it's three tenses in one." In a map, you have past, present, and future—and all of these moments are simultaneously captured in one visual surface.

Beyond this, the reason that our project team decided to take

on this particular endeavor was the feeling that while Venerable Master Hsing Yun's vision and his brilliance is obviously manifested and evident in his philosophy, writings, and speeches, we felt that there was an aspect of his legacy and his work that has not been explored that is very important—which is the institutions that he has created. And so we thought that the map would be a great way to show this legacy of institutions.

At first, even though there are a lot of Fo Guang Shan temples and institutions, we thought we would just find the addresses easily to have the map out there in no time. We thought this was a great training exercise for our graduate students, but what we have found is a little more challenging.

To begin, I would like to give a shout out to our project team, and I do this upfront and not at the end, because the work presented is really theirs. So just briefly our project team consists of Karen Deng, Wenwen Zhou, Chris Johnson, Mandy Zhang, and the assistant director Dr. Kuo Shou-Jen. These are the folks that have been working diligently on these maps.

The first thing we set out to do was to plan and to design. These were the stages of the mapping project, we needed to determine the aim and the scope of the project, engage in data collection and verification and identify mapping software, which was pretty straightforward. We knew there were going to be tasks after this, but these were the initial tasks we needed to do.

### **Aim and Scope**

We knew that we wanted to develop an interactive map of Fo Guang Shan institutions; however, our aim was twofold. We not only wanted a geographic display, so that the locations of the institutions can be seen from the map, but we also wanted to trace the historical development all the way from 1954, which is when Venerable Master Hsing Yun came to Yilan, Taiwan. We wanted the interactive map to capture the start of his teaching of the Dharma

there to the present day

There are many temples in Fo Guang Shan, but it is much more beyond this. It is universities, schools, tea houses, art galleries, and the very important lay organization Buddha's Light International Association (BLIA). We also decided not to map the cultural centers in Mainland China, so that is not on this map. We were very modest and decided to go with the temples as our project scope, but there were plenty of those to begin with.

### **Data Collection and Verification**

Our next step was data collection and verification. We started out wanting this as basically something you would see on Google and we thought many of the categories people would want to see, for instance: the branch name in English and Chinese. One unique feature of our map was that we were going to try to capture the year that the temples were established or opened. In addition, the data would include the address, website, and some few notes about the development of the temple as well as the GPS coordinates. Very straightforward, we thought. We first looked at a couple of sources, just to gather data. We went to the following sources first: Fo Guang Shan's own Google Map, Fo Guang Shan website, Fo Guang Shan Hsi Lai Worldwide Branches website, and FoGuang-Pedia.

However, much of the data had conflicts in the addresses, or there were missing temples. We had to do this research and tried to supplement it with Google maps itself. We looked up Fo Guang Shan to see what Google would produce. This is how we got our base data or our Excel file and supplemented this to have branch names for both English and Chinese.

The address was a little trickier, because oftentimes, the GPS coordinates wouldn't coordinate with the actual address. Investigation was needed to clear up some of those conflicts. We also went into the writings of Venerable Master Hsing Yun, the

volumes on temples within the *Complete Works of Venerable Master Hsing Yun*. The team also went to visit the temples to collect information about when the temple was established. This also helped to give us a brief history of the temple and a cursory information on what was there.

While there were some information on the Fo Guang Shan's worldwide headquarters' website, we found that many of the branch temples had their own Facebook page and were using that as their website. So we tried to update that data, and there were a few temples which didn't have any websites at all, but that was fine.

The final thing was personal communication, as people are always the best database. So we had Dr. Kuo go to Hsi Lai Temple to talk with the monastics; he talked to people he knew and we gathered information from these interviews as well.

### Mapping Software

The software QGIS was used in the beginning phases of the project, because it was open-source, free, and seemed to do what we wanted. However, we quickly found out that it had some drawbacks. So for this stage, we supplemented it with Google Maps, and Adobe Spark. Later, we went ahead and purchased our GIS (Mapping and Geographic Information System) which was much more robust. Many of the maps that you would see today would be integrated into our larger RGIS map.

This mapping project is hosted on our institute's website right now. The first thing we had was a straightforward Google Map. This was the best way to be able to see all of the data in the best way that we could. So Mandy Zhang put this up on Google Map. The temples are all there and much of the data we have collected can be found on this map, including the visuals and the starting year.

For the historical development, Karen Deng made an animation

out of a timeline of the development of branch temples in Taiwan, the US, Canada, and worldwide. You can see some activities in the Taiwan map in 1976 as well as somewhat of an explosion into the 1990s and into the 2000s. These animations can be started at any time and if needed, can be rewinded to a certain year to see what temples were there.

Internationally, nothing is going in the worldwide map except in the little tiny corner that is Taiwan, from 1964 until about 1977. There is some activity beginning in North America in the 1970s, and it can be undoubtedly seen that the development really happened in the early years in both Taiwan and the US. The growth in Taiwan had been steady throughout till the current day. As far as the global movement, worldwide development occurred in the 1990s and the 2000s. There is a slight decrease in the current decade. All of these can be seen through the animated maps.

The project also includes story maps which tell stories of key temples through the maps; for instance, Lei Yin Temple where Venerable Master Hsing Yun began his Dharma Propagation. We hope to continue developing this through each of the major regions.

Last, I would like to share a quote by Gilbert Grosvenor, the Founding Editor of *National Geographic*: “A map is the greatest of all epic poems. Its lines and colors show the realization of great dreams.” And I believe that viewing this map of Fo Guang Shan really demonstrates Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s great dreams and its realization.

I am very thankful to Venerable Miao Guang and the Fo Guang Shan Institute of Humanistic Buddhism for the invitation to speak, and always to Venerable Master Hsing Yun, who has been very supportive of our institute. Thank you.

The Mapping Project can be accessed online via:  
<https://www.ishb-uwest.org/fgsmapping>