



Special Focus: Flows and Counterflows of Buddhism ‘South of the West’: Australia, New Zealand, and Hawai‘i

## Buddhism in the Far North of Australia Pre-WWII: (In)visibility, Post-colonialism and Materiality

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Buddhism was first established in Australia through flows of migrants in the mid-nineteenth century, and is currently Australia’s fourth-largest religion. Yet Buddhists have received significantly less scholarly attention than Christians, Jews and Muslims in Australia. Previous research conducted on Buddhism in Australia has also largely centered on the southern states, and on white Buddhists. This article shares findings of archival research on Buddhism in the far north of Australia, focused on Chinese, Japanese, and Sri Lankan communities working in mining, pearling, and sugar cane industries, pre-WWII. It documents the histories of exclusion, resistance and belonging experienced by Australia’s Buddhists in the far north of Australia pre-WWII, during times of colonial oppression and Japanese internment. In so doing, this article challenges dominant narratives of a white Christian Australia, and also of white Buddhism in Australia, by rendering Asian communities in scholarship on religion in Australia more visible.

**Keywords:** Buddhism; Australia; China; Japan; Sri Lanka; lived religion; post-colonial; whiteness; belonging; materiality

**P**AUL Croucher’s *History of Buddhism in Australia* describes the planting of ‘two *bodhi* tree saplings, said to be related to the tree under which the Buddha gained enlightenment,’ on Thursday Island in the Far North of Australia in the late nineteenth century by ‘a cohesive little Buddhist community’ of Sinhalese from Sri Lanka (Croucher 1989: 5, citing Swan 1981). The trees were said to be ‘still flourishing’ in 1989 but the temple which the community constructed was no longer there. Croucher observed how this reflected ‘the truth of the Buddhist epitaph on a Sinhalese gravestone “Sabbe sankhara anicca,” or “impermanent are all component things.”’ In fact, the *bodhi* trees, or rather the single tree, perished soon after World War II (WWII), but Saranealis House, a Sinhalese jewellery store, built in 1897, remains largely intact in Thursday Island’s main street, as does Laifoo’s grocery store, the Japanese and Chinese sections of the graveyard, and



frangipani trees gifted to the Cathedral by the Sinhalese (Sparkes and Shnukal 2004). The enduring presence of descendants of the Japanese, Chinese, and Sri Lankan families, who lived in Thursday Island when it was a booming pearling town at the turn of the twentieth century, is also evident in Thursday Island's community (Nagata 2004; Ramsay 2004; Sparkes and Shnukal 2004).<sup>1</sup>



Figure 1: Thursday Island Cemetery. (Photo: Anna Halaffof)

The spread of Buddhism into Australia is typically thought to have occurred a century later, in the late twentieth century, with increased immigration following the lifting of the 1901 Immigration Restriction Act, known as the White Australia Policy, and the ending of the Vietnam War. Prior research on the arrival of Buddhism in Australia has also focused largely on the activities of white Buddhists in southern states from the 1970s onward (Croucher 1989; Rocha and Barker 2011; Barker 2016; Halaffof, Garrod, and Gobey 2018). Buddhists are currently Australia's fourth largest religious group, comprising 2.4% of the population, following Christians (43.9%), Muslims (3.2%) and Hindus (2.7%), and Buddhists currently enjoy a higher positive public image in Australia than other religious minorities (ABS 2022; Barker and Rocha 2011; Markus 2021; Singleton et al. 2021; Weng and Halaffof 2020). Australian teens also have a strong interest in practices related to Buddhism such as mindfulness and meditation (28%), and a strong belief in concepts such as karma (50%) and reincarnation (29%) (Singleton et al. 2021). What is little known in and beyond Australia is that Buddhism and Buddhist deities, symbols, and rituals first arrived through flows of workers and migrants from Asia, particularly from China, Japan and Sri Lanka, as early as the mid-nineteenth century Gold Rush. The largest of these early Asian populations were across the Far North of Australia, in Broome, Darwin, Thursday Island, Cooktown and Cairns (ABS 1947a, 1947b; Croucher 1989).<sup>2</sup>

Regina Ganter (2005) writes that '(i)f we turn the map upside down and start Australian history where its documentation properly begins—in the north—the kaleidoscope of Australian history falls into a completely different pattern.' She adds that it makes 'nonsense of the idea of an isolated continent' given Australia's

<sup>1</sup> Halaffof field observations from Thursday Island, October 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Halaffof's field observations from Atherton, Cairns, Thursday Island, Darwin (with Smith), Broome, October-November 2018, and Cooktown in 2019 and July 2021.

proximity to New Guinea and Asia, as ‘until World War II, whites were heavily outnumbered in the north by close-knit Asian and indigenous communities’ with a history of close relations. Indeed, it was in large part fears regarding the high numbers and successes of Chinese and Japanese communities—including Buddhists, Taoists, and Confucians—in the Far North of Australia that led to the passing of the 1901 Immigration Restriction Act (Yu and Wei 1999; Reynolds 2003). While prior research has documented and focused on race-relations in the north of Australia, particularly between Indigenous, Asian, and European Australians, there has been very little emphasis placed on the religious dimensions of these encounters in this scholarship, and of the religious lives of these Asian workers and migrants.



*Figure 2:* Frangipani trees outside the Anglican Quetta All Souls Memorial Cathedral, Thursday Island. (Photo: Anna Halaffof)

This article documents how Australia’s first Buddhists had a significant presence in the Far North both pre- and post-Federation.<sup>3</sup> It mines existing academic literature, local history, and photographic collections to begin to piece together a historical account of Buddhism in the Far North of Australia up until the end of WWII, when numbers of Buddhists in Australia reduced significantly. It also draws on co-authors Anna Halaffof’s and Sue Smith’s more recent observations on the material presence of Buddhism, recorded on a fieldtrip to Mackay, the Atherton Tablelands, Cairns, Thursday Island, Darwin, Broome and Perth in late 2018, and to Cooktown in mid-2019 and mid-2021. Observations were recorded while visiting sites of significance including temples, cemeteries, sugar plantations, former mines, pearling areas, and market gardens.

We begin by outlining our analytical framework of post-colonial Buddhism (Gleig 2019), lived religion (McGuire 2008) and material religion (Houtman and Meyer 2012; Meyer 2012). All three frameworks disrupt the primacy of textual approaches, highlight everyday, embodied experiences and material aspects of religion, and contribute to recentering religious populations excluded in dominant narratives. We then draw on existing academic scholarship and research published by historical societies, to document the history

<sup>3</sup> The process of Federation occurred on the 1<sup>st</sup> January 1901, when 6 British colonies—Victoria, New South Wales, South Australia, Western Australia, Queensland, and Tasmania—united to form the nation of the Commonwealth of Australia (Parliamentary Education Office n.d.).

of Buddhism across the Far North of Australia pre-WWII. Four brief case studies of Buddhist materiality in Darwin, Broome, Cooktown and Thursday Island are presented. In so doing, this article addresses the marginalisation of Asian Buddhism, and the history of Buddhism in the Far North region, in scholarship on Buddhism in Australia, and in scholarship on religion in Australia more broadly. It does this by making more visible the lived, hybrid, and complex religions of early Asian communities living in Australia, and the triangulated relations between Indigenous-Asian-European Australians (Ganter 2005). In so doing, it challenges the fantasy of a White Christian Nation (Hage 1998; Halafoff et al. 2021). This follows more recent developments in scholarship on Buddhism that have similarly sought to re-centre Asian and Indigenous voices in the early development of Buddhism in the United States (Imamura 1992; Nattier 1995; Pierce 2000; Quli 2008; Cheah 2011; Harding, Hori, and Soucy 2014; Williams 2019; Gleig 2019; Mitchell forthcoming).

### Post-colonial Buddhism

One recent re-historicisation of Buddhism this article draws attention to is Duncan Williams' *American Sutra*. As Williams (2019) notes, some Japanese immigrants in the early nineteenth century saw their journeys to America in vastly different ways to their white European counterparts. He writes:

The story of American has long been cast as one of westward exploration and expansion, beginning with settlers from Europe who crossed the Atlantic Ocean to the New World, and radiating out from initial outposts on the Atlantic coast across the plains of the Midwest... spread[ing] Anglo-Protestant values into lands supposedly empty of civilization... But what happens when we flip the map? For the hundreds of thousands of Asian immigrants who crossed the Pacific to reach America in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the American West was the Pacific East... just as settlers from Europe saw themselves as pioneers working their way westward as they spread their values and mores, these immigrants from Asia brought their own cultures and religions as they moved further eastward (Williams 2019: 1–2).

Drawing on extensive primary and secondary data on Japanese incarceration during World War II, Williams thus decentres the prevailing narrative of Buddhism in the United States as a foreign religion, and reveals the racist and dehumanising roots from which contemporary Buddhism in America was forged. By re-telling history from the point of view of Japanese Buddhist immigrants, Williams (2019: 4) frames Japanese Buddhist immigrants as modern, progressive and fearless in the face of oppression—the very embodiment of ‘religious freedom and civil liberties in American history.’

Williams' account contributes a post-colonial revisioning of Buddhism in America by re-valorising ‘traditional’ non-Western cultures and worldviews, previously dismissed as primitive from a modernist perspective. According to Ann Gleig (2019), ‘post-colonial’ Buddhism refers to the scholarship on Buddhism which critiques the consequences of imperialism and colonialism by re-inserting the contributions of Asian Buddhist communities into articulations of religion in the West.<sup>4</sup> This work can be considered an attempt to correct a so-called ‘ethnosangha oversight’ in the US, a term coined by Gary L. Ray (1996) and acknowledged by Buddhist Studies scholars during this time to describe the phenomenon whereby Asian Buddhist practices and temples were excluded in references to Western Buddhism (Nattier 1995; Pierce 2000; Rocha 2006: 187–91). These and other scholars' works highlight the existence and contribution of Asian Buddhist communities, making the invisible more visible, to use Jan Nattier's (1995) terms. In so doing, they unsettle racializing assumptions about Asian or so-called ‘ethnic’ Buddhists as backwards, superstitious, irrational, and merely an extension of Asian cultures (see, for example, Quli 2008; Harding, Hori, and Soucy 2014; Rocha 2006).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Earlier efforts to do so in the 1990s include those of Jan Nattier (1995), Lori Pierce (2000), Charles Prebish and Kenneth Tanaka (1998), and others, who drew attention to the diversity of Buddhist practitioners in the United States, particularly with regard to ethnicity, race, class, country of origin and style of practice.

It is useful to note that post-colonial revalorisations of Asian Buddhist cultures and worldviews have gained particular salience in America, whereby white supremacist ideology has strongly shaped articulations of 'American Buddhism' (Cheah 2011). In Australia, post-colonial analyses have thus far been less prevalent in scholarship on Buddhism, an issue that is addressed by this article. As mentioned above, there has been scant mention in existing scholarship of the contributions of Asian Buddhist communities in Australia before the late- twentieth century, and a much greater focus on the activities of white Buddhists (Croucher 1989; Rocha and Barker 2011). Croucher's (1989) history, Enid Adam and Phillip Hughes (1996), and Rocha and Barker (2011), have all shown that Australia's first and subsequent Asian Buddhist communities continue to experience racism and racialisation in the form of vandalism of temples and difficulties obtaining planning permits for the construction of temples. However, that is not the same for temples built by largely white Buddhist communities, as Sally McAra (2011) has shown with regard to the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition's stupa and Atisha Centre in Bendigo, Victoria. A decade ago, scholars examined intergenerational transmission among Vietnamese and Cambodian (Vasi 2011) Buddhist communities in Australia. Kim Lam's (2019, 2020) more recent research on young Buddhists in Australia—of multiple ethnicities—has found that perceptions of Buddhism as an Asian religion contribute to the minimisation and concealment of young Buddhist practitioners' religious beliefs and practices and renders Buddhism less visible in the Australian public sphere as a result.

Rocha and Barker (2011) also included a limited number of Asian Buddhist case studies, due to language barriers and the small number of scholars studying Asian Buddhist groups at the time. The editors drew on globalisation studies and studies of Buddhism in the West (Baumann 2001; Rocha 2006) to argue that Buddhism in the region has been strongly influenced by flows of people, ideas, practices, and material cultures into and out of Australia. Barker and Rocha (2011: 11; citing Spuler 2000) noted that Buddhism in Australia included common characteristics of Buddhism in the West, namely, internal diversity of traditions, the presence of ethnic and convert Buddhists, and emphases on democratic principles in elected Buddhist councils, lay practice, social engagement, secularisation and gender equity. They also added an additional Australian quality of anti-authoritarianism.

Findings from the *Buddhist Life Stories of Australia (BLSA)* project concurred with Barker and Rocha's characteristics of Buddhism in Australia. This later study was a digital oral history crowdfunded pilot project, led by Anna Halafoff in 2015–2016, which recorded nineteen interviews with prominent Australian Asian and Anglo/European Buddhist leaders, including from Tibetan, Thai, Vietnamese, Sri Lankan, Chinese and Taiwanese traditions. Halafoff and her team also observed significant levels of appreciation and cooperation between lay and monastic, and Asian and Anglo/European Buddhists, and a deep connection with the Australian landscape, through Buddhist concepts of space and stillness, as additional characteristics of Buddhism in Australia, mentioned by Anglo/European and Asian Buddhist leaders alike (Halafoff, Garrod, and Gobey 2018). Both Rocha and Barker's edited collection and the BLSA project have been relatively small endeavours, as research on Buddhism in Australia has never received substantive funding or scholarly attention in broader studies of religion in Australia, compared to research on Christianity, Judaism, or Islam.

The persistent racism faced by Asian Buddhists, and also their relative invisibility in Australian history, studies of religion, and even in research on Buddhism in Australia, can perhaps best be understood by drawing on the work of Australian scholars focussing on whiteness and race-relations. Anthropologist Ghassan Hage (1998: 16–17, 20) states in *White Nation* that 'whiteness' is 'a crucial component' of 'Australianness,' as white Australians have constructed themselves as 'governors' and rendered non-white, including Indigenous and

<sup>5</sup> See also 'Angry Asian Buddhist' blogger Aaron Lee (n.d.), Funie Hsu (2016), Wakoh Shannon Hickey (2010), Duncan Williams (2019), Chenxing Han (2021).

Asian Australians, as ‘passive objects to be governed’ ‘according to a White national will.’ Racism is both ‘numerological’ and ‘existential,’ regarding the scale of migration, such as ‘there’s too many Asians’ or ‘there’s too many Muslims,’ or a ‘racism of disgust’ at difference, and a belief in the superiority of whiteness (Hage 2014: 232–40). Hage (2014: 232–40) further explains how in ‘the White nation fantasy,’ the non-white presence is viewed as ‘one that poses problems,’ and ‘fear ... is directed towards the aggressively independent and political non-Whites: the Aboriginal people and the migrants who deploy an Australian will outside the supervisory tentacles of White governmentality.’ By contrast, what Hage refers to as ‘the multicultural Real,’ is pervading and enduring. This is certainly evident in the cultural and religious diversity, the multicultural and multifaith ‘Real,’ of the Far North.

Similarly, instead of always stressing the problems, controversies and threats posed by diverse cultures and religions, as is so often the norm in scholarship, media, and policy, Meredith McGuire (2008) chose to highlight the complex, hybrid and peacebuilding aspects of contemporary ‘lived religion’ and its material, embodied practices. The ‘material turn’ in the study of religion, has also shifted the foci away from texts and beliefs to places, bodily affect, aurality and aesthetics, rituals, heritage, and objects that mediate the presence of spiritual entities (Houtman and Meyer 2012; Meyer 2012). Material religion scholars argue that the focus on belief, the mind and the private sphere in the study of religion is due to a Western, Protestant bias tied to colonialism that deemed all other forms of religiosity as inferior. Rather, Meyer and Houtman (Meyer and Houtman 2012: 7) argue that:

Materializing the study of religion means asking how religion happens materially, which is not to be confused with asking the much less helpful questions of how religion is expressed in material form. A materialized study of religion begins with the assumption that things, their use, their valuation and their appeal are not something added to a religion, but rather inextricable from it.

Moreover, these scholars pay special attention to issues of power asymmetries, something at the heart of our impetus to write this article. Here we analyse diverse Buddhist heritage created by Asian communities in the Far North—from trees to tombstones, festivals, statues, and temples. In making this religious heritage visible, we join those post-colonial scholars contesting the national history of Australia as a European Christian country. What counts as national heritage is always contested since it involves negotiations of power and identity between different migrant groups. Indeed, the concept of heritage has its roots in processes of nation-building, colonialism, and imperialism. Here, our focus on religious heritage calls for the recognition of a complex and cosmopolitan history of Buddhism in Australia. Although some of this materiality has been preserved in museums in the Far North as heritage, so far it has not been included in scholars’ analyses of the inception of Buddhism in this country.

### **‘Two Australias’ and Triangulated Race Relations in the Far North**

The Indigenous peoples of Australia—the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders—have inhabited the continent for over 50,000 years, with a rich diversity of languages, religions, nations and societies among them (Bell 2009; Carey 2009). European explorers were not the first visitors to Australia, as mainly Muslim Malays or Macassars from the south coast of Indonesia had likely been trading with Indigenous Australians since at least the early 1700s. Fishermen from this region travelled in their *prahas* in search of *trepang*, sea cucumbers, a culinary delicacy and medicinal in value that they also sold to the Chinese trading across Asia (Lockwood 1968; Ganter 2005, citing Macknight 1976). According to Ganter (2005) there were ‘a number of family links between [the Indigenous] Yolngu [people] and Makassar’ that ‘continue to link these people’ despite attempts to interrupt them by white settlement and government ‘harassment,’ which caused trade between them to first decline and then be forbidden in 1906.<sup>6</sup>

The British began to inhabit the north coast of Australia in the early 1800s for trade and defence purposes. Sugar, pearling, agriculture and mining industries were then established across the Far North in the mid-to late-1800s (Lockwood 1968). Large numbers of indentured labourers and migrants came from Asia to Australia. In 1881, there were 11,229 Chinese in Queensland, 3,804 in the Northern Territory, and 145 in Western Australia. By 1901, there were 6,762 Chinese in Queensland, 3,072 in the Northern Territory, and 1521 in Western Australia (ABS 1925).

Between the 1870s and 1890s, kidnapping and enslavement of Indigenous Australian people by Europeans was common in the north of Australia (Sickert 2003). Indigenous Australians also often worked for Europeans and Chinese miners and gardeners, and Japanese pearlmen across the Far North, navigating tough conditions, and exchanging labour and/or sex for food, clothing, tobacco, alcohol, and opium. The Chinese and Japanese were said to treat and pay the Indigenous Australian workers better than the Europeans. Indigenous communities often set up camps on the outskirts of mining and pearling towns and/or near Chinese gardens and Chinatowns (Reynolds 2003; Lockwood 1968). Sexual encounters and relations between Indigenous women and European and Asian men were common, particularly given there were comparatively few European and Asian women in the Far North at this time. They ranged from violent and abusive, negative encounters of rape and trade, to mutually consenting casual encounters, short-term relationships and co-habitation, to long-term relationships including marriage, and resulted in the birth of many children (Reynolds 2003; Lockwood 1968; James 1989; Shnukal, Ramsay, and Nagata 2004). Ganter (2005) describes how 'Asian/Aboriginal families formed the core of the polyethnic spaces that characterised the north... linked by family, friendship, residence or experience.' However, both the Indigenous and Asian communities were seen as 'problematic' by state actors, and as 'much as the state sought to distinguish between populations' and to regulate their relations, Asian and Indigenous communities 'resisted.' Many descendants of these unions and long-established Indigenous-Asian-European families continue to live and operate businesses throughout the north of Australia.<sup>7</sup>

Indentured workers left Asia to take up temporary working contracts to escape poverty and to seek a better life in Australia. They worked in mining, pearling and sugar industries and also as servants and cooks for the Europeans. Many signed repeated contracts and many also chose to stay on in Australia and some were able to bargain for higher wages and better working conditions. Many became business owners and were able to employ other workers (Sickert 2003; Shay and Shay n.d.; Reynolds 2003). They were valuable contributors to business and community life, donating generously in numerous charitable drives for hospitals, disaster relief, and sporting events. They established 'Chinatowns' and 'Japtowns' (problematic, derogatory terms), and market gardens across the Far North to provide goods and services for growing populations including grocery stores, gambling houses and brothels, and temples, halls, hospitals, and cemeteries for their communities (Lockwood 1968; Yu and Wei 1999; Reynolds 2003; Sickert 2003; Shnukal, Ramsay, and Nagata 2004; Sparkes and Shnukal 2004; Yee 2006). Ganter (2005) writes: 'Streetscapes in the northern colonial townships suggested Asia not Europe and white Europeans were a minority.'

Henry Reynolds (2003: vii, x) explains how, by 1901, the year of Federation and the introduction of the White Australia Policy, there were 'two Australias': 'Southern, settled, overwhelmingly white Australia' and the 'cosmopolitan and multi-racial' 'towns of the tropical north—Mackay, Cairns, Townsville, Cooktown, Thursday Island, Darwin, Broome, Derby and Roebourne.' These were home to Indigenous Australians, European settlers and non-European indentured laborers and residents including Pacific Islanders, Malays, Filipinos, Singalese, Chinese and Japanese (Reynolds 2003). While the vast majority of them were men,

<sup>6</sup> See MacIntosh (1996), Ganter (2005) and Stephenson (2010) on Islam in Australia.

<sup>7</sup> Halaffoff field observations Thursday Island, Darwin (with Smith) and Broome, October–November 2018.

Japanese sex workers found employment in Japanese brothels, and smaller numbers of Malay, Chinese, and European sex workers also worked across the Far North region in these mining, sugarcane, and pearling towns (James 1989; Sissons 1977a, 1977b; Nagata 1996, 2004). For example, in 1897, there were fifty-four Japanese sex workers living on Thursday Island (Nagata 2004). Among these migrants and workers were the earliest Buddhists and Buddhist deities, symbols and rituals in Australia, from China, Japan and Sri Lanka. Their religious lives are described in more detail in the case studies below.

Life in these Far Northern towns and cities was largely segregated according to race and economic lines. For example, in Broome, the English pearlers and their wives held court and employed servants from India and other Asian countries, 'keeping with all of the excesses and hypocrisy as perfected by the British in India' (Sickert 2003: 36). Broome residents, interviewed by Sickert (2003) between 1998 and 2002, recalled how it had historically been a deeply segregated and racist community. One of Sickert's interviewees, Maxine Chi, granddaughter of Chinese pearler John Chi, recalled the following:

Aboriginal and Asian people had a common thread running through their history in Broome. Of being impacted on by policies... other people's policies have always dictated how they lived their lives... The whole fabric of this town is based on oppressive labour, hierarchies, coercions, living under other people's moralistic views of... who they should associate with and whether they are being a threat to the white establishment (Sickert 2003: 52).

Sickert (2003: 82) explained how 'Europeans in Broome expected Asian races to remain socially and economically subservient, enabling white supremacy to remain unchallenged.' However, as the population was mostly non-white, Asian businessmen and businesswomen were in an ideal position to provide for the needs of their own communities, and their Indigenous neighbours, and their economic success challenged these unequal power relations (Sickert 2003: 82–83). Lockwood (1968: 77–78, 80) recounts how the Chinese in the Far North were frequently called derisive names such as 'chow, ching-chong, chink, yellow agony and yellow peril' and 'obnoxious Celestials.' Leprosy, thought to have been introduced by the Chinese, further exacerbated racial tensions. Fears of cholera, and the plague spreading from Asia were also reported. Darwin's Chinatown was described as 'an unhygienic place' and 'a den of vice' (1968: 152–53).

Reynolds (2003: 117) similarly explained how '[t]he very success' of the Chinese and Japanese 'both impressed and worried Europeans.' It led to racist attacks by politicians who feared they 'would take over the whole region.' In response, the Chinese and Japanese leaders vehemently defended themselves and their right to remain in Australia (Yu and Wei 1999; Reynolds 2003). Reynolds noted that Australia's first parliamentarians, based largely in the South, had an 'anxiety of the looming proximity of...Asia and of the contradiction at the heart of the new nation'—that it was 'a small European enclave [in a] continent at the bottom of the Asian hemisphere.' 'This tension,' writes Reynolds (2003: viii), 'was always most apparent in North Australia.'

This substantive presence and success of Asian communities throughout the Far North led eventually to the introduction of the 1901 *Immigration Restriction Act/White Australia Policy*. While it no doubt dramatically restricted flows of Asian migration and trade to Australia, it did not decimate these communities entirely. Indeed, the negative effect it had on the pearling industry meant that the government shortly relented, granting exemptions so pearlers could once again employ whomever they wished to dive for pearl shells across the Far North (Lockwood 1968; Yu and Wei 1999). Large number of Asian Australians born in Australia or those who held naturalisation papers were also permitted to stay, and with new waves of European migration during this time, the Far North of Australia actually maintained its multicultural composition (Sickert 2003; James 1989; Yu and Wei 1999). In the 1921 Census, there were 17,157 Chinese, 2,740 Japanese, and 269 'Cingalese'/Sri



Lankans in Australia (ABS 1947a). Journalist Ernestine Hill described cosmopolitan Darwin, in the *Adelaide Chronicle* as follows, on the 21 September 1933:

Five distinct communities flourish in that vivid patch of Australian tropic bushland. There are the neat attic cottages of the Greeks, incongruous beneath the Poinciana trees; the walled campog settlement of the Malays and Islanders; laced bamboo huts of Manilamen, on stilts; and the little bird-cage houses and shops of a village in Tokyo, incredibly clean and bare, with their matting beds, tiny shrines and miniature gardens—to say nothing of the paperbark mias and shacks of the aboriginal compound where all the tribes of the Territory are summer visitors. In the maze of the alleys that is Chinatown, where the joss sticks are ever burning before the tiger faced gods of Kwong Sung, and barefooted Oriental tailors bend to their sewing machines, you may lunch—if you have been lucky enough to make friends—upon salted fish roe and soi preserved eggs, spicy with age, boiled bamboo shoots, and shark fins, dipping your chopsticks in communal rice with trousered women of the East their faces a smiling mass (quoted in James 1989: 129).

Racial tensions however increased in the lead-up to WWII. Japanese boats were prohibited from entering territorial waters and landing in Indigenous territories. Many arrests of Japanese in Australia were made, and also disputed by powerful Japanese families and businesses. Darwin, Broome and Horn Island were bombed by the Japanese in 1941–43 but Thursday Island never was (Lockwood 1968; Ganter 2005).

Similar to the situation in the US during WWII, 1,141 Japanese living in Australia, including across the Far North were interned. They included second- and third-generation Japanese Australians (Nagata 1996, 2004). In 1946, all Japanese, except for those born in, or who had wives or children born in, Australia, were repatriated or deported to Japan, regardless of how long they had previously lived there (Nagata 2004).

The Japanese who could return to Thursday Island were welcomed back by their neighbours and resumed their lives there, although they had lost their livelihoods and homes. This was not the case in Broome and in Darwin (Nagata 2004). Chinese and Sri Lankan communities were also displaced across the Far North during WWII, ‘Chinatowns’ and ‘Japtowns,’ and many Chinese and Sri Lankan temples were destroyed, and while the bodhi tree on Thursday Island was still alive in 1945, it was in bad condition and died soon after (Ramsay 2004; Sparkes and Shnukal 2004). The Chinese and Sri Lankans who either stayed in or returned to the Far North also had to rebuild their lives. Despite the White Australia Policy, and WWII, smaller numbers of Chinese, Sri Lankan and Japanese immigrants and their descendants continued to live in and eventually prosper again across the Far North of Australia (Lockwood 1968; Sickert 2003: 170). By 1947, there were 9,144 Chinese, 157 Japanese, and 150 ‘Cingalese’/Sri Lankans in Australia (ABS 1947a). The material record of these pre-WWII Asian communities, and their lived religious practices, including Buddhism, also remains visibly present across the Far North of Australia.

### **Lived Religion and Materiality Up North**

In the first Australian census conducted in 1911 there were 3,269 Buddhist, 3,501 Chinese Religion, 5,194 Confucian, and 663 Shinto adherents. In 1921, there were 2,065 Buddhist, 3,591 Chinese Religion, 2,692 Confucian, and 239 Shinto adherents. By 1947, there were only 411 Buddhist, 158 Chinese Religion, 357 Confucian, and 10 Shinto adherents (ABS 1947b).<sup>8</sup> This demonstrates the religious diversity among the Asian communities in Australia, the high numbers of these communities even after the implementation of the White Australia Policy, and the decrease in their numbers following World War II.

<sup>8</sup> These were the categories included in the Australian censuses. Chinese Religion refers to other Chinese religions than those listed in the census such as Taoism and ancestor worship.

While there has been limited scholarly attention paid thus far to the lived religion of these Asian communities across the Far North, this section summarises what has been described in academic scholarship and begins to document what can be found in surviving historical and material records. This research is preliminary, given limited resources allocated to a pilot grant and short field trip across the Far North in 2018, but yields important discoveries worthy of further exploration. We focus here primarily on four brief case studies centred on the Northern Territory Chinese Temple and Museum in Darwin, the Chinese Shrine in the Cooktown Cemetery, the Japanese O-Bon Matsuri (Festival for the Ancestors) in Broome, and the Bodhi Tree and Sri Lankan Temple on Thursday Island.

*Northern Territory Chinese Temple and Museum, Darwin*

The material record of Chinese religions in the Far North of Australia includes that of Taoist, Confucian, and Buddhist traditions, reflecting the hybrid practices of the Chinese communities. The oldest artefact of Chinese migration to, and religion in, Australia is housed at the Northern Territory (hereafter, NT) Chinese Museum in Darwin. It is a 13cm high soapstone statue of Shou Lao, a Taoist God of Longevity, seated on a deer and holding a peach. It was found in the roots of a banyan tree in Doctor's Gully in 1879 during road construction, and is believed to have most likely belonged to Chinese labourers or market gardeners who first arrived in the area in the early 1870s (Croucher 1989: 2). A large bodhi tree stands outside the adjacent NT Chinese Temple, planted from a sapling from Bodhgaya, India, which was a gift from the largest Tibetan stupa/temple in Australia, Atisha Centre in Central Victoria. The NT Chinese Temple and Museum houses a collection of artefacts from, and photographs of, the original Darwin and surrounding goldfield Temples. They include two large stone lions that guard the Temple's entrance, which originally guarded a temple on the goldfields.<sup>9</sup>



Figure 3: Bodhi tree, NT Chinese Temple and Museum, Darwin. (Photo: Anna Halafoff)

<sup>9</sup> Halafoff and Smith, field observations Darwin, October–November 2018.

Gold was discovered in Pine Creek, south of Darwin in the 1870s and these discoveries brought large waves of mainly Chinese prospectors from Hong Kong and Singapore to the Northern Territory. The Chinese became the largest and most powerful cultural group in Darwin, outnumbering the Europeans, during this period (Reynolds 2003; Lockwood 1968).

Joss Houses, Chinese temples, were built in many towns and mining fields across the Far North including Darwin and Brocks in the Northern Territory, and Cairns, Cooktown, Atherton, Herberton, Mackay, Palmer River, Port Douglas, and Townsville in Far North Queensland, and in Broome in Western Australia (Waltham 2014: 9). The temples are called Miao in Mandarin, for example the famous Atherton Joss House, which has been restored and is open to visitors, is also known as Hou Wang Miao (Chinese-Australian Historical Images in Australia (CHIA) 2005). The term joss was derived from the Portuguese *deus* (God) and the temples were manned by attendants, not priests (Croucher 1989), and were where the Chinese performed their religious rituals, which bore resemblances to rituals and community life in China. When temples were built, building materials, ornaments and objects of worship were frequently imported from the Asian region (Kok 2008; Waltham 2014).

The presence of temples was indicative of a sizeable population of Chinese residing within a geographical vicinity (T. G. Jones 1997). The routines of Chinese lifestyle were focused on work and were somewhat mundane. By contrast, their religious practices were key aspects of their leisure time, which included ‘burning joss sticks, setting off fireworks, making offerings to the domestic altar [sic] and consulting the almanac...to ensure good fortune’ (Kirkman 1993: 266). Some of these temples had strong links with lodges associated with Chinese provinces or dialect groups that supported Chinese immigration into Australia (Kok 2008: 13). For example, The Chung Wah Society (formerly Wah On Society), which still manages the NT Chinese Temple and has branches across Australia, was formed in the nineteenth century ‘to promote better understanding between Chinese and Europeans’ (T. G. Jones 1997: 107). These efforts continue today to include ‘education and the exchange of culture and sport[ing]’ activities (T. G. Jones 1997: 107).

Darwin, Broome, Cairns and Cooktown also all have many markers around their former and/or current ‘Chinatowns’ with rich historical and pictorial descriptions. Traditional festivals such as Lunar New Year, Qingming, the Dragonboat Festival, Moon Festival and the Hungry Ghost Festival were some of those observed in Chinatowns, temples and cemeteries of the Far North recorded in local newspapers at the turn of the twentieth century (Inglis 1967: 40; Yu and Wei 1999; Broome Historical Society n.d.). The Lunar New Year is the most significant period of celebration for the Chinese people, and for ‘settling debts and performing rites to ensure the co-operation of the gods in the coming year’ (Kirkman 1993: 267). These celebrations were well-noted in the *Northern Territory Times*. In 1900, the festival’s procession was viewed as ‘filled with a barbaric conglomeration of sights and sounds strangely out of tune in an Australian town’ (T. G. Jones 1997: 76). It is, however, interesting to note that in 1902, with the assistance of a Chinese reporter, coverage was far more positive and highlighted the presentation of ‘the usual gorgeous glaze of colouring, green, red, and yellow being the predominant hues’ (T. G. Jones 1997: 77). Author and journalist Ernestine Hill also photographed Chinese temples, attendants, and processions on her travels in the Far North in the 1930s. This photography collection is housed at the University of Queensland in Brisbane.

A large banyan tree part of remnant rainforest, known as “Galammarrma” to the Larrakia Aboriginal people for whom it is culturally significant, has withstood numerous cyclones and remains standing to this day in what was once Chinatown and is now Darwin’s Civic Centre. It is also known as ‘The Tree of Knowledge’ and according to a nearby plaque was ‘used as a meeting place’ where Chinese young people sat ‘with and learned from their elders and where wisdom was gained in its shade.’ It is a living reminder of the long and enduring history of triangulated relations between Indigenous, Asian, and European Australian in its “Top End”.



Figure 4: Kuan Yin statue, NT Chinese Temple and Museum, Darwin. (Photo: Anna Halafoff)



Figure 5: Lucky bat, NT Chinese Temple and Museum, Darwin. (Photo: Anna Halafoff)

*The Chinese Shrine in the Cooktown Cemetery*

Gold was first discovered in Palmerston, later known as Palmer River, near Cooktown in the 1870s. Chinese prospectors began arriving from other goldfields in the southern states in the mid-1870s. According to Shay and Shay (n.d.), in July 1875 the Chinese population on the Palmer was 9000, and had grown to 18,000 by 1876, and 19,500 in 1877, constituting 90% of the entire Palmer population. Nearby Cairns soon became the centre of much commercial activity in North Queensland, with links to Cooktown and the Palmer River goldfields, Port Douglas, the Atherton Tablelands, Innisfail, the southern cities of Australia, and to China and Hong Kong (Reynolds 2003).



Figure 6: Kuan Yin image, Cairns and District Chinese Association. (Photo: Anna Halafoff)



Figure 7: Lotus Flower, Cairns and District Chinese Association. (Photo: Anna Halafoff)

Australia's early Chinese temples contained many Buddhist images, notably statues of Kuan Yin, lotus flowers, swastikas, and lucky bats. Flying foxes have large colonies throughout the north of Australia and were seen as good omens when the Chinese first settled there, and were incorporated to feature prominently in temple architecture across the region. There is a largely intact Hou Wang Miao Chinese Temple and

Museum, constructed in 1903 with an impressive collection in Atherton, and the Cairns and District Chinese Association and the Cooktown's James Cook Museum have well-preserved collections from Temples built in the same period in their regions housed in their collections but with limited opportunities to display them all on a permanent basis.

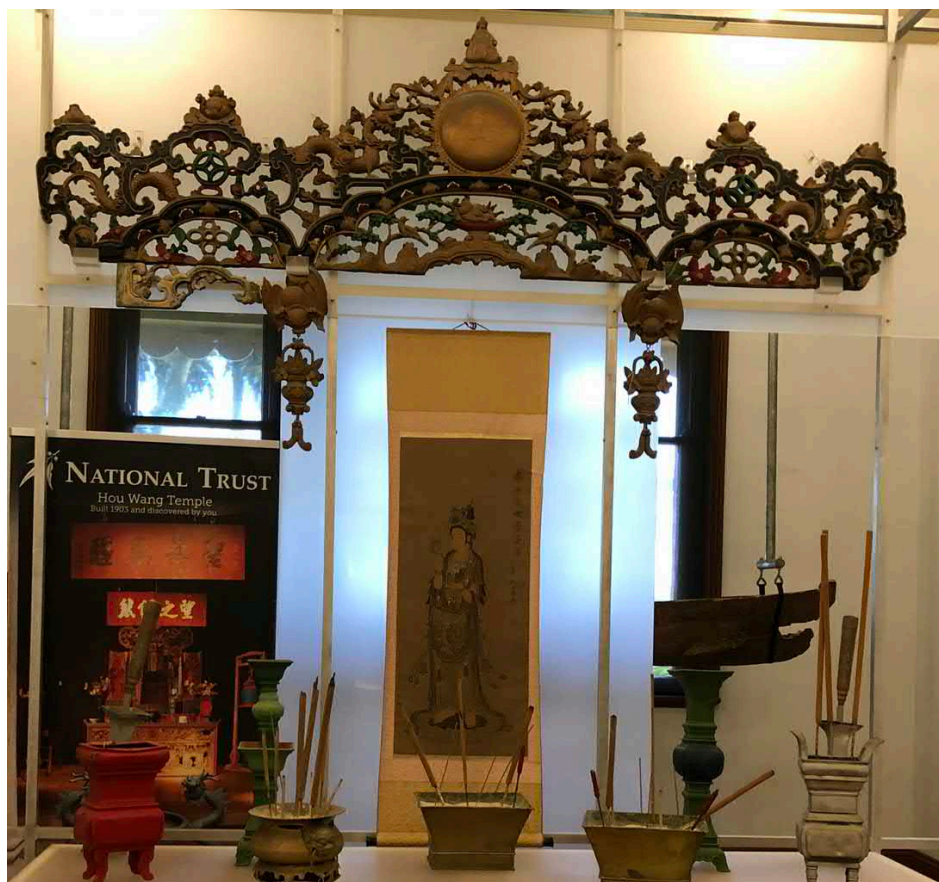


Figure 8: Chinese Temple display, James Cook Museum, Cooktown. (Photo: Anna Halafoff)

There are sizable Chinese sections and monuments in cemeteries across the Far North, and notably in Broome, Darwin, Cooktown, and Thursday Island dating back to the nineteenth century (Yu and Wei 1999; Shay and Shay n.d.; Broome Historical Society n.d.).<sup>10</sup> The largest Chinese Shrine, built in 1887, still stands on the outskirts of the Cooktown cemetery. A plaque explains that the Shrine is inscribed with three characters 'Tjin Ju Tsai' which mean: 'Respect the dead as if they were present.' It also has two, approximately meter-squared, 'burning towers... used to make offerings to the spirits.' Over 300 Chinese were buried in the Chinese section between 1873–1920, with many later exhumed and returned to China. The plaque also states: 'Chinese death rituals are complex and elaborate. Shrines provide a focus for these ceremonies. Funerals involve offerings of food and temple 'money' to ensure a smooth transition to the life beyond.' A smaller stone monument, placed 'over the remains of an unknown Chinese person, whose bones were found on the Palmer River Goldfields,' is also dedicated to the 'thousands of Chinese people buried on the goldfields of Cape York Peninsula, most of whom still lie forgotten in the bush.' Large, old, mango and lychee trees also still stand in Cooktown's main street, the botanical gardens, and on other former market gardens planted by its original Chinese residents, further evidencing their significant presence in Far North Queensland at the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Halafoff field observations, Thursday Island and Broome October–November 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Halafoff field observations, Cooktown June 2019 and July 2021.



Figure 9: Chinese Shrine, Cooktown Cemetery. (Photo: Anna Halaffoff)

*Japanese O-Bon-Matsuri (Festival for the Ancestors), Broome*

Australia's pearling industry was founded in the north of Western Australia in the 1860s in the town of Cossack, and then in Roebuck Bay in Broome (Sickert 2003). Pearl shell beds were also discovered in Port Darwin and in the Torres Strait Islands in the 1880s (Lockwood 1968). Large Japanese communities were established in these places, and the Japanese dominated the pearling industry into the twentieth century (N. Jones 2002; Reynolds 2003; Nagata 2004; Ganter 2005). There were also smaller groups of Indigenous Australians, South Sea Islanders, Torres Strait Islanders, West Indians, Malays, Melanesians, Polynesians, Filipinos, Timorese, Sri Lankans and Chinese working in and supporting the pearling industry (Reynolds 2003; Sickert 2003).

The Japanese Club on Napier Terrace in Broome was the site of popular sumo wrestling matches, that were conducted complete with traditional rituals of spilling salt to keep away evil spirits (Sickert 2003: 115–16). The Japanese O-Bon Matsuri (Festival for the Ancestors), was conducted on the full moon of August or September each year. It began with a ceremony at the cemetery to welcome the spirits of the dead, and then a launching of miniature fleets of pearl luggers (sailing vessels) at Mangrove Point at Town Beach (Sickert 2003: 119). The festival continues to be celebrated to this day. There are also 919 Japanese gravestones in Broome cemetery, which were restored by a generous donation by the Chairman of the Japanese Shipbuilding Industry Foundation, in 1983 (Broome Historical Society n.d.).

Hill photographed ceremonies associated with the festival in Broome in the Japanese cemetery featuring Japanese men and women, and a Japanese Buddhist priest in ceremonial dress on her travels in the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>12</sup> She also photographed a group of Japanese children and a Japanese priest outside of what she noted to be a Buddhist school in Broome.<sup>13</sup> Japanese, Chinese and Malay children also attended the Catholic school in Broome, and Japanese and Chinese communities were said to be the Catholic nuns greatest benefactors (Sickert 2003: 96).

<sup>12</sup> Halaffoff field observations, Broome November 2018.

<sup>13</sup> Halaffoff field observations, Broome November 2018.



Figure 10: Broome Cemetery. (Photo: Anna Halafoff)

Thursday Island, in the Torres Strait Islands, was also a key site of pearling and Japanese, Chinese, and Sri Lankan migration in the late nineteenth century. A large Japanese community established a Japanese Quarter there, referred to as ‘Japtown’ or ‘Yokohama,’ with a Japanese Club, a boarding house, stores, a laundry, brothels, and soy-sauce factories (Nagata 2004). The Japanese put on theatrical performances, and the Japanese marked their Emperor’s birthday annually with fireworks, lanterns and umbrellas (Reynolds 2003: 90–95). 640 Japanese gravestones remain in a dedicated section of the cemetery (Nagata 2004). In 1900, one visitor to Thursday Island described it as being ‘more a Japanese settlement than a British colony,’ while another in 1901 said that it appeared to be ‘a regular little Chinese, Singhalese or Japanese principality’ (Ganter 2005 quoting *Queensland Parliamentary Papers* 1901: 1150).

It must also be noted that the Japanese established shrines, gardens, and cemeteries where they conducted funeral rites in the internment camps, which were in the southern states, and that they also continued to celebrate the New Year and Emperor’s birthday there also (Nagata 1996, 2004).

#### *Bodhi and Frangipani Trees on Thursday Island*

Sri Lankan seamen also first arrived in the Torres Strait as part of the 1870s ‘pearlrush’ (Sparkes and Shnukal 2004: 162). They largely worked as boatmen between the islands, but also as jewellers, boarding-house keepers, shopkeepers, and professional fisherman. A boarding house with a billiard room and store were established within the community, that had its own ‘Cingalese Quarter.’ The Sri Lankans on Thursday Island staged theatrical and musical events, and also frequented the Chinese, Malay and Japanese opium and gambling dens and brothels (Sparkes and Shnukal 2004: 169).

Initially a small house was used as a place of worship and daily prayers, before they built their own ‘tiny tin Buddhist temple’ and planted a sacred bodhi tree close by it (Sparkes and Shnukal 2004: 168, quoting E. Jones 1921: 18). This was likely the first Buddhist temple in Australia. The Sri Lankan community on Thursday Island also celebrated Vesak annually, marking the birth, enlightenment, and death of the Buddha. A Buddhist monk





*Figure 11: Torres Strait Islands. (Photo: Anna Halaffof)*

from Sri Lanka consecrated the temple that was visited ‘from time to time by a Sri Lankan priest’ (Sparkes and Shnukal 2004: 190, citing Swan 1981: 59). The Sri Lankans also planted the pink frangipani trees, which are still there, outside the Church of England Quetta Memorial Cathedral in memory of their community members who had died in the SS Quetta shipwreck. Flowers from these trees are traditionally placed in Buddhist shrines in Sri Lanka (Sparkes and Shnukal 2004: 190, citing Singe 1989: 94–95). As in the other major cities described above, these trees are a legacy of the rich cultural and religious contributions of Buddhism to the Far North of Australia.

### **Analysis and Conclusion**

This article set out to retell the history of Buddhism in Australia, centring the significant and enduring presences and contributions of Asian workers and migrants, and in particular the Chinese, Japanese, and Sri Lankan communities who lived and practiced their religions in pre-WWII Australia. This is evident in the strong material record of their lived religious beliefs and rituals across the region, present not only in temples, sacred trees, cemeteries, and personal shrines, but also in their livelihoods and economic successes. Cultural heritage is always contested because ‘religious, ethnic, national, political, and other groups manipulate (appropriate, use, misuse, exclude, erase) markers and manifestations of their own and others’ cultural heritage as a means for asserting, defending, or denying critical claims to power, land, legitimacy, and so forth (Silverman 2011). While some of this heritage has been preserved in museums in the Far North as the heritage of immigrant groups who moved to Australia, it has not been recognised (and used as data) as Australian religious heritage. This is so probably because of a Protestant bias on what has historically been counted as religion in Australia and due to the prevalent myth that Australia is a White Christian Nation. The religious heritage studied here (trees, tombs, temples, shrines, and festivals) counter this assumption and the one that Buddhism arrived in Australia with the end of the White Australia Policy. By taking this religious heritage seriously, we are seeking to rematerialize the study of Buddhism in Australia. As Meyer and Houtman (Meyer and Houtman 2012: 8) posit:

The point is to explore how, notwithstanding the indispensability of material means—things, but also images, bodies, and words—for religion to be tangible and present, religion got and gets dematerialized both in religious practice and in the theoretical conceptualization of religion by scholars.

Indeed, Ganter (2005) concludes: ‘If we start to write Australian history from north to south, instead of the other way round...we must, straightaway, give up the idea of Anglo-Celts at the centre of the Australian universe.’ We also ‘need to look at the triangulated relationships between whites, Asian communities and Aborigines’ and that ‘[o]nce we look at the whole continent instead of its southern half, the moment of Anglo-Celtic dominance appears brief,’ from the end of WWII until the 1970s only. The same can also be said about Christian or Abrahamic faith dominance.

While the abolishment of the White Australia Policy and a shift towards multicultural policies to embrace cultural diversity has led to an appreciation of diverse cultures and religions in Australia, racism against Asian Australians, and particularly against Chinese Australians, continues to be a persistent and problematic issue that has been heightened by the current coronavirus pandemic and ongoing political tensions between Australia and China. Research reveals that in contemporary populism centred on an exclusionary nationalism, whiteness continues to inform and construct cultural and religious minorities as ‘others’ within Australian media and political discourses (Halafoff 2015; Weng and Mansouri 2021; Weng et al. 2021). The retelling of history—with more accuracy and stressing Australia’s cultural and religious diversity, hybridity and complexity—is a powerful tool to deconstruct the myth of a White Christian Nation, created by the 1901 racist policy imposed due to numerical and existential racism regarding migration from Asia. Our research also reveals a tireless resistance to this racism, and a strong resilience among Asian and Buddhist Australians in the face of ongoing exclusion, to assert their rightful place in this nation.

What we also discovered is that some of the characteristics of Buddhism in Australia, as documented by Barker and Rocha (2011) and Halafoff et al. (2018), were evident in the earliest period of Buddhism in Australia pre-1901. Buddhism in the Far North was certainly strongly influenced by flows of people, ideas, practices, and material cultures into and out of Australia from and to Asia. There was also an internal religious complexity, diversity and hybridity among Far North Chinese, Japanese, and Sri Lankan communities, including Buddhist traditions, symbols, rituals, sacred places, and objects. These communities were also socially engaged, donating to hospitals and local charities, and anti-authoritarian at times, standing up for their economic and human rights. We also found a deep connection with the Australian landscape among Australia’s earliest Buddhists. Buddhist symbols and the deity Kuan Yin feature prominently in Chinese temples in cities and regional towns around the country, including the lucky bats/Australian flying foxes. A Sri Lankan Buddhist temple was also built in Thursday Island, and Japanese Buddhist shrines were documented in internment camps. Sacred bodhi trees, frangipani trees and mango trees were planted in the Far North by the Sri Lankan and Chinese communities, some of which survive to this day. Banyan trees, such as ‘Galamarrma’, also known as the ‘The Tree of Knowledge’ continue to be significant sacred places for Indigenous, Asian and European Australians.

Finally, more research and fieldwork need to be conducted across the Far North of Australia in order to deepen our understanding of Buddhism in the region, both historically and with regard to contemporary Buddhism. More time needs to be spent analysing documents and newspapers in historical societies, which are yet to be digitised, and more interviews need to be conducted with Buddhist descendants and leaders in the Far North to record their and their families’ life stories.<sup>14</sup> Preliminary visits to Darwin, Broome, Cairns, Cooktown and Thursday Island reveal the endurance of the multicultural and multifaith reality and the strong presence of

Asian cultures and religions in Australia. Its exclusion thus far in our understanding of Buddhism, and religion more broadly in Australia, has begun to be addressed by this article, and undoubtedly requires more scholarly attention.

### Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge all of the curators, historians, volunteers, tour operators and taxi drivers who assisted us when we visited museums, historical societies, associations, and bookshops across the north of Australia. In particular we'd like to thank the Mackay Historical Society and Museum, Cairns and District Chinese Association, Mason's Tours, Cooktown Historical Centre, Cooktown Museum, Torres Strait Eco Adventure Tours, NT Chinese Museum, Broome Historical Museum, Sisters of St John of God Heritage Centre Broome, Broome Visitor Centre, and the Kimberley Bookshop. We would also like to thank Paul Croucher and the late Professor Gary Bouma, for their inspiration, support and encouragement throughout the project.

Cristina Rocha is grateful to the Paris Institute for Advanced Study (PIAS, France) for a residential fellowship that allowed her time to work on this article. PIAS receives financial support of the French State, programme "Investissements d'avenir" managed by the Agence Nationale de la Recherche (ANR-11-LABX-0027-01 Labex RFIEA+).

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<sup>14</sup> Rare mentions of religion in historical accounts of race-relations in the Far North (i.e. in Reynolds 2003) are often drawn from pre-WWII newspaper coverage. The next stage in our research will thereby include a more detailed study of Buddhism and Asian religions in Australian newspapers from the 1870s to the 1940s.

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