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FO GUANG SHAN'S  
EXPANSION IN THE  
RELIGIOUS MARKET  
OF THAILAND: A SWOT  
ANALYSIS

Gu i y u S u , Y a o p i n g L i u

Note of Romanization

Pinyin is used as the primary Romanization for Chinese characters throughout this paper; however, some names and organizations in the Wade-Giles system remain unchanged due to their continued use among Thais and various Westerners. For example, Hsing Yun.

Introduction

As the most prominent Buddhist country in continental Southeast Asia, Thailand is home to more than 300,000 monks.<sup>1</sup> A total of 93% of its population follows Theravada Buddhism.<sup>2</sup> In Thailand, there are 33,630 temples registered under four Buddhist schools—Maha Nikaya, Dhammayuttika Nikaya, Annam Nikaya, and Jin Nikaya, respectively.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Samantha Bresnahan, "Why Thailand is putting its monks on a diet?" *CNN Health*, October 18, 2019, <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/10/18/health/thailand-monks-vital-signs-wellness/index.html>;

<sup>2</sup> Office of International Religious Freedom, "2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Thailand," May 12, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-report-on-international-religious-freedom/thailand/>.

<sup>3</sup> Division of Buddhist Religious Sites, Office of Religious Treasures (abandoned temples), "Nationwide measurement data statistics," December 31, 2004, <http://www.dhammathai.org/watthai/watstat.php>.

Among them, the first two belong to the mainstream Theravada tradition, while the latter two are derived from the Mahayana tradition founded by Vietnamese and Chinese immigrant monks subsequently in the 19th century.<sup>4</sup>

With its large Buddhist population, Thailand also attracts a growing number of foreign Buddhist institutions for religious market expansion since the early 1990s.<sup>5</sup> The Taiwan-based FGS is one of these foreign Buddhist institutions to have started setting up its branch in downtown Bangkok. The present research specifically refers to Taihua si and the Buddha Light Cultural and Educational Center, the two branches of FGS in Bangkok.

### A Brief History of FGS

Born in 1927 to a Li family in Jiangsu Province, eastern China, Hsing Yun became a monk in his early teens. Later, the young Hsing Yun entered the Jiao Shan Buddhist College in Zhejiang Province and was inspired by the founder of the college, Tai Xu (1890–1947), who introduced the concept of earthly Buddhism.<sup>6</sup> In 1967, Hsing Yun founded FGS in Ma Chu Yuan, Da Shu Township, Kaohsiung City, Taiwan, with Taixu as his spiritual teacher.<sup>7</sup> In 1972, Hsing Yun formulated the Constitution of the FGS Patriarchal Association, and since then, FGS has become a modernized, institutionalized, and well-organized religious group. FGS is guided by four primary purposes: to promote Buddhism through culture, cultivate talents through education, benefit society through charity, and purify people's hearts through communal practice. Over the decades, FGS has established a university,

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<sup>4</sup> Yaoping Liu, "The History of Jin Nikāya in Thailand: A Preliminary Study from a Sociopolitical Perspective," *Journal of Chinese Buddhist Studies*, 33 (2020): 123–124.

<sup>5</sup> Guo-zhong Xing, "Remark on paradigm of religion economic research," *Science and Atheism*, no. 6 (2008): 5–21.

<sup>6</sup> Darui Long, "Humanistic Buddhism from Venerable Taixu to Great Master Hsing Yun," *Hsi Lai Journal of Humanistic Buddhism*, 1 (2000): 56, <http://buddhism.lib.ntu.edu.tw/FULLTEXT/JR-JHB/jhb94215.htm>.

<sup>7</sup> Dapeng Sang, "On Master Hsing Yun's Practical Philosophy of Humanistic Buddhism - A Treatise on the Personality Characteristics of Hsing Yun's Humanistic Buddhism," *Journal of Wuhan University: social sciences edition*, no. 4 (2015): 7–14.

a Buddhist college, a library, a publishing house, a translation center, a literature center, a teahouse, a nursery school, a home for the elderly, a senior high school, a newspaper, and a television station. The FGS Sangha has since become a significant promoter of humanistic Buddhism in Taiwan and overseas.<sup>8</sup>

For better development, religion often responds to catch up with the social, economic, and sometimes even political needs of its times. Taiwan's economy developed rapidly from the 1960s to the 1980s and became one of the "Four Little Dragons of Asia".<sup>9</sup> After economic growth, Taiwan gradually became internationalized, and many Taiwanese businesspeople started investing and doing business abroad, bringing Chinese culture to their hosting countries.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, the 1980s saw the influx of an increasing number of overseas Chinese immigrants, including Taiwanese immigrants, who were already deeply influenced by traditional Chinese culture. In addition, mainland China's admirable economic achievements since its opening in the late 1970s inspired the national pride and cultural confidence of overseas Chinese.<sup>11</sup> Given these premises, traditional Chinese culture has become popular overseas, especially among overseas Chinese communities worldwide. This is also essential for religious institutions such as FGS to attract a large following and grow tremendous influence overseas, especially the Chinese communities on foreign soil.<sup>12</sup>

On the other hand, overseas Chinese communities have contributed to the quick and vast expansion of Chinese religious institutions, such as FGS, abroad. To date, FGS has grown its enormous influence over Chinese communities worldwide, including Thailand, in the manife-

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<sup>8</sup> Yu-Chieh Huang, "Flame-like Ritual Music and its Religious Connotations: The Case of the Buddhist Temple System in Taiwan," *Taiwan Music Studies* 4 (2007): 20–38.

<sup>9</sup> Hujiang Li, "The 'Blue Ocean Strategy' of Contemporary Buddhist Organizations: The Case of the Buddha Light Mountain Mission," *Journal of Southwest University for Nationalities (Humanities and Social Sciences)*, no. 9 (2010): 109–113.

<sup>10</sup> Hujiang Li, "Three Features of the Blue Ocean Strategy of Contemporary Buddhist Organizations - A Comparative Analysis of the Dharma Body Monastic Order and the Fo Guang Shan Order," *Wutai Mountain Research*, no. 1 (2010): 13–17.

<sup>11</sup> Shi Cangjin and Li Qunfeng: "A Brief Analysis on Fo Guang Shan's Spreading and Influences Abroad," *Southeast Asian Studies* 1 (2013): 59–66.

<sup>12</sup> Zhou Ye, "Communication Strategies in Faith Consumption - An Experimental Analysis of Taiwan's Fo Guang Shan Cultural and Educational Group," *Business Manager*, no. 3(2011): 1–21.

station of its large Chinese following and the growing number of local converts. However, there is a dearth of scholarship that has paid attention to its expansion from a marketing perspective.

FGS promotes exchanges and understanding among different denominations and sects. It actively plays the role of “ambassador of civil diplomacy,” using religious beliefs as a link to strengthen understanding and trust between countries and to promote relations among them. The spread of FGS overseas also encourages the influence of the “Greater China” cultural soft power overseas.<sup>13</sup>

### FGS’s internationalization movement

In the late 1970s, FGS expanded out of Taiwan to foreign countries. In Asia, the Buddha’s Light International Association has established associations in India, Ladakh, Sri Lanka, Sikkim, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Hong Kong, Macau, Korea, Tokyo, Osaka, the Philippines, and other countries and regions.<sup>14</sup> There are dozens of FGS branches in Asia, located in Japan, Korea, the Philippines, Malaysia, New Zealand, Indonesia, Thailand, India, and many other countries. Most of these countries have a prevalent Buddhist faith or some social influence; in addition, many have huge Chinese populations, many of whom are devout Buddhists. In Southeast Asia, FGS first entered Malaysia, where a large Chinese population and Buddhism are generally popular in the Chinese community.<sup>15</sup>

In 1963, Hsing Yun visited Malaysia as a member of a delegation from Southeast Asian countries. Since the 1980s, Hsing Yun has visited Malaysia almost every year, and his itinerary mainly consisted of lectures, presiding over pujas, three conversions, five precepts pujas, etc. In 1987, at the “North-South Masters’ Reunion” lecture organized by

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<sup>13</sup> Nan Gao, “The Social Functions of Humanistic Buddhism - An Example of the Buddha’s Light Mountain Mission in Taiwan,” *Humanity*, no. 26 (2016): 38–38.

<sup>14</sup> Yang Liao, “The Philosophy and Practice of Humanistic Buddhism-A Sociological Analysis of Humanistic Buddhism in Fo Guang Shan,” *Essays in the Sociology of Human Buddhism*, no. 1 (2018): 302–318

<sup>15</sup> Yi Wang, *A Preliminary Study on the Religious Beliefs of the “Four-Faced Buddha” in Thailand and Taiwan*, Vol. 1 (Beijing: Social Science Literature Publishing, 2015).

the Malaysian Buddhist Youth Federation, Hsing Yun represented the Northern and Southern Buddhist Dharma Society to discuss the teachings together. In the same year, at the invitation of the President of the Malaysian Buddhist Association, Elder Kim Ming, and the Buddhist community of Singapore, Hsing Yun led a 20-member delegation to Malaysia and Singapore to teach the Dharma. In 1989, Hsing Yun presided over the groundbreaking ceremony of the South China Temple (now the Tung Chan Temple in Lamjung, Selangor), which was the first time in the 20 years since the establishment of the Malaysian Buddhist Association that a formal letter was sent to invite foreign masters to come and teach the Dharma. Since then, Malaysia has had a local Buddhist monastery.<sup>16</sup>

From the early 2000s, Hsing Yun turned his attention to Southeast Asia and his visits there became more frequent. In 2002, he went on a month-long charity tour to Laos, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Thailand to promote Buddhism and further facilitate exchanges between Buddhism in the North and South. In 2004, Hsing Yun officiated at the opening ceremony of the 2004 Asia International Buddhist Association Fellowship in the Mouri Temple, Japan, and revealed the future development of the Buddhist cause. In 2006, Hsing Yun was invited to Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh, India, to officiate at the Three Jewels conversion ceremony for 200,000 people. In 2008, Hsing Yun went to Indonesia, Singapore, and Malaysia for a 12-day Dharma tour, officiating at the Three Conversions and Five Precepts, the Bodhisattva enlightenment ceremony, and the Singapore Buddha Mountain opening ceremony, as well as talking with the faithful. In 2009, he went to New Malaysia and Thailand. At the same time, he also went to Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand again for a 10-day Dharma tour, where he presided over the reading of “Ten Thousand Visions of Humanity,” the “Three Conversions and Five Precepts Ceremony,” and the “Fourth and Fifth Council Meetings of the World General Assembly of the Buddha’s Light Association”; at the same time, he delivered a lecture on “How to Obtain the True Meaning of Buddhism in the World”. The same year,

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<sup>16</sup> Kun-hong Hou, “Buddhism and Politics in the 1930s: Venerable Tai Xu and Chiang Kai-shek,” *Journal of Sichuan Normal University: Social Science Edition*, no. 33 (2006): 7–5.

he went to the Philippines for a five-day Dharma promotion tour and presided over the “Three Conversions and Five Precepts Puja.”<sup>17</sup>

FGS and Hsing Yun also place great importance on exchanges with different denominations to promote understanding and trust within Buddhism and among different sects.<sup>18</sup> In February 1994, FGS signed a bilateral agreement with the Dharma Sangha in Bangkok, Thailand, which includes an exchange of publications, protection of human rights and religious freedom, preservation of Buddhist traditions, and promotion of cultural and educational collaborations between Buddhist groups. In 1998, Hsing Yun traveled to Malaysia and met with Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, where they engaged in dialogue and exchange on Buddhism and Islam.<sup>19</sup>

In 2003, at the invitation of the Korean religious community, Hsing Yun visited Korea and met with representatives of Songgwang Temple, Haein Temple, Tongdu Temple, and the Choe Gye Sect, and held a “Cultural Exchange Alliance Ceremony” at Haein Temple. In 2004, Hsing Yun met with Elder Dharmadatta, head of the Southern Mission in Malaysia and Singapore, and Venerable Keung Thima, President of Shakyamuni Bhikkhu University. In 2005, Hsing Yun met with a delegation of the Board of Trustees of the Dongguk University of Buddhism in Korea.<sup>20</sup>

In response to the invitation of Global Vision Vietnam, Hsing Yun visited the thousand-year-old Zhen Guo Temple in Hanoi, Vietnam, in October 2011. He met Phu Huy, the third Dharma Master of the Buddhist Association of Vietnam, to exchange views on the current situation of Buddhism in Vietnam and the future development of Buddhism. In 2008, Hsing Yun met with Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi at the Malaysian Prime Minister’s residence to discuss

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<sup>17</sup> Feng Han, “The Role of Buddhism in the Socio-Economic Development of Thailand,” *Asia-Pacific Studies*, no. 1 (1994): 72–76.

<sup>18</sup> Leilei Zhang, “The Development of Monastic Economy and the Concept of Humanistic Buddhism - A Study of Buddha’s Light Mountain as an Example,” *Journal of Guangdong Technical Teachers College*, no. 6 (2014): 92–98.

<sup>19</sup> Qun Zheng, “Thailand: The Fusion of Modernity and Tradition,” *Creation*, no. 2 (2004): 3–16.

<sup>20</sup> Weimin Liao, “Ci Xiang Xifang: An Exploration of Master Hsing Yun’s Communication Style in the Perspective of Charity Culture,” *Film Review*, no. 11 (2014): 4–25.

topics related to inter-ethnic harmony. In 2008, Hsing Yun met with Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi at the latter's office to discuss issues related to ethnic harmony and social development. On the ground, FGS has always attached importance to political connections and often built closer relationships with the different levels of government in its hosting countries.<sup>21</sup> For example, In Malaysia, the head of state visits Dongchen Temple on important Chinese holidays such as the Lunar New Year. On 28 December 2011, the Malaysian Ministry of National Social and Family Development invited FGS to Malaysia to discuss the content of youth education activities to reduce family and social problems caused by youth and to promote social harmony. Choo Seng, President of FGS Johor Bahru Branch, and representatives from the Board of Directors of the branch suggested to the government to practice the "three good things" (speak good words, do good deeds, and keep a good heart) and to advocate and jointly promote the "Seven Precepts of the Purification of the Human Heart Movement," which are to quit smoking and drugs, pornography, violence, theft, and gambling. It is hoped that the participants can purify their hearts and minds and rectify social morals through young leadership training camps, Buddhist youth camps, and the Seven Commandments Movement. Mr. Sulaini, the official representative of Malaysia, expressed his appreciation for the choice of Dongzen Temple as the main venue for the activities of FGS Malaysia, which promotes the participation of youth from different towns in various activities beneficial to the mind and body. In 2005, when a disastrous tsunami struck Southeast Asia, FGS cared for the children who lost their parents due to the disaster and launched a relief campaign with the participation of more than 5,000 monks and devotees. In 2008, when tropical cyclone Nal Gis hit Myanmar, Hsing Yun instructed the Bangkok Cultural and Educational Center in Thailand and the local Buddha's Light Association to mobilize their members for disaster relief work.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Jin-Cheng Shen, and Jin-Yan Xie, "A Study of the Relationship between Religious Tourism Attractiveness, Satisfaction, and Loyalty: A Case Study of Kaohsiung Fo Guang Shan," *Tourism Management Research*, no. 1 (2003): 79–95.

<sup>22</sup> Duo Jue, "Report on the Study Tour of the Literary and Educational Business of Fo Guang Shan," *Buddhist Studies*, no. 1 (2008): 366–373.

The Dharma-related and social activities of FGS, especially Hsing Yun, have received high recognition in Asia. In 1995, Hsing Yun was awarded the “Buddha Treasure Award” by the Indian Buddhist Congress. In 2000, Hsing Yun received the “Best Contribution to Buddhism Award” from the Thai government. In 2003, Hsing Yun received an honorary doctorate in “Educational Management” from the Mahabharat Chulalongkorn Buddhist University in Thailand. In 2004, Hsing Yun received an honorary doctorate in philosophy from Dongguk University in Korea and a doctorate in religion from Dhammapada Magud Buddhist University in Thailand. In the same year, representatives of the Dhammapada Sangha under the monk king of Thailand jointly cast 19 giant gold Buddhas, which were presented to 19 Buddhist countries and regions worldwide for worship. In 2006, at the age of 80, Hsing Yun received a birthday gift of “80,000 people copying the Heart Sutra” from the Malaysian Buddhist community. In August 2010, Hsing Yun was chosen by the Malaysian newspaper *Sing Tao* with the highest number of votes as the “2010 Most Popular Foreign Writer” and received an honorary doctorate in literature from Geumgang University in Korea.<sup>23</sup>

### Research Problem

As an active advocate of humanistic Buddhism, Hsing Yun dedicatedly expands this new form of Buddhism out of Taiwan by setting up branches of FGS in different continents. For the Theravada Buddhist countries such as Thailand, he and his followers, both monastic and lay, promoted the inter-tradition harmony of Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism (or Buddhism spread northward *en route* to central Asia and southward *en maritime route*).<sup>24</sup> To attract the following from the local Chinese immigrants, Hsing Yun and his dispatches to Thailand named their second Buddhist sanctuary Taihua si, literally the temple of Thai and Chinese, perhaps also for ethnical cohesion. Since the establi-

<sup>23</sup> Jinqiang Su, “Master Hsing Yun’s Human Buddhism,” *Taiwan Voice*, no. 21 (2018): 1–11.

<sup>24</sup> Gongren Zheng and Li Bin, “Ten Contributions of Master Hsing Yun to Buddhism,” *World Religious Culture*, no. 5 (2015): 11–16.



shment of the Buddha Light Cultural and Educational Center in 1994, FGS has become one of the most influential foreign Buddhist institutions active in Thailand. Its following is growing, and its influence extends beyond the local Chinese community to reach Thais. According to inside information provided by an anonymous person, the number of FGS followers in Thailand now exceeds 250,000.<sup>25</sup> FGS's expansion in Thailand directly or indirectly poses challenges, especially to the local-grown Chinese Buddhist school, Jin Nikaya, given they both share the common religious market, Thai-Chinese communities.<sup>26</sup>

The scholarship on FGS's internationalization movement has as yet paid almost no attention to its expansion in Thailand.<sup>27</sup> Dr. Yaoping L.I.U., the Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation Professor in Buddhist Studies, who has been based in Thailand for many years, has observed the growing influence of FGS and other Taiwanese Buddhist institutions.<sup>28</sup> He has noted the competition between FGS and Jin Nikāya in the local religious market.<sup>29</sup> But neither he nor others have gone into any profound studies of how FGS had accessed the religious market in Thailand with such great success and in a such short period. None of the existing literature has addressed the strengths FGS bears for its past success in the local religious market and the weakness of its future existence in Thailand.

### Research Objectives

To solve the problems motioned above, this paper constructs a SWOT matrix to mainly analyze the strengths and weaknesses FGS bears for its expansion in the religious market of Thailand. In addition, the paper also aims to explore the potential opportunities for FGS's

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<sup>25</sup> Hujiang Li, "The Way of Management of Contemporary Buddhist Organizations - An Example of the Buddha's Light Mountain Order and the Dharma Body Temple Order," *Journal of Qinghai University for Nationalities: social science*, no. 42 (2016): 9-32.

<sup>26</sup> Liu, "The History of Jin Nikāya in Thailand," 123-124.

<sup>27</sup> Tianhong Kuo and Jia Wang, "The Positive Role of Buddhism for Social Charity in Taiwan - Focusing on Fo Guang Shan and Tzu Chi," *Heilongjiang Ethnic Series*, no. 3 (2012): 187-192.

<sup>28</sup> Liu, "The History of Jin Nikāya in Thailand," 123-124.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

further growth in Thailand and certain threats it might face in the near or long future.

## Research Scope

The present research is limited to the two Buddhist sanctuaries FGS built in Bangkok and the religious programs it carried out for the local religious market based on the two sanctuaries.

### 1. The Buddha's Light Mountain Cultural and Education Center in Bangkok.

To promote exchanges between China and Thailand, FGS established the Bangkok Cultural and Education Center in the commercial area of Thailand in 1994, with the capacity to host 800 people for religious gatherings. In 2020, Venerable Nyin Guan, the abbess of this center, led a record 600 people to take the three precepts. Furthermore, according to an anonymous monk, the Buddha's Light Society's vegetarian meditation, short-term retreats, Buddha City pilgrimage, as well as Chinese arts programs such as cooking classes, hand-copying of scriptures, Great Compassion Confessions Ritual, and so on, especially the lively teaching style of the Sutra Hall, are currently attracting many men and intellectuals and are a future force for the promotion of Buddhism in the world.<sup>30</sup>

### 2. Taihua si

*Taihua si* was built under the auspices of Hsing Yun, the founding master of FGS in Taiwan, and supervised by Hsing Yun, the former abbot of FGS in Taiwan. The overall shape of *Taihua si* is that of a Chinese Buddhist temple. Adhering to the philosophy of "Respect and Inclusion" and the spirit of "The Four Elements" of the Founding master of FGS, *Taihua si* is dedicated to promoting humanistic Buddhism in the region. Through the intermediary of the Vice Governor of Bangkok,

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<sup>30</sup> Li, "The Way of Management of Contemporary Buddhist Organizations," 9.

the Tourism Authority of Thailand has listed *Taihua si* as a recommended tourist attraction in Bangkok.<sup>31</sup>

## Literature Review

### Religious market in Thailand

Buddhism has been long and deeply integrated with Thai society and life. People cannot live, grow old, die, receive education and medical care, get married, put beams on their new houses, or travel to work without a temple and monks.<sup>32</sup> Besides the family, the temple is the most important basic unit in village life in Thailand. Every village or cottage has a temple.<sup>33</sup> The cultural and spiritual life of Thai people revolves around Buddhist temples. Monks play an essential role in the social reality of people's lives. Thais have a traditional "accumulation of merit" model of faith. They believe that special powers on the part of monks, through wealth donations or religious practices, are transferred to the lives of the faithful, ultimately transforming their suffering in the world.<sup>34</sup>

The basic presupposition of Stark and Fink's economics of religion or religious market theory is that, like the material economy, there is a similar exchange of supply and demand in faith that constitutes a religious economy or market. Definition: "the religious economy includes all religious activity in a society, including the 'market' of present and potential believers, one or more organizations that attempt to attract or maintain believers, and the religious culture offered by these organizations." Stark and Fink argue that religious demand in any society is fairly stable and that all religious economies include a relatively stable set of market demand niches that are potential market segments for believers with specific religious preferences (needs, interests, and expectations).

<sup>31</sup> Li, "The 'Blue Ocean Strategy,'" 5.

<sup>32</sup> Li-Liang Chen, "The History and Overview of Buddhism in Thailand," *Dharma Yin*, no. 12 (2018): 1–12.

<sup>33</sup> Yan Gao, "Experiencing Thai Buddhist Culture," *Qiaoyuan*, no. 9 (2017): 2–18.

<sup>34</sup> Li-Ping Fan, "Buddhism in Thailand and Thailand's Industrialization," *Journal of Guangxi Normal University: philosophical and social science*, no. 4(1995): 5–33.

Thus, Stark et al.'s theory is also known as the supply theory or supply-side explanation.<sup>35</sup>

Because of the popular demand for faith, monks in Thailand have had to assume the values and ideal goals of the faithful. The monks' religious activities give believers a shared cultural experience and religious psychological satisfaction, giving them a sense of belonging and closeness to the sacred.<sup>36</sup>

### SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats)

A SWOT analysis is a situation analysis based on the internal and external competitive environment and conditions, i.e., the main inner strengths, weaknesses, and external opportunities and threats closely related to the object of study are listed through investigation and arranged in the form of a matrix. Then a series of conclusions are drawn by matching various factors with each other using a system analysis, and the conclusions are usually decision-oriented.<sup>37</sup>

Strengths, which are internal factors of the organization, include a favorable competitive situation, adequate financial resources, good corporate image, technical strength, economies of scale, product quality, market share, cost advantages, advertising, and so on.

Disadvantages, which are also internal factors of the organization, include aging equipment, disorganized management, lack of critical technologies, backward R&D, shortage of funds, poor operation, product backlog, poor competitiveness, and so on.

Opportunities, which are also external factors of the organization, include new products, new markets, new demands, lifting of foreign market barriers, mistakes of competitors, and so on.

Threats external to the organization include new competitors, an increase in substitute products, market tightening, industry policy chan-

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<sup>35</sup> Rodney Stark and Ching-Jin Chang, "The Economics of Religion," *Journal of Shandong University of Finance and Economics*, no. 6 (2011): 20–31.

<sup>36</sup> Zhiyin Yang, "The Regularity Study of Religious Economy - A Systematic Construction of Religious Economics," *Studies in World Religions*, no. 5 (2012): 6–34.

<sup>37</sup> Zhiping Fan and Yonghong Sun, "An Enterprise Knowledge Management Strategy Based on SWOT Analysis," *Nankai Management Review*, no. 5 (2002): 3–23.

ges, economic recession, changes in customer preferences, unexpected events, and so on.

Using this method, a comprehensive, systematic, and accurate study of the scenario in which the subject of the study is located can be conducted so that corresponding development strategies, plans, countermeasures, etc., can be formulated based on the results of the study.

### How to apply the SWOT in the analysis of a religious institution

The positive orientation of religious culture can help promote society's good and orderly development and play a positive role for religious people and believers in promoting economic and social development.<sup>38</sup> The application of SWOT in religious institutions has a certain value and significance for current and future issues of common concern and discussion in academic and religious circles, such as how to modernize religion in response to the needs of the times and society, how to explore and expand the theoretical construction and practice of human religion, how to correctly deal with the relationship between initiation and exodus, transcendence and secularization, and how to grasp the future development of religion in the context of globalization—all have certain value and significance.<sup>39</sup> The questions of how to deal with the relationship between secularism and initiation, transcendence and secularization, and how to grasp the future development direction of religion in the context of globalization are of some value and significance.<sup>40</sup>

### Research Method

This paper focuses on the literature research method, observation method and interview method, field as well as social media visits and informal interviews with the two branches of FGS.

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<sup>38</sup> Li, "Three Features," 13–17.

<sup>39</sup> Gao, "The Social Functions," 38–38.

<sup>40</sup> Tian-Hong Kuo and Jia Wang, "The Positive Role of Buddhism for Social Charity in Taiwan - Focusing on Fo Guang Shan and Tzu Chi," *Heilongjiang Ethnic Series*, no. 3 (2012): 187–192.

Literature research method: Based on extensive references to academic works, papers, and temple memoirs in related fields, theoretical knowledge such as the sociology of religion are applied to analyze and study the marketing strategies of FGS.

Participant observation method: Mainly, we participated in the lives of the monks of FGS to understand their views on the church of FGS and the development of FGS culture in various places.

Informal interviews: Interviews were conducted with residential monks and laypeople, mainly to understand the impact of the various activities carried out on their ordinary lives and to analyze further where improvements are still needed for the smooth spread of the Buddhist movement in Thailand, represented by FGS.<sup>41</sup>

### SWOT Analysis

The SWOT analysis has the advantage of considering the problem comprehensively, thinking systematically, and being able to “diagnose” and “prescribe” the problem.

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<sup>41</sup> Xue-Cheng Yang and Xiao-Hang Zhang, “Application of social network analysis in marketing,” *Contemporary Economic Management*, no. 31 (2009): 5–6.

Strengths	Weaknesses
<p>1) Teachings (doctrinal theory-Humanistic Buddhism) are understandable and acceptable for Thai-Chinese, even Thais, given that it shares many commonalities with the dominant Theravada Buddhism in Thailand.</p> <p>2) The FGS conducts various religious activities and operates sophisticated art programs, such as Meditation, the New Year Festival of Light and Peace, Buddha's Birthday Celebrations, International Book Fairs and the Vegetarian Expo, and so on.</p> <p>3) The FGS is a well-known Buddhist brand within and outside Taiwan, with 3,500 temples built in 173 countries across different continents.</p> <p>4) The FGS has been good at fund-raising through its sophisticated religious and arts in Taiwan and the Chinese communities in its hosting countries.</p>	<p>1) The Chinese immigrants in Thailand have long intermingled with Theravada teachings and practices; it will take more time for FGS's Humanistic Buddhism to gain wider recognition.</p> <p>2) The two branches lack monastic manpower, especially the Thai-speaking monastics, to organize significant religious and philosophical activities for the local Chinese communities who rarely speak Chinese Mandarin, even southern Chinese dialects. Local-born Chinese school.</p> <p>3) To build and maintain the munificent facilities in Thailand is costly and will consequently pressure FGS branches to attract donations and further escalate its competition with the local-born Chinese school.</p>

Opportunities	Threats
<p>Though registered in Thailand as a civil foundation instead of a Buddhist temple, it has purposely built close relationships with the Thai Sangha, especially the powerful Buddhist leaders and the local political figures, for protection. This questionable status presses FGS and its representatives to generate more supportive networks for existing and then expanding.</p>	<p>The local-grown Jin Nikaya has been long questioning FGS's legitimacy to act as a Buddhist temple in Thailand. As one of the four legally-recognized traditions under the Thai Sangha, the former bears unparallel influence within and outside of Thai-Chinese communities, especially among the local-born Chinese due to its long history and deep assimilation into Thai society. The disputes between these two institutions are not top secret despite manifesting in a silent manner at this point. We just hope these two Buddhist institutions will not resort to public fighting in the near future.</p>
<p>Since Thailand is the Southeast Asian country hosting the second largest Chinese population, only after India in this region, it is not difficult for FGS to gain a sizable share of the local religious market.</p>	<p>The main market target of FGS is Chinese immigrants with a certain emotional bond with Chinese culture and religions. However, the almost zero Chinese proficiency, especially of the local-born Chinese, prevents FGS from gaining wider market recognition in Thailand. The problem, as mentioned previously, is that FGS failed to mobilize more monastics who can speak Thai to entertain the participants in its activities. Relying on the local interpreter often ends up with some unexpected problems.</p>



## Conclusion

FGS's international expansion has been successful in the past decades, given the enormous number of its branches across different continents and its strong networks with Chinese Buddhists in different hosting countries. This is commonly agreed upon and even praised by scholars in multiple languages.

However, its expansion in Thailand, a country long dominated by Theravada Buddhism, leads to various challenges, even threats from its local competitors, according to the SWOT analysis above. Moreover, its weakness, such as the lack of Thai-speaking monastic manpower and the legitimacy of existing as a Buddhist temple, are exposed despite the various strengths it bears and opportunities it has created during its decades of struggling for wider market recognition.

The authors hope this paper can inspire new approaches to studying this prominent and influential Buddhist institution, which has been active on the world stage for a long time.

## R e f e r e n c e s

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