




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

Flows of Innovation in Fo Guang Shan Australia and New Zealand: Dynamics Behind the Buddha’s Birthday Festival (1991-2019)

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Fo Guang Shan (Fóguāng shān 佛光山 FGS), a Buddhist movement in the Chinese Mahāyāna tradition, has grown rapidly in the last fifty years to become a global network with nearly 180 branch temples. For almost thirty years, FGS Australia and New Zealand has invested heavily in the annual Buddha’s Birthday Festival (BBF) in the form of weekend-long festivals in public spaces across the region. FGS Australia and New Zealand has served as an incubator, exporter, and importer of innovations to make Buddhism accessible to the public through these festivals. This article maps the flows of such innovations across the Pacific among the headquarters in Taiwan, the branches in Australia and New Zealand, and other regional headquarters. We argue that far from being a passive receiver, Buddhism in FGS Australia and New Zealand is an active participant in such flows. Low-risk, incremental innovations percolate through the branches, and are further developed or adapted as skillful means to popularise the Buddha’s teachings according to local contexts. This article also examines some organisational and individual factors involved in balancing tradition and innovation in navigating the plural religious landscape of the region.

Keywords: innovation; Buddha’s birthday; Fo Guang Shan; Australia; New Zealand; global Buddhism; translocative flows

CHINESE Mahāyāna Buddhism in the Pacific region today is the product of, and continues to be transformed by, a dynamic process that balances the wish to preserve core teachings and the need to adapt to external demands. This article examines the dynamics of flows and counterflows in Fo Guang Shan (FGS), a Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhist movement, as it negotiates tradition and innovation while adapting to the local contexts of Australia and New Zealand.

Fo Guang Shan (Fóguāng shān 佛光山 FGS) is a global Buddhist movement founded by Venerable Master Hsing Yun (Xīngyún dàshī 星雲大師, 1927-) in 1967. From its headquarters in Kaohsiung, Taiwan, FGS has grown rapidly to become a global network of 179 branch temples scattered over five continents (Fo Guang Shan 2011). The post-1960s global Chinese diaspora prepared the ground for the internationalisation of the FGS network, beginning with the establishment of Hsi Lai Temple (Xī lái sì 西來寺) in California in 1988. The stated objectives of this global network of FGS temples are to promote “Humanistic Buddhism” (explained below) and to foster peace and harmony among all peoples of the world. The monastic order of FGS is complemented by Buddha’s Light International Association (BLIA), an international non-government organisation largely composed of



lay people founded in 1992. Headquartered in California, BLIA has 200 chapters in over seventy countries and regions (Institute for the Study of Humanistic Buddhism 2021).

Both FGS and BLIA support the global Chinese Buddhist diaspora by not only providing a home for their faith but also a connection to the “imagined homeland of Chinese culture” (Chandler 2005: 162). Further, they also endeavour to spread the Buddha’s teachings to local communities. Hsing Yun once described the monastics of FGS and the laity of BLIA as the wings of a bird, working together to “spread the seeds of bliss throughout the world” (Hsing Yun 2010a: 1). According to their understanding, FGS and BLIA strive to foster peace and harmony globally with four founding principles: propagating Buddhist teachings through cultural activities, nurturing talents through education, benefitting societies through charitable programs, and purifying human minds through Buddhist practices (Fo Guang Shan 2013).

FGS advocates Humanistic Buddhism or “*renjian fojiao*” (*rénjiān fójiào* 人間佛教), which literally translates as “Buddhism for the human realm.” According to Hsing Yun, Humanistic Buddhism is “what the Buddha taught, what is essential to human beings, what purifies, and what is virtuous and beautiful” (Hsing Yun 2016: v). This conception of Buddhism has been characterised as being able to engage with the modern world by practising the Buddha Dharma as a means of self-purification (Pacey 2005: 17). FGS is one of a number of Chinese Mahāyāna movements based in Taiwan that enacts the doctrine of Humanistic Buddhism, traceable back to Master Taixu (*Tàixū dàshī* 太虛大師, 1890–1947) during the early period of the Republic of China. Taixu started the reformist movement known as Buddhism for Human Life (*rénshēng fójiào* 人生佛教) in China. This movement refocused Chinese Buddhism away from repentance rituals as an economic activity and rebirth in Pure Land towards worldly concerns. It was also initiated to counter the hegemonic forces of colonial powers and Christian missionary in those times (Pacey 2005: 445; Yao and Gombrich 2017: 206; Reinke 2021: 21). The Humanistic Buddhism of Hsing Yun emphasises the present life and the present society. We suggest that FGS is a Chinese mode of Buddhist modernism (McMahan 2012: 160) in which discourses of modernity, such as rationality, science and democratic principles, are selectively appropriated, transformed and localised to the contexts of contemporary Chinese society.

Although the demography of FGS and BLIA is largely ethnic Chinese (Chandler 2005: 167), the religiosity of FGS challenges dualistic taxonomic typologies along the ethnic-convert (Numrich 1996: 63) or modern-traditional divide (Baumann 2001: 25). Instead, Jens Reinke refers to FGS as a globalised, transnational, modern reformist Chinese Buddhist movement (2021: 3). In his ethnographic study of FGS, Reinke describes the Humanistic Buddhist religiosity of FGS as one that incorporates both traditional Buddhist practices and rituals as well as contemporary social engagement (Reinke 2018: 5) to the extent that, “[this] particular entwinement of social engagement, communality, and religious cultivation ... constitutes the modernity of Fo Guang Shan’s *renjian* Buddhist [Humanistic Buddhist] religiosity” (Reinke 2021: 116).

FGS established Nan Tien Temple (*Nán tiān sì* 南天寺), its Australia and New Zealand (ANZ) regional centre, in Wollongong in 1995 (Waitt 2003: 224). Hsing Yun was invited to build a temple in Australia, first by a Vietnamese Chinese expatriate Shi-Jiao Chun (*Cùn Shíjiāo* 寸時嬌) in 1989, and again by the mayor of Wollongong, a regional town in New South Wales (NSW) in the following year (Nan Tien Temple Editorial Team 2017: 55). The time coincided with the internationalisation campaign at FGS that had started in 1988. Meanwhile, in Australia the Labor government was pursuing a deliberate multicultural Australia policy from 1982 to 1996 (Spuler 1999: 1). In this period the number of Buddhists in Australia increased almost six-fold, from 35,000 to 200,000, mainly due to large-scale migration from Vietnam after the war finished (Baumann 2001: 18). Despite the surge in the number of Buddhists, few Buddhist temples were established during this period.

To gain an insight into FGS Australia's and New Zealand's participation in the global flows of Buddhism, we used the translocative approach of Thomas Tweed to trace the movement of ideas, people and objects across the Fo Guang Shan network of temples (Tweed 2011: 24). Tweed coined the term "translocative" to describe religions as flows across space, always changing to establish their place in the world (Tweed 2008: 25). He argued for the need of a theoretical or methodological framework to make sense of the dynamics of religious dissemination in the era of global flows, as religious people, ideas and objects travel back and forth between their homeland and new sites. To interrogate the flows of religious practices and artefacts, he proposed five axioms which define areas to consider when studying contemporary Buddhism. These five areas are: following the flows, noticing those present and absent, attending to the objects of the senses, considering varying temporal and spatial scales, and noticing the structures that propel or impede the flows.

This multi-sited translocative approach was selected because it highlights movement and social relations, as well as contact and exchange, that culminate in different expressions of Buddhism. While Tweed's study focuses on flows across Asia, America and Europe, we find the approach suitable for our examination of the flow of innovations in relation to Buddha's Birthday Festival (BBF)¹ across Asia, America and the Australia-New Zealand regions. The aquatic metaphor of flows and Tweed's attention to border crossings fit well with our description and categorisation of how BBF innovations travelled across various BBF sites. In addition, Tweed's five axioms for translocative analysis of religion helped us to reflect on how the innovations were re-contextualised and adopted as they travelled across regions.

This article focuses on a study of BBF because it has been one of the largest and longest running regular events held across FGS temples in the region. Between 1993 and 2019, FGS Australia and New Zealand invested heavily in the weekend-long festivals in public spaces across both countries. This involved months of planning and the participation of thousands of volunteers to welcome tens of thousands of visitors (Figure 1). As such, BBF is a major event for FGS to make Humanistic Buddhism visible to Buddhist and non-Buddhist members of the public.² The continuous, significant investment of human and material resources into BBF by FGS Australia and New Zealand has produced innovations that intended to spread the "three jewels" of Buddhism – the Buddha, his teachings (*dharma*), and community (*sangha*) – to local interests.



Figure 1: Monastics, dignitaries, interfaith representatives, performers, volunteers, Three Acts of Goodness mascots, young and old gathered for a group photograph at the Buddha's Birthday Festival in Darling Harbour, Sydney, Australia in year 2018 (courtesy Nan Tien Temple Australia).

¹ The Buddha's Birthday celebration commemorates the birth of Siddhārtha Gautama, who became Shakyamuni Buddha, in Kapilavastu in ancient India approximately 2600 years ago. Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhists celebrate the Buddha's birth on the eighth day of the fourth month in the lunar calendar (FoGuangPedia 2021. "Buddha's Birthday Celebration." FoGuangPedia. <https://foguangepedia.org/buddhas-birthday/>, accessed 15 July 2022). In South and Southeast Asian Buddhist traditions, the Buddha's birthday is celebrated on Vesak, which commemorates the Buddha's birth, enlightenment and nibbana on the same day. Since 2000, the United Nations recognises the Day of the Full Moon in the month of May each year as Vesak Day (United Nations General Assembly 2000. "54/115. International recognition of the Day of Vesak at United Nations Headquarters and other United Nations offices").

² Online interview conducted on 9 January 2021 (refer to *Methodology* for details of this interview).

Methodology

We collected and analysed data from archival documents such as commemorative books, program booklets, speeches, photographs, and videos. We have also analysed publicly available resources, such as dedicated event websites and news articles on the festivals. In addition, we conducted a three-hour online group interview on 9 January 2021 involving nineteen key personnel from FGS temples and BLIA chapters in Australia and New Zealand.³ Interviewees included the Chief Abbess of FGS Australia and New Zealand, Venerable Manko (*Mǎnkě fǎshī* 滿可法師), based in Nan Tien Temple, abbesses of Chung Tien Temple Queensland and FGS New Zealand, superintendents of FGS branch temples in Melbourne, Perth, Christchurch, and FGS monastics who have played key roles in essential segments of the festivals for five years or more. The Chief Abbess was among the pioneers who built Nan Tien Temple about three decades ago and retained the institutional memory of ideas, events, people and flows. At least two other monastics had been in Australia and/or New Zealand for over two decades. All BLIA chapters of Australia and New Zealand were represented in the interview. These BLIA representatives have been intimately involved in the planning and execution of BBFs from the level of managerial positions and upwards. Such roles include campaign managers, overall project managers, and advisors to senior advisors. All have been involved in the running of major FGS or BLIA activities, especially BBFs, for upward of five years (with a mean of 17.4 years and a median of 20 years). The three-hour group interview, conducted by the authors, comprised semi-structured, open-ended questions to allow interviewees to tell their stories and narrate their experiences. Interviewees were also asked to validate information that the authors collected.

The first author has been a member of the FGS monastic order since 2002 and spearheaded the Buddha's Birthday Education Project in the United States and Australia. The second author has been a member of BLIA Sydney chapter since 2008 and has volunteered in BBF Sydney in various operational and administrative roles. Apart from the archives and the interview, we also included participant observation⁴ data in this article.

Flows of Innovation: Observations

An innovation is a change that actors perceive as being new and significant (Yerxa 2015: 6). For the purpose of this article, we have scoped our study to innovations in relation to BBF in FGS Australia and New Zealand. BBF is a multi-site project that offers opportunities for the examination of the extent to which innovations respect the tradition and still align to the culture of contemporary time and place. The participants have given the authors access to a well-documented data repository of archival records of BBF across FGS Australia and New Zealand, from where we were able to identify innovations over the years.

We mapped the flows of these innovations across the Pacific among the headquarters in Taiwan, the regional headquarters and branch temples in Australia and New Zealand, and the North American regional headquarters. We identified four broad patterns of flow: (1) innovations originating from FGS headquarters that flow on to the regional centre and then the branch temples; (2) innovations within the network of temples in the region that lack any evidence of an origin from headquarters; (3) innovations from Australia and New Zealand that flow to headquarters and on to the global network of FGS temples; and (4) innovations that flow between regional centres and that are independent of headquarters (Figure 2).⁵

³ The BLIA Oceania Secretariat oversees the operations of six local BLIA chapters, i.e. BLIA Sydney, BLIA Queensland, BLIA Victoria, BLIA Western Australia, BLIA New Zealand North Island and BLIA New Zealand South Island. Each is an independent registered charity entity. In turn, the Oceania secretariat reports to the BLIA headquarters office based in Hacienda Heights in US. Abbess Manko is the Deputy Secretary General of BLIA Oceania.

⁴ The first author was involved as a participant between 2012 and 2019, the second author between 2014 and 2019.

⁵ Unless otherwise stated, data in the following section comes from the interview and participant observation.

In this section, we first present the flows of innovation based on archival data according to the four broad patterns of flows identified. We will then analyse these flows according to Tweed’s five translocative axioms.


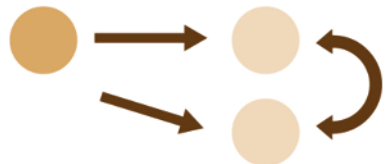
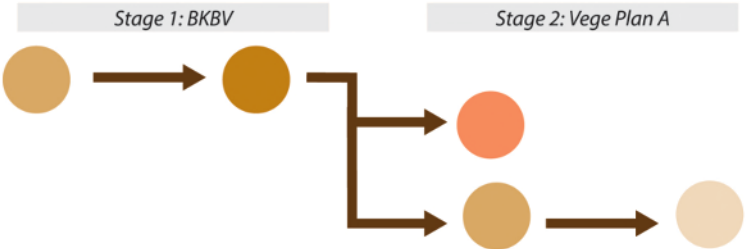
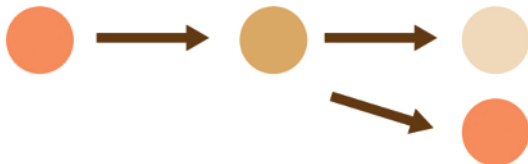

Patterns of flow in the FGS network		Examples
1. From FGS HQ to NTT to FGS ANZ branches		BBF in public space Buddha-bathing rituals Three Acts of Goodness
2. Between NTT and FGS ANZ branches		Dharma talks, meditation sessions, multicultural performance, Mindfulness colouring towers
3. From NTT to HQ to the global FGS-BLIA network		
4. From an international FGS regional centre to NTT to FGS ANZ branches & other international branches		BBEP
Legend		
Abbreviations	ANZ: Australia & New Zealand, BBEP: Buddha’s Birthday Education Project, BBF: Buddha’s Birthday Festival, BKBV: BeKindBeVeGo, BLIA: Buddha’s Light International Association, FGS: Fo Guang Shan, HQ: headquarters, NTT: Nan Tien Temple	

Figure 2: The four different flow patterns of innovations in the Fo Guang Shan (FGS) network and their examples as used in this paper.

(1) Flows from FGS headquarters to the regional centre and branch temples in Australia and New Zealand

Two innovative practices that flowed from headquarters to the regional centre and branch temples in Australia and New Zealand are the celebration of the Buddha’s birthday in public spaces and the Three Acts of Goodness campaign (explained below).

Celebrating the Buddha’s Birthday in public spaces

The FGS monastic order started its mission in Dharma promotion in Australia at the Parramatta Vihara, a temple located in a suburb in Western Sydney (Nan Tien Temple Editorial Team 2017: 473). The first BBF celebration in 1991 was held inside the temple, before “The Food Fair of Celebration for Buddha’s Birthday” was moved to a neighbouring park in 1993. Two years later, FGS Australia hosted its first public BBF celebration

in Darling Harbour, a tourist spot and traffic hub in the heart of Sydney with a high volume of visitors, and has continued to do so annually until 2019 (Wong et al. 2016: 36). The decision to bring the festival out into open ground departed from the tradition of celebrating Buddha’s birthday inside the temple. According to Chief Abbess Manko, the primary motivation for the move was to accommodate the growing number of visitors, mostly immigrant Buddhists.

Although a novel move for a Buddhist group in Australia, it was not the first time FGS brought the BBF out into a public space. In 1958, in the small town of Yilan in northeast Taiwan, Hsing Yun mobilised 30,000 people (in a city with a population of 50,000) to host a city-wide parade to celebrate Buddha’s birthday despite nationwide martial law (Juewei 2015: 1150). The parade was significant not only in its relatively large scale but also as a demonstration of the centrality of the historic Buddha as the founder of the religion in the doctrine of Humanistic Buddhism. Hence the move to bring BBFs to a prominent public space has precedence in FGS.

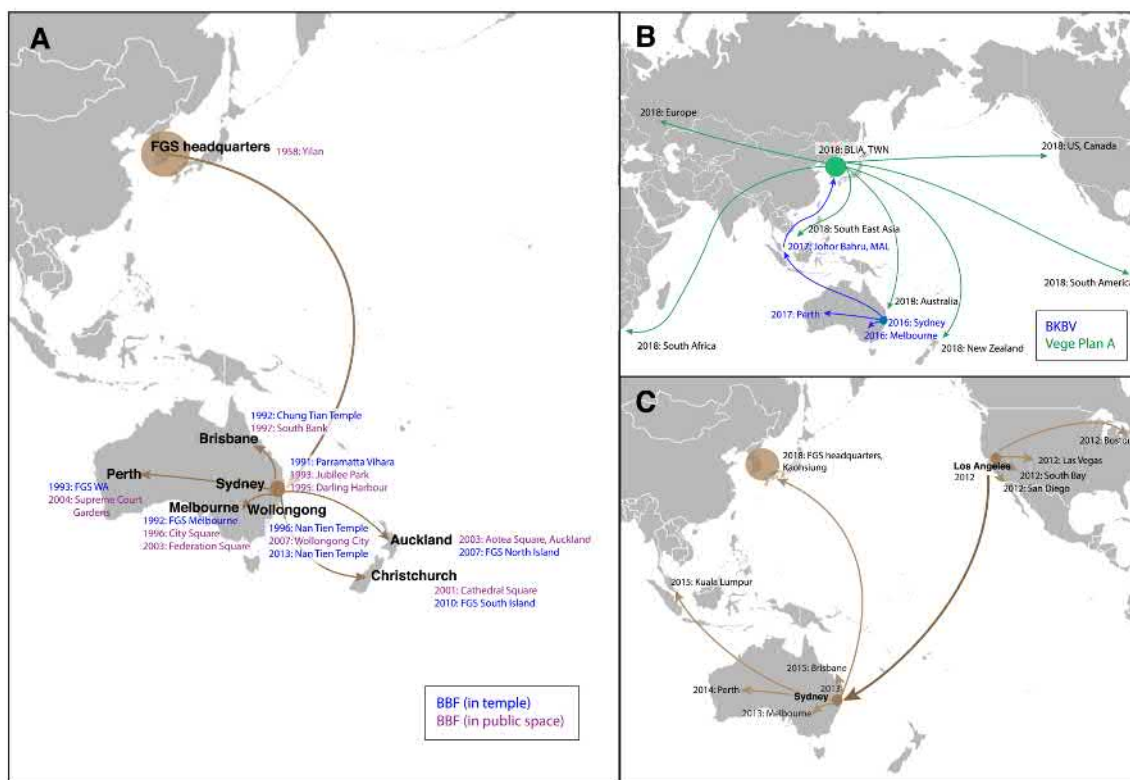


Figure 3: Multidirectional flows in the FGS network. A. Flow from FGS headquarters in Taiwan to its regional centre and branch temples in Australia and New Zealand. The idea to celebrate BBF in public spaces originated from FGS headquarters in 1958 in Yilan, Taiwan, and flowed to FGS Australia and New Zealand starting with celebrations in Jubilee Park in 1993 and then Darling Harbour, Sydney in 1995. B. Flow from FGS Australia and New Zealand to the worldwide FGS network. BKBV originated from Sydney in 2016 and became transformed into the global Vege Plan A event in 2018. C. BBEP flowed from Hsi Lai Temple, the regional centre of FGS North America to Nan Tien Temple, regional centre of FGS Australia and New Zealand, and then other parts of Asia.

After the staging of the first BBF at Darling Harbour, other branch temples in the region followed suit (Figure 3A). Established in 1992, Chung Tian Temple (*Zhōng tiān sì* 中天寺), a branch temple in the state of Queensland, organised its first BBF in public at South Bank in the heart of Brisbane in 1997. Interviewees from Chung Tian Temple revealed that they were especially driven by an acute need and sense of obligation as a Chinese Buddhist group to correct misunderstandings and encourage positive engagement with the locals amidst

racial discrimination incited by the One Nation Party⁶ (Dorling 2017). The BBF celebration in Brisbane has since grown to become one of the biggest Buddha's birthday celebrations in the country (Sykes 2012).

FGS Melbourne in the state of Victoria first celebrated Buddha's birthday outside the temple at City Square in 1996. Subsequently, the festival has moved around various locations before settling in Federation Square in the heart of the city in 2003. BLIA Victoria, co-organiser of the festival, became the first Buddhist organisation in Melbourne to promote its BBF through super banners displayed across the city in 2006.

Hosting BBFs in high-profile public spaces is evidently a costly undertaking, such that the next branch temple to move its celebration to the heart of the city of Perth only did so ten years after its establishment, and upon invitation by the local authority.⁷ Under the endorsement and invitation by Perth City Council, FGS Western Australia moved its BBF from the Maylands temple to Supreme Court Gardens in 2004. The festival continued to grow since then and has now become one of the top five events in the state's cultural calendar.

Across the Tasman Sea, the FGS branch temples in Christchurch and Manukau, New Zealand, were built in 1993 and 2007 respectively. BBFs have been held at public spaces such as Aotea Square, Auckland and Cathedral Square, Christchurch before being brought back to temple grounds in 2007 and 2010. In Auckland, this coincided with the completion of the temple building, and as explained by the abbess, was a decision to bring people to the temple. Buddha's birthday celebrations in New Zealand have since remained in the temple. This departure from its Australian counterparts has implications in the further diversification of BBFs in the two countries, as will be discussed in the next section.

Promoting the Three Acts of Goodness at BBF

The campaign to “do good deeds, speak good words, and think good thoughts” known as the Three Acts of Goodness (*sānhǎo* 三好), is FGS' signature campaign in its effort to make Buddhism accessible to the public. In the chapter “Three Acts of Goodness” in *Buddha-Dharma Pure and Simple 2*, Hsing Yun notes,

Spiritual cultivation starts from cultivating wholesome physical, verbal, and mental karma. The three ways of purifying the Three Karmas are to do wholesome actions, speak wholesome words, and think wholesome thoughts (Hsing Yun 2020: 21).

FGS has translated this ethical practice of purifying the Three Karmas of body, speech and mind into the Three Acts of Goodness campaign so that it does not have a religious connotation. This is an example of how Humanistic Buddhism aims at translating doctrine into a language that can be easily understood by non-Buddhists, and contextualised for application in daily life.

At FGS headquarters, a connection between the Three Acts of Goodness and Buddha's birthday celebrations was drawn in 2010 when the then President of Taiwan ROC Ma Ying-jeou led a collective pledge to the Three Acts of Goodness in the National Buddha's Day and Mother's Day Celebration in front of the Presidential Office Building in Taipei (Ko 2010). Soon after, this innovation flowed to the BBFs in Australia and New Zealand, which incorporated the Three Acts of Goodness into various parts of its celebrations, from the bathing Buddha *gāthā*⁸

⁶ One Nation Party is an Australian right-wing to far-right political party founded by Pauline Hanson in Queensland in 1997. According to its Policy Document on Immigration, Population and Social Cohesion (1998), the party criticises multiculturalism as a “threat to the very basis of the Australian culture, identity and shared values” and strongly opposed Asian immigration in the 1990s (Dorling 2017: 14). See also, <http://www.gwb.com.au/onenation/policy/immig.html>.

⁷ While the Temple documents did not state the reason for the Perth City Council to invite the BBF into public space, the minutes of an ordinary meeting of the Vincent town council in Perth held on 13 April 2004 indicate that public spaces should be actively managed through activities such as festivals and street theatre. This recommendation follows how people need public spaces for enjoyment of sensory and aesthetic qualities (City of Vincent 2004: 45). It is likely that the BBF falls into the category of multicultural festival and hence fits into Australia's and the city council's multicultural agenda.

⁸ A *gāthā* is a ‘song’ or ‘verses’ often in the contexts of legends and rituals; the traditional bathing Buddha *gāthā* stems from the Chinese Buddhist canon's *The Buddha Word on the Merit and Virtues of Bathing Statues* (T. 697) and *The Sūtra on the Merit of Bathing the Buddha* (T. 698) and is used in FGS in Chinese or in this English translation “I now sincerely bathe all Tathagatas/ Gaining merits of pure wisdom

to messages displayed on the stage backdrop. The traditional Buddha-bathing ritual at FGS involved scooping water over the shoulders of the Prince Siddhārtha statue three times while quietly reciting “May I eliminate all unwholesome thoughts; May I cultivate all good deeds; May I serve all living beings,”⁹ which was displayed on the Buddha-bathing instruction card at Buddha-bathing stations. After 2010, Buddha-bathing cards displaying the Three Acts of Goodness were installed in the festival at Darling Harbour to echo the promotion of the campaign at headquarters (Nan Tien Temple Archive). As one bathes the Buddha, one may recite “I vow to do good deeds, speak good words, and think good thoughts.” BBF New Zealand incorporated the Three Acts of Goodness into its Buddha-bathing cards in 2014 and Perth 2016.

Three Acts of Goodness became the theme of the 2012 festival in Sydney and was given physical form in two-metre-tall mascots imported from Taiwan, as well as stickers and bookmarks for free distribution at the festivals (Nan Tien Temple Archive). Thereafter, the message of the Three Acts of Goodness continued to be an important recurring theme in BBFs and was repeatedly featured, expanded and instigated in satellite activities surrounding the festivals. For example, BBF organisers in Perth hosted the “Three Acts of Goodness Photography Competition” award ceremony at Elizabeth Quay in 2017 (Nan Tien Temple Archive). In New Zealand, the Three Acts of Goodness and the Four Givings¹⁰ (Hsing Yun 2020: 25) were integrated to form the theme of the 3G4G Festival of Cultural Sharing, an extension of BBF held annually at the temple and a popular cultural excursion program for local schoolchildren. The FGS New Zealand informant reported that over a period of six years from 2009 to 2015, a total of 17,000 visitors attended the 3G4G Festival together with BBF.

Both the incorporation of the Three Acts of Goodness into BBF and staging BBFs in public spaces demonstrated a flow from headquarters to Australia and New Zealand, where there were variable extents of uptake, as well as diversification as these practices adapted to local contexts at the different sites.

(2) Flows among the branches in Australia and New Zealand

There were practices in relation to the festivals that have emerged in local contexts. In Taiwan, FGS headquarters celebrates Buddha’s birthday on the eighth day of the fourth month in the lunar calendar. Since 1957, Hsing Yun has campaigned for this day to be recognised as a public holiday. In 1999, the Taiwanese government officiated it as a public holiday (Juewei 2015: 1150). As a result, most FGS temples in Taiwan celebrate on the actual day and perhaps also on weekends around that day (Life News Agency 佛光山人間通訊社 2022). Across the Pacific, however, BBFs are held across the months of April and May. The 2019 Buddha’s birthday calendar was typical: the first festivals took place the weekend before Easter in New Zealand and Perth, followed by Nan Tien Temple during the Easter weekend. Brisbane ran its three-day festival during the first weekend of May, followed by Sydney over the Mother’s Day weekend, and ending with Melbourne the following weekend (Life News Agency 佛光山人間通訊社 2022).

Extending the celebration was an innovation but was also a pragmatic response to the limitation of human resources for the festivals in Australia and New Zealand. In line with the centralistic structure of FGS, the Chief Abbess was expected to preside over the official ceremony in all the festivals in Australia. Other monastics also had to travel interstate to support the rituals and deliver Dharma talks. For instance, at least six monastics were required to officiate the Buddha-bathing ceremony, but not all states had enough local monastics, according to one informant. While the requirement to fill roles in official ceremonies was clearly one of the main reasons for interstate travel, the monastics also assumed many different duties at the BBF at

and majesty/ May beings be free from defilements in all/ Thereby attain Tathagata’s pure Dharma body.” (我今灌沐諸如來；淨智莊嚴功德海。五濁眾生離塵垢；同證如來淨法身。)”

⁹ Fo Guang Shan 佛光山. 2014. “Bathing the Buddha Celebration.” Fo Guang Shan. <https://www.fgs.org.tw/events/vbb/en/origin.html>, accessed 20 July 2022).

¹⁰ The Four Givings are to “give others joy, give others hope, give others confidence, and give others convenience.”

other sites. For example, English-competent monastics delivered Dharma talks and led meditation sessions. Besides the monastics, each branch temple depended on a team of lay BLIA volunteers, comprising first- and later-generation immigrants as well as locals, to support the festival. We know from years of participating in BBF Sydney that most lay volunteers did not travel for the festivals except when special needs arose. For example, the Chief Executive Officer of the Sydney BBF flew to New Zealand fifteen times to support BBF, joined by other volunteers from Sydney and Melbourne on several occasions. In addition, volunteers from the Buddha's Birthday Education Project (BBEP) also flew interstate to help stage and staff exhibition marquees. Such occasions became opportunities for exchange of information and ideas across the region.

The extension of the festival was also driven by the need to adapt and respond to local conditions. The festivals were held over weekends instead of a designated date (that was not a public holiday) to draw the largest possible crowds. Furthermore, the interviewees revealed that the festival was held in mid-April in New Zealand to avoid the colder climate in later months. Having moved the festival back to temple grounds since 2007 and 2010, the organisers in New Zealand could now fully utilise the temples' indoor and outdoor space to create the 3G4G Festival of Cultural Sharing, which was an extended celebration that catered to groups of schoolchildren from different parts of the country. The popularity of the 3G4G Festival had encouraged the Auckland organisers to host a year-round exhibition on the Buddha's birth in the temple. To date, the 3G4G Festival remains unique to FGS New Zealand, but the title of 3G4G was borrowed in other FGS activities in Perth and Sydney. The extension of Buddha's birthday celebration demonstrates how an adaptation that emerged out of local needs could create further conditions for innovation.

While outward flows of innovations from the main or regional headquarters to branches were the most common, flows across the FGS network were far from unidirectional. Specifically, we identified flows from the regional centres to headquarters and flows between regional centres in the Pacific that were largely independent of headquarters.

(3) Flows from Australia and New Zealand to headquarters

According to the founder of FGS, vegetarianism is a significant part of the Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhist culture and a method of cultivation to nurture compassion (Hsing Yun 2010b: 2). Since the first Buddha's birthday celebration outside the temple in Sydney in 1993, the vegetarian food fair has been ubiquitously associated with BBFs. In the early days, the festival was named "The Food Fair of Celebration for Buddha's Birthday" (Parramatta, 1993) and "Wesak Day Vegetarian Food Fair" (Darling Harbour, 1995). Across BBFs in Australia and New Zealand, the vegetarian food fair had further inspired ideas in promoting vegetarianism, including the "Vegelicious Cooking Demo" by celebrity chefs initiated in Melbourne, and the BeKindBeVego (BKBV) event in Sydney, to name a few.

Inspired by multiple sources, a BLIA subchapter in Sydney launched BKBV in 2016. BKBV was innovative in transforming a traditional Mahāyāna practice into an online pledge. During the interview, the informants mentioned that for many years prior to BKBV, temples in Singapore and Malaysia had advocated vegetarianism during the Month of Filial Piety. In BKBV, the organisers aspired to go beyond the boundaries of the usual target audience of the temple to reach a wider segment of the community. Standing at 11% of the population, vegetarians outnumbered the Australian Buddhist population at the 2.4% mark (Roy Morgan Research 2016; Australian Bureau of Statistics 2017). The organisers revealed that they intended to make BKBV an outreach activity of BLIA. Hence the name "Be Kind Be Vego," as they understood kindness to not only be a central element of Buddhist philosophy, but also a highly regarded core value of the Australian society. Given the growing connectivity between vegetarianism and progressive ideas of care for the planet and spirituality, BKBV can be seen as a strategic move to connect to the general public beyond religious-minded attendees.

BKBV featured as roadshows in BBFs in Sydney, Melbourne and Perth in 2016 and 2017. The turning point came when, in 2017, BLIA Sydney presented the project at an international BLIA conference held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia (Chen 2017) and called for its adoption by headquarters. BLIA headquarters took up the project in 2018 and renamed it Vege Plan A (Figure 3B) (BLIA World 2022). Vege Plan A was positioned as “action-based response to climate issues” to protect the environment and lives. The main narrative of environmental action has been highlighted above the narrative of kindness. While retaining the key feature of an online pledge to a vegetarian diet, Vege Plan A has moved beyond the geographic boundaries of its predecessor and has been taken to the global FGS-BLIA network. Various FGS and BLIA groups in North America, Southeast Asia, and other parts of the world have reinvented it in different creative forms (BLIA World 2022). The flow that appropriated the practice of vegetarianism into “Be Kind Be and then Vege Plan A” to participate in the contemporary global Buddhist discourse on ecological issues constitutes BLIA’s attempt to use skilful means to integrate the traditional and the innovative in the implementation of this project.

(4) Flows among regional centres

The fourth kind of flows are among branch temples from different regions of the world that is not mediated directly by headquarters. We illustrate this pattern of flow here with the Buddha’s Birthday Education Project (BBEP) that was initiated by the first author of this article. BBEP was a BBF satellite project which aims to educate and inspire people about the historic birth of the Buddha and provide the context of the Buddhist rituals seen at BBFs. Extracting data from historical documents that charted the spread of Buddhism along the Silk Roads and the celebration of the Buddha’s birthday in medieval China, the project used creative means to transform canonical texts into accessible formats (Nan Tien Temple 2018).

The project was started by the first author while at Hsi Lai Temple, FGS’ North American regional centre based in California. The main artefacts were a triptych of a Buddha’s birthday procession in Luoyang, China, in the Northern Wei Dynasty (386–534 AD), an animation piece of a technologically advanced altar-carriage in Later Zhao China during the fourth century, and a Silk Roads depiction of the spread of Buddhism (Nan Tien Temple 2018). The BBEP took these artefacts on roadshows around southern California and to the Natural History Museum in Las Vegas. Since then, the roadshows have continued across America during BBFs. This project was reinvented to become part of the BBFs in Australia when the first author was posted to Nan Tien Institute in Wollongong. In 2012, the BBEP reproduced the main artefacts from America but also invited Australian artists to create local impressions of Buddha’s birthday legends. The result was an exhibition of eight original artefacts from artists based in NSW. A new range of Dharma-inspired products and applications were developed for BBEP over the next few years, including the Mindful Check-in App, handmade books of significance, board games, Dharma card sets, videos, and more (Nan Tien Temple 2018).

From Sydney, the project travelled to BBFs in Melbourne, Perth and Brisbane. In 2015, a Malaysian branch temple put up a BBEP exhibition and created a replica of the Later Zhao carriage. Three years later, BBEP returned to the Buddha Museum at FGS headquarters with an Australian delegation of twenty, including the first author. While in Taiwan, the BBEP was presented in detail to a group of eighty Buddha Museum staff and was showcased to one million visitors over a period of six months (Durham University 2018). This return marked a closure to the BBEP which started at the same time as the Buddha Museum was opened and concluded as part of a collaboration with Durham University’s exhibition of “Walking with Buddha:

Discovering the Natal Landscape of the Buddha.”¹¹ During these seven years, the project continued to be a part of the dynamic growth of BBFs in Australia and Asia, contributing new artefacts each year.

Reflections

By charting the emergence and mobilisation of innovations in BBF, the preceding section mapped the flows and counterflows of people together with ideas and artefacts in the FGS network. FGS can be seen as an example of global Buddhism. Martin Baumann listed one of the characteristics of global Buddhism as “transnational and trans-continental flows of Buddhist ideas and practices” mediated by travelling Buddhist teachers and students (Baumann 2001: 4). Scholars including Cristina Rocha (2012: 299) have since demonstrated that the globalisation of Buddhism is a part of the globalisation of culture that has gone beyond the mobility of people and is now facilitated by the internet and social media. Here we examine FGS’ flows of innovation as a part of the global diffusion and dissemination of Buddhism (Baumann 2001: 5) and further uses the translocative axioms to furnish further insights on the characteristics of such flows.

Axiom 1: Following the flows

As we followed the multidirectional dynamics of BBF in the FGS network, we noted the presence of four different kinds of flows of innovations (Figure 3). We also found the innovations to be the equivalent of skilful means or *upāya-kauśalya* (*fāngbiàn* 方便) in Mahāyāna Buddhism, incremental and contextual. In Buddhist doctrine *upāya-kauśalya*: skill (*kauśalya*) in means (*upāya*), or skilful means, is often referred to as the Buddha’s adept methods of adapting the teachings to suit the audience (Harvey 2013: 111). Michael Pye defined skilful means as that which is needed by human beings to attain enlightenment (Pye 2003: 2). As BBF organisers use skilful means to produce innovations to adapt to the local contexts of the region, they have left the core doctrines of Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhism unchanged. Other scholars have described a similar approach to innovations in FGS across different sites (Li 2014: 141; Reinke 2021). In other words, innovations were made to align to local conditions but respect traditions. This approach fits with sociologist Finke’s observations that the most successful innovations are often those that cite core teachings as the source of inspiration (Finke 2004: 26).

In BBF most of the innovations have been incremental, rather than radical. For example, the Three Acts of Goodness was first incorporated into Buddha-bathing cards, then physically embodied in dolls, and gradually became the theme of satellite activities of the festivals. Importantly, these were innovations that can be built upon to “enable” the next innovation. Engineering scholars Joseph Sinfield and Freddy Solis (2016: 8) described the “lily pad strategy” as a low-risk path to navigate critical stages in the process of innovation. With this strategy, progress in one lily pad garners resources in the development process and paves the way for subsequent innovations. Each lily pad represents an enabling innovation as it “enables” the next innovation. A significant subset of the BBF-related innovations by FGS Australia and New Zealand can be classified as incremental innovations. Innovations such as bringing the festival to public spaces and extending the festival facilitated a cascade of further innovations and reshaped the environment for the festivals. Linking together incremental innovations may allow an organisation to make cumulative leaps towards greater impact over time.

That the innovations are incremental does not detract from their significance. While the FGS order may not be the first Buddhist group in history to celebrate Buddha’s birthdays in public spaces on a large scale

¹¹ The “Walking with Buddha” exhibition showcased the life of the Buddha and was centred around the archaeological findings of the team from Durham University, who uncovered evidence of a structure at the birthplace of the Buddha at Lumbini in Nepal dating to the 6th Century BC. The discovery was significant as the first archaeological material linking the life of the Buddha to a specific century. The exhibition attracted one million visitors from 25 countries (Durham University 2018).

(Rocha 2006; Snodgrass 2009; Kim 2011; Juewei 2015), the decision to re-enact this idea outside Asia was nonetheless noteworthy for the organisation. Bringing the festival out into prominent public spaces created new conditions that the local organisers have continued to adapt and leverage to draw audiences to the festival from year to year. For FGS Australia and New Zealand, BBF presented an opportunity to engage a myriad of stakeholders, interested members of the public, and passers-by. All BBFs included an interfaith blessing ceremony to engage with the local multifaith community. The multicultural stage, also common to all BBFs, offered multicultural performers and artists, many of whom from a non-Chinese background, a platform to showcase their cultural heritage. In the case of Brisbane, situating the festival in the arts and cultural hub of South Bank created opportunities to collaborate with cultural, educational, and charitable entities in the precinct, including Queensland Art Gallery and Gallery of Modern Art, Griffith University, and others. Likewise, BBF at other sites often listed a diverse base of supporting organisations in their festival pamphlets, suggesting that the local BLIA chapters leveraged the festival as an occasion for community outreach (Nan Tien Temple Archive).

Taking BBF into public spaces also created opportunities for garnering support and endorsement from local governments and communities, including the then Prime Minister of Australia (Nan Tien Temple Archive). Such endorsements affirmed and legitimised the efforts of immigrant Buddhist organisations such as FGS in taking the Buddha's teachings beyond their circles of devotees of mainly immigrant background to the wider local communities through BBFs. These observations suggested that in the move to a public space, FGS Australia and New Zealand was as equally motivated by a missionary intent to introduce the message of Buddhism to the local society as it was to accommodate more immigrant visitors. This innovation fits with the three missionary methods of FGS described by Chandler: creating links of affinity (*jié yuán* 結緣), sparking people's curiosity, and localising Buddhist teachings and practice (Chandler 2005: 162).

Axiom 2: Noticing all the figures crossing

We have observed the need of the Chief Abbess to fly across the states under her purview to preside over ceremonies. Her presence and that of FGS monastics on the public stage are also important symbols of the presence of the FGS sangha in such events. In addition, the Chief Abbess is involved in all major decisions during the planning and preparatory phases of such large projects. This in part is due to the centralist structures of FGS and BLIA. Having an overview of all the major decisions and an oversight of this interstate BBF event over the years also implies that the Chief Abbess has become the sole institutional memory.

Tweed emphasised paying attention to both the people present and people absent. One prominent figure missing from the BBFs was the founder, Hsing Yun. Although he was physically absent, he seemed to have encouraged FGS to keep a relatively open attitude toward innovations. Internal sources at FGS claimed that Hsing Yun is credited with at least seventy-three innovations by the year 2003 (Ju Chang 2003). In the 1950s, he pioneered the use of a slide projector to teach the Dharma (1953), formed the first Buddhist choir (1954), and cut the first record of Buddhist songs (1957) in Taiwan. Hsing Yun said, "I try to meet the needs of the people, whatever the time and place. This is because the Buddhism that people need is practical Buddhism" (Hsing Yun 2016). This pragmatic spirit led him to interpret and promote Buddhism in innovative ways (Chia 2015: 146). For Hsing Yun, Humanistic Buddhism is not a new form of Buddhism, rather one that presents reinterpretations of the teachings in a contemporary way (BLIA 2021). The establishment of BLIA, an NGO with voluntary membership, as a global extension of FGS for the laity was an innovation in itself (Yao and Gombrich 2017: 224). As a teacher, Hsing Yun sets an example that FGS monastics can emulate. Following Hsing Yun, there appears to be ongoing internal reflexivity on the negotiation between tradition and innovation.

Axiom 3: Attending to all the senses and all religion's components

Festivals are multi-sensorial experiences. The flow of such sensorial experiences across borders is significant. Tweed (2011: 25) mentioned incense as an example but we observed that incense has been gradually replaced by flowers in festivals held in public spaces. This could be a response to the need for safety in public spaces such as avoidance of injury caused by mishandling of burning incense and reducing risk of asthma arising from the scent of incense. Hence, what may be considered important and sacred at headquarters may not be treated in the same way in other parts of the world.

We also notice the effort that local volunteers went through to stage these multi-sensorial experiences. They ran vegetarian food stalls, managed lively performances on the multicultural stage, and organised experiential classes such as meditation, calligraphy, tea ceremony, lantern making, and lotus flower origami. Family-friendly programs such as Buddhist-themed giant board games, jumping castles, petting zoo, fireworks, and light shows have formed part of the festival programs at the different sites. With these tools the BBF intended to materially touch the lives of visitors.

Axiom 4: Considering varying scales

FGS Australia and New Zealand invested in these public BBFs for over two decades. While this may seem long from the view of FGS, it is not so in the larger scheme of things. Chinese immigrants have brought Buddhism to Australia since 1848 (Rocha and Barker 2011: 2). It has taken about 150 years to build the conditions for Buddhism to be sufficiently recognised in Australia so that BBFs can be feasible in public spaces from the late twentieth century. Furthermore, FGS and BLIA were not the only Buddhist organisations celebrating BBFs publicly. The first Australian observance of the United Nations Day of Vesak was organised at Sydney Town Hall on 31st May 2007 (Wilson 2019) and has continued in public spaces in Sydney, Canberra, and Melbourne for the ensuing years.

Tweed has pointed to the need to look away from the nation state as the default level of analysis (Tweed 2011: 25). We concur with Tweed in his observation as we found it necessary to examine flows across different states in Australia and New Zealand rather than across national borders. It was equally important to look at flows outside of this region, given the dynamism and connectivity of FGS temples across the world. Surveying flows that involve Taiwan and the United States have helped us identify the four different kinds of flow described above.

Axiom 5: Noticing how flows stop, start, and shift

This study reveals the complex nature of studying flows as many other factors may impede or accelerate the flow of BBF ideas and their implementation within the FGS network. In examining the power behind the flows, we find Tweed's observation about the "kinetics of dwelling and crossing" being mediated by institutional structures and social power (Tweed 2011: 25) relevant to this study. Organisational features and group dynamics in FGS Australia and New Zealand have influenced the flows of innovation. These include the monastics' rotational posting system, the operation of BBF committees in FGS Australia and New Zealand and their intragroup dynamics, and avenues for the exchange of information and ideas on BBF within the global FGS network.

In the case of BBEP, the rotational posting of a monastic brought the project across the Pacific, where it took root and extended to other parts of Asia, including headquarters. However, unlike Vege Plan A, the dedicated academic expertise required in BBEP meant that it was highly dependent on a specialised team for sustainability. The different extent of transposability of the two projects was one factor to have determined their different reach. High dependence on specific skills results in the limited portability of the BBEP; for

example, the inability of the monastic to fly to New Zealand during the active years of BBEP to train a team of volunteers resulted in the absence of BBEP in New Zealand.

The temple and the BLIA chapter at each location operated somewhat autonomously with respect to the BBFs through organising committees comprising local volunteers. For instance, according to our informants there was no direction nor intervention from headquarters when the committees chose to host the celebrations in public spaces. We were told that the temples had a free hand in suggesting and implementing major innovations without the need to consult with headquarters. For example, organisers in Perth moved its multicultural stage to a public space at the suggestion and offer of funding by the local city council in 2003. Melbourne committee members mobilised their financial and human resources to pilot popular installations such as BBF super banners throughout the city, a bodhi tree interactive art installation, a children's mini-cinema, and lighted mindfulness forest colouring towers. The different committees also maintained separate financial accounts and ran their fundraising programs independently for the festivals. We noticed that some sites included "multicultural" in the naming of its event. Melbourne called its event "Buddha's Day and Multicultural Festival" while Perth named it "Buddha's Birthday and Multicultural Festival." On further investigation, we discovered that fundraising was made easier locally with explicit indication of the event's support of multiculturalism. Hence, the public presence of Buddhism also had to negotiate the socio-political agendas of the locality for it to be able to continue on the city's calendar of festivals.

In each city, the organising committee met monthly and then weekly leading up to the festival to plan and discuss. The meetings were attended by both monastic and lay members. Innovative ideas were raised and reviewed in these meetings, and decisions were often based on a majority vote. The Chief Abbess has an advisory role and may offer objections to ideas deemed unfit but did not overrule any majority decision. Yet the autonomy of the committees was limited. Hence, tensions could arise when the Chief Abbess, serving as the hub of learning, wished to include successful innovations at other sites. The Chief Abbess asserted in the interview that she respected the autonomy of each temple and its unique conditions. Nevertheless, we suspect that local FGS temples and BLIA chapters would be morally obligated to include her recommendations.

FGS headquarters connected the branch temples in different localities with regular international and regional meetings to facilitate exchange of resources and ideas relating to BBFs. Since 2012, reports of BBFs from around the world took place after the annual monastic seminar at FGS headquarters. Temples that had organised BBFs earlier that year were invited to present their innovations to all other temples. As each region tried new ideas, other regions would evaluate them and initiate the same program if deemed feasible. Variety was encouraged, and there was possibly some friendly competition. In addition, FGS Australia and New Zealand also held annual regional monastic seminars in which local temples shared their ideas and successes. These regular meetings and a rotational system of monastic placement encourage connectivity among temples and individuals around FGS. Personal friendships were formed on such occasions, allowing ideas to be captured by any temple through formal and informal conduits.

In broader terms, the flows of innovation were facilitated by the socio-political contexts in which BBF were situated, most notably the growing global Chinese diaspora, a change in the Australia and New Zealand governments' immigration and multiculturalism policies, and a trend towards cultural and religious pluralism. Ease of air travel across Australia and New Zealand enabled monastics and laypeople to fly across the regions to support and learn from one another. It is beyond the scope of this article to detail how these socio-political and technological factors enabled the cross-fertilisation of ideas in the development of BBF in FGS Australia and New Zealand. However, it would be remiss if we did not mention their importance to facilitate future research.

Conclusion

We used a translocative approach to reflect on the relational and dynamic nature of BBF innovations in a global Buddhist organisation. Our investigation into innovations in BBFs in FGS Australia and New Zealand revealed multidirectional flows. They started with the flow of traditions, ideas and resources from FGS headquarters. Furthermore, we noticed flows from Australia and New Zealand back to headquarters and onward to the global network, as well as flows across regional centres worldwide. Far from being a passive endpoint recipient, FGS Australia and New Zealand was an active participant in the global flow of Buddhism across the Pacific region.

In this study, we have provided a view into how some operations of a Buddhist monastic order balances tradition and innovations. Even in monastic organisations which are often portrayed as hierarchical and centralised, innovation at the grassroots level is possible and even necessary. In FGS Australia and New Zealand, innovation is enabled by partnering with a lay organisation, BLIA, that shares the same model of Humanistic Buddhism. This study thus adds to recent scholarship on FGS specifically, but also global Buddhism in general, to reveal the importance of actors other than the founder and headquarters who have shaped the worldwide trajectory of the organisation (Reinke 2021: 9). The success of the BBF was dependent on the movement of monastics, especially the Chief Abbess, across the sites, as well as the deft contextualisation and recontextualisation of a foreign festival to fit local understanding and to appeal to multi-sensorial experiences. FGS sustains innovative practices by harnessing the combined characteristics of autonomy and connectivity among its branch temples and individuals to accrue collective knowledge in its network. In the spirit of *upāya* and in the mission of Humanistic Buddhism to cater to human needs, local adaptations were made and shared across the various branches in Australia and New Zealand. These innovations were found to be gradual and low-risk but served to legitimise and promote the organisers' presence as worthwhile.

By elucidating the dynamics and mechanisms of flows and counterflows at FGS Australia and New Zealand as it negotiates the balance between tradition and innovations, we hope to enrich the tapestry of the story of Buddhism in Australia and New Zealand, a story that is plural, dynamic, and still in the making.

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