

Special Focus:
Buddhists in the Making of
Modern Chinese Societies



Technologies of Salvation: (Re)locating Chinese Buddhism in the Digital Age

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Abstract: The study of the communicative fabric of the social media life of elite clerics sheds light on the role that digital technology plays in the processes of re-articulation of their relationship with practitioners. Examining the spheres of pious self-making and social imaginary that are opened up by Buddhist technoculture, this article suggests that deep-rooted attitudes towards the circulation of knowledge and charisma inform the current recuperation of monastic ideals and the production of digital “dharma treasures” (*fabao* 法宝). These are key to establishing and maintaining local, trans-regional, and international networks of online and offline followers. The hyperspace-biased conversations within and around urban Buddhism represent a development of significance and complexity. Buddhist lives, I argue, are produced and mediated by the ever-expanding incidence of clerical blogging and engagement with the smartphone-based social media platform WeChat (*weixin* 微信).

Keywords: Chinese Buddhism; digital Buddhism; social media.

I am a product of this age. I would not have come into being if not for these times. In truth, the Internet has made me who I am.¹

-- Daoxin, posted on his Weibo blogroll on 7 September, 2011.

Soon, a video depicting a master monk consecrating a mobile phone went viral, and Buddhagrams began to conquer Weibo and WeChat.

-- Chen Qiufan (a.k.a. Stanley Chan)

Chinese Buddhism has come a long way since Deng Xiaoping (鄧小平) introduced radical economic policy changes in 1978 (Goossaert and Palmer, 2011; Ashiwa and Wank, 2009). While the growth of Protestant churches represents one of the most dramatic developments of China’s religious field, the expansion of Buddhism is no less remarkable and deserving of attention (Ashiwa and Wank, 2005; Fisher, 2014; Tarocco, 2015). The lives of clerics have considerably improved amidst sustained efforts to rebuild and expand nunneries, monasteries and other Buddhist institutions (Bianchi, 2001; Borchert, 2010, Ashiwa, 2000). Commenting on the Chinese state’s creation of bureaucratic organizations for the management of religion, Yoshiko Ashiwa and David Wank note that, since the 1990s, the relationship between Buddhism and the “state

1 The original text reads: “我是時代的產物沒有這個時代就沒有我。可以說網絡成就了我”。Posted on 7 September, 2011, <http://weibo.com/shidaoxin> (accessed September 2015).

apparatus has its points of conflict but it is also mutually constitutive” (2006: 356). When he was President of the People’s Republic of China from 1993 to 2003, Jiang Zemin (江泽民) made frequent public appearances in the company of Buddhist clerics.² The family of China’s current leader, Xi Jinping (习近平), enjoys close ties to Buddhism. During his tenure as party secretary of Zhejiang province, Xi facilitated the ambitiously named “World Buddhist Forum” (*shijie fojiao luntan* 世界佛教论坛) that took place in Hangzhou in 2006. A 2012 *Reuters* report describes Xi’s wife, Peng Liyuan (彭丽媛), as a “Buddhist” practitioner (Ji, 2012).³

Scholars have studied the recent Buddhist revival from a variety of perspectives, including the moral dimensions of lay Buddhist practice (Fisher, 2008, 2014), the spread of Tibetan Buddhism among Chinese Buddhists (Yü, 2012), the relationship between Buddhism and the market economy (Yang and Wei, 2005; Yü, 2012) and the role of nuns in the making of modern Chinese Buddhism (Bianchi, 2001; Huang, 2009). This article takes a different approach. In looking at digital Buddhist communities in the Chinese-speaking world, I join Peter van der Veer in his call for “more poetic accounts” of urban life in Asia and the “practical, everyday urban aspirations to “self-cultivation” and “self-presentation” (van der Veer, 2015: 3). The phrase “technologies of salvation” is advanced as a potential cornerstone for contemporary urban Buddhist life. Following John Lardas Modern’s conception of “the ever-evolving habitus of techno-modernity” (2013: 184), this article argues that urbanites who live in post-socialist China and Sinophone Asia’s city-regions—Beijing, the Shanghai-Suzhou-Hangzhou-Ningbo corridor, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Hong Kong, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur and Taipei—use technology and Buddhist digital religious goods for soteriological purposes. In my understanding, technology has historically played an important role in shaping Buddhist cultural and social lives. Thus, I view the object of the present enquiry, namely WeChat and contemporary Buddhist technoculture, in the context of the history of other non-human actants, including artifacts, hermeneutics textual forms, infrastructures, and so on, that have extended human capacities (Carneiro 2015: 53). Technology—notes Francis Lim—“is also *techne*, in the Heideggerian sense—an application of knowledge that connects us inter-subjectively and with the material world [...]” (2009: 2). The study of the communicative fabric of the social media life of Buddhist monks and nuns, I argue, sheds light on the role that digital technology plays in the processes of re-articulation of their relationship with other practitioners. By examining the spheres of pious self-making and social imaginary that are opened up by Buddhist technoculture, this article suggests that deep-rooted attitudes towards the circulation of knowledge and charisma inform the current recuperation of monastic ideals and the production of digital “dharma treasures” (*fabao* 法宝) that are key to establishing and maintaining local, trans-regional, and international networks of online and offline followers.⁴

2 See <http://www.bailinsi.net/index.php/Home/News/index.html> (accessed January 4, 2014).

3 Benjamin Kang Lim and Frank Jack Daniel “Does China’s next leader have a soft spot for Tibet?”, *Reuters*, September 1, 2012. <http://in.reuters.com/article/2012/09/01/china-tibet-xi-jinping-idINDEE88002I20120901> (accessed June 22, 2015).

4 On dharma treasures in later Chinese Buddhism and the “routinization of charisma” see ter Haar (2014).

The hyperspace-biased conversations within and around urban Buddhism represent a development of significance and complexity. Buddhist lives, both lay and monastic, I argue, are produced and mediated by the ever-expanding incidence of streaming, blogging, and assiduous engagement with the smartphone-based social media platform WeChat (*weixin* 微信).



Image 1: Daoxin's Weibo Account



Image 2: Jiqun's Public Account on WeChat

Cyber-Buddhism and Buddhist Technoculture

Thanks to social media, Buddhists can, for the first time, be on very close terms with monks who can efficiently answer their questions, dispel doubts and reinforce religious bonds.

-- Daoxin, personal WeChat micromessage to the author, 12 September, 2015.

Rene Lysloff describes 'technocultures' as "social groups and behaviors characterized by creative strategies of technological adaptation, avoidance, subversion, or resistance" (1997: 207). The use of recording technologies and the making and widespread proliferation of digital Buddhist objects in the form of "electronic scriptures" (*dianzi fojing* 电子佛经) suggests a shift from sharing the rituals within a specific religious community to a more widespread one. Buddhist technoculture is profoundly invested in 'communitas', in sharing, and in the social (Helland, 2000; 2005). As early as 1966, the leader of the global Buddhist organization Tzu Chi Foundation, the charismatic eminent nun Cheng Yen, funded the Bamboo Bank to manage donations to her organization. Today, people can donate money from their cellphones by simply tapping on their screens and selecting the amount they would like to give.⁵ An application is linked to the user's credit card and allows for the donation of large sums. Besides facilitating donations, the application gives access to edifying life stories and a compilation of the aphorisms of the charismatic Buddhist nun (Huang, 2009).

5 See <http://www.tzuchi.us/blog/bamboo-bank/> (accessed September 2015).

Cyber-Buddhism is on the rise. It is a translocal and transnational phenomenon in which members of smaller China-based communities are as active as those of Taiwan-based Buddhist denominations including Dharma Drum Mountain (*fagushan* 法鼓山) and Buddha Light Mountain (*foguangshan* 佛光山).⁶ Another organization, Woodenfish Project (*muyu jihua* 木魚計劃), a transnational lay educational movement founded by the Beijing-based, Taiwan-born and Yale-educated nun Yifa (依法), bridges New York, Beijing and Taiwan.⁷ In China, Buddhist chat rooms and message boards affiliated with local social websites such as Xic Hutong (www.xici.net) have been in use since the early 2000s. Urbanites born in the late 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s still use these even if technology has changed fast: Buddhist blogging took off in 2004, followed in 2005 by the social-networking site with chatting capabilities, Renren. Weibo, the microblogging platform with multimedia capabilities, was launched in 2009. At the time of writing, WeChat is swiftly entering all spheres of personal and religious life.

The Buddhist monastic community has historically been tasked with the mediation, preservation and dissemination of the *buddhadharma* (*fofa* 佛法) and the communal daily recitation and ritual production and distribution of texts are seen as pious and highly meritorious acts.⁸ In medieval China and for many centuries afterwards, Buddhist “bibliolatry” greatly facilitated the discovery of printing technology and the dissemination of texts (Barrett, 2008). For today’s donors, thanks in particular to the Chinese Buddhist Electronic Texts Association, the co-existence of paper and pixel is an established reality.⁹ The Internet-based International Dunhuang Project further illustrates the possibilities of globalized Buddhist technocultures and their attending ethical gestures: the accrual of sharable religious merit connected to the reproduction of Buddhist scriptures has now entered the digital age. Practitioners can participate in the creation of numinous digital objects and bestow their accrued religious merit in “memory of loved ones” and “to the world” (see the image here below).¹⁰ Buddhist soteriology is thus re-created by the mechanics of digital reproduction.

Smartphone apps also play an important role. Cyber-Buddhists use them to access audiovisual materials and hypertexts, to practice on digital altars, and to meditate. Apps allow practitioners to *do* Buddhism as they go about their daily lives. For instance, they can ritually “liberate animals” (*fangsheng* 放生)—a widespread merit-making practice since the Ming period—by sending virtual money for the purchase of animals

6 For Tzu Chi see <http://www.tzuchi.us> (accessed September 2015). For Foguangshan see <https://www.fgs.org.tw/default.aspx> (accessed July 2016).

7 <http://www.woodenfish.org/>; WeChat ID: woodenfishorg 木鱼计划. (Accessed September 2016).

8 There is a vast scholarly literature on this topic. See for example Chen Pi-yen, *Morning and Evening Service: The Practice of Ritual, Music, and Doctrine in the Chinese Buddhist Monastic Community*. University of Chicago, PhD. Dissertation, 1999; Paul Demiéville, “Notes on Buddhist Hymnology in the Far East,” in Balasoorya et al. eds. *Buddhist Studies in Honour of Walpola Rahula*. London: Gordon Fraser, 1980: 44-61.

9 CBETA is at <http://www.cbeta.org/> (accessed 14 September, 2015). Fodian is at <http://www.fodian.net/index1.htm> (accessed 14 September, 2015).

10 The International Dunhuang Project is at <http://idp.bl.uk/forms/sponsorSutraChoice.a4d> (accessed June 2012). Similar examples exist at <http://lrc.bailinsi.net/default.lq> (accessed June 2012); cf. <http://gd.donglin.org/gdfm/> (accessed June 2012). For virtual votive candles see <http://www.093.org.tw/content/servies/servies06.asp> (accessed May 2012).

(Tarocco, 2011; Yang, 2015). According to one of my interlocutors, film-maker Jian Yi (简艺), a cyber-activist within the WeChat-based vegan community and a committed lay Buddhist, apps for religious practice are, alongside cyber-pilgrimage, “part of the daily experience of many” who pursue the Buddhist path to salvation in contemporary urban China. They see these as a “supplement” of other community-based practices and affordances.¹¹ Jian, a follower of the Dharma Master Jiqun (济群), whose digital life I will discuss below, thinks that lines are often being blurred as to what use eminent monks decide to make of personal, one-on-one communication on WeChat. In my experience, the voice messaging service (“voicechats” *yuyin* 语音) is consistently used to have remote conversations with charismatic dharma masters. In one memorable instance I have witnessed, by no means an isolated case, M, an influential practitioner and famous writer, made meticulous arrangements for her sister’s memorial service by voice-messaging her dharma master over dinner in a Shanghai restaurant.¹²

Within Chinese cyber-Buddhism, religion and technology do not exist as two ontologically distinct spheres of knowledge and experience. On the contrary, modern media technologies and Buddhist technologies of salvation inform each other in the realization of religious presence. In the future, reasons Daniel Veidlinger, “there is little doubt that Buddhism’s digital presence will expand even more as these technologies pervade every corner of our lives” (2015, 9). Smaller screens, the computer monitor, the Internet window and, above all, the smartphone display screen have created public spaces of a novel kind many Buddhists are keen to inhabit.

These transformations are happening in the larger context of the post-Mao Chinese developmental state, a state for which the growth of information and communication technologies and the informatization of political economy and social life have become of the highest strategic importance (Feigenbaum, 2003). High-tech expansion buttresses the dominant political hold of the CCP and its project of modernity. “The cyberspace of Chinese Buddhist netizenship”—notes Yü—is only a part of the larger electronic infrastructure of China’s market economy (2012: 111). Both Yü (2012) and Fisher (2014) point to the many entanglements between the pervasive materialism of today’s China, the social dislocations caused by neoliberalism and the moral yearnings and ethical aspirations of Chinese urbanites. Such yearnings and aspirations are reflected in the world of Buddhist-inspired social media that, at least for the time being, has opened up spaces and opportunities of self-making and granted unprecedented access to religious knowledge and monastic networks.

In addition to having the world’s biggest Internet user base, approximately seven hundred million people, China also possesses the world’s most active and faster growing environment for social media. Most people use their smartphones to access the Internet

¹¹ Jian Yi, personal communication, 21 September 2015, available in the author’s personal archive.

¹² Shanghai, 22 October 2014. My informant, M is a famous writer in her 40s, a vegetarian and a devout practitioner. For a recent study of charisma in the context of contemporary Sinophone Buddhism see Ji Zhe (2008).

and they access it directly through WeChat (Wu and Wen, 2014).¹³ Thanks to the diffusion and affordability of smartphones, urbanites in large Sinophone city-regions (Che and Yang, 2014) take access to social media and the Internet very much for granted.¹⁴ First launched in 2011, the mobile instant text and voice-messaging platform WeChat contains a vast amount of Buddhist-inspired content. My Buddhist interlocutors invite me to stay in touch by “scanning a QR code” (*sao weixin erweima* 掃微信二維碼) whereby one can not only send personal messages, chat and make phone calls, but also access the new contact’s “circle of friends” (*pengyou quan* 朋友圈) and check out their “moments” feed. Thus, a continuous and seamless visual and verbal commentary is generated for all members of one’s network to bear witness to and participate in. Importantly, images, videos, and links can also be re-posted and shared in a potentially endless loop. Interaction is always encouraged: there is a like button and a comment box.¹⁵ Monks consciously style their feed to creatively disseminate Buddhist knowledge and ideas. The natural world features prominently. “Nature, Pure Nature!” (*ziran chun ziran* 自然, 纯天然!)—wrote in 2015 the monk Changfa (常法), proctor at Hangzhou’s large Lingyingsi (灵隱寺). The caption accompanied a skillfully composed photograph of a beautiful river bend. Taken with his smartphone, it framed a spot devoid of buildings and human activities, a rare occurrence in this part of China. This kind of image, Changfa later told me, is aimed at encouraging laypeople to immerse themselves in the practice of Buddhism (*xiuxing* 修行).¹⁶

While smartphones and other personal technologies present clear socially isolating features, their communicative affordances can keep people connected and help them cultivate personal bonds. The possibility of using social media to engage with different audiences simultaneously can be a powerful tool for individual clerics and religious organizations (Baffelli, 2013). “Social media plays an important role in the promotion and revival of Chinese Buddhism,” the nun D. tells me in one of our many WeChat conversations. She enthuses about her dharma master’s creation of hypermedia “dharma treasures” (*fabao* 法宝), beautifully packaged and produced “DVD discs” and “MP3 players made in the shape of a wooden fish (*muyu* 木鱼)” (See image 4). These contain teachings and dharma lectures that are “loved and worshiped by all.”¹⁷ D. lives in a

13 A McKinsey survey on Chinese consumers, China’s social-media boom (available on the McKinsey Greater China Web site, mckinseychina.com), also finds that 91 percent of Internet users in Tier 1 to Tier 3 cities use social media. Tier 1 cities include Beijing, Guangzhou, Shanghai, and Shenzhen. Tier 2 comprises about 40 cities, Tier 3 about 170. The tiers are defined by urban population and by economic factors, such as GDP and GDP per capita.

14 According to China Internet Watch, the population of smartphone users will increase from 38.3% to 51.1% in China, between 2014 and 2018. Digitimes Research estimated that sales were increasing 16.2% sequentially with local sales estimated to be more than 100 million units by the end of 2014. <http://www.chinainternetwatch.com/11769/china-smartphone-users-to-be-574-2-mln-2015/> (accessed June 12, 2015); <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-06-09/life-in-the-people-s-republic-of-wechat> (accessed July 2016).

15 Starting in 1999, I have conducted extensive periods of research in Shanghai, Hangzhou, Ningbo, Nanjing, and Putuoshan (普陀山). I also make regular visits and am connected in cyberspace with communities in Taipei, Bangkok, New York, Beijing and Hong Kong.

16 Personal communication, 12 September 2015. Changfa’s WeChat Moments are available in the author’s personal archive.

17 Personal communication on WeChat, 30 June 2016. All messages are available in the author’s personal archive.

temple in Ningbo, an exceptionally active center of digital production and dissemination whose clerics and lay practitioners are often highly skilled programmers and videographers. The young nun attends conferences and similar events in China together with her Master (*shifu* 師父) in order to disseminate the temple's digital religious goods. Like many other disciples of Chuanxi I have talked to, D. first encountered her master in a video posted online. Later on, watching DVDs of his dharma talks led to conversion. In her own life, technology and salvation are tightly interwoven.¹⁸



*Image 3: Portable DVD player from a temple in Ningbo.
Photo: Francesca Tarocco.*

The digital turn of the past fifteen years, argue Zhang and Zito, has stimulated the rise of “digital subjects.” This term, they emphasize, “works on two registers, inside and outside the DV media itself. On the one hand, we have the multitude of subject matter and subjectivities given expression in DV works that often escape the purview of mainstream cinema and state television. On the other hand, there are the creative agents-as-subjects, including filmmakers, critics, curators, and audiences who have formed a loosely connected network on and off line to make, exchange, and consume those objects” (Zhang and Zito 2014: 7). While following in the steps of earlier practices, today’s makers supplement the established aural element with an elaborate visual dimension. Lotus flowers, gilded statues, smoldering incense braziers and other elements of Buddhist iconography commingle in a carousel of basic cinematic effects—fades, split screens and page-turners: everyday visual and aural pleasures inhabit

¹⁸ D., personal communication on WeChat, 16 June 2016. For Huiji Temple see <http://www.chuanxi.com.cn/>. The site also offers access to the temple’s app and WeChat social media platform through a QR code. A collection of the temple’s DVDs is available in the author’s personal archives.

the fast-growing world of cyber-Buddhism. Practitioners hint at the fact that similar mechanisms of efficacy can be applied to mass-produced digital objects as those of earlier types of Buddhist materialities (Tarocco, 2011; 2013; Baffelli, Reader and Staemmler, 2010). All the instances in which machines capture moments of religious affect, of auratic moments that can then be endlessly reproduced, demand to be taken seriously: “what separates histories of religion—asks Modern—from histories of a secular haunted by the effects of mechanical reproduction (2013: 87)?” Some of the videos produced and disseminated within the WeChat network of D.’s community use fragments of the daily lives of clerics and laypeople to illustrate or comment on Buddhist doctrines of karma, rebirth, and compassion. For instance, a small bird is ingeniously freed from a trap using a contraption invented by a young monk and other aquatic animals are bought and freed by laypeople and monks. Cumulatively, the short videos create an atmosphere conducive to religious development, soliciting the viewer to practice Buddhism and increase her engagement with temples and monastics. Paola Voci’s *Smaller Screen Realities* astute analysis of “cell phone movies, music videos, short animations, online amateur documentary” (2010, 3) argues that, collectively, smaller-screen realities have contributed to change the media environment of China through their “genre-defying, category-resistant, media-crossing experience” (2010: 4). Within cyber-Buddhism, practitioners enjoy and share their visions in “spaces” that are still relatively unrestrained.

Buddhist Charismatic Lives in Cyberspace

Without the Internet, I would still be an ordinary monk living in a monastery.¹⁹

-- Daoxin, posted on his eponymous Weibo blogroll, 7 September, 2011

Cultivate yourself both internally and externally; hold the writing brush and practice calligraphy. In fact, this is to cultivate the mind.

-- Daoxin, posted on his Weibo blogroll, 17 January, 2013.²⁰

Paraphrasing Daoxin’s insight on the role of the Internet in the context of his own monastic life, I argue that new media technologies expand ordinary ‘buddhascapes’ beyond their original spatial and temporal occurrences. To use the language of a WeChat-based Buddhist community, this is the world of ‘online bodhisattvas’ (*pusa zai xian* 菩薩在線).

Charisma and aura, of persons and things, have found their way into mass-produced digital devices and into hyperspace. Natasha Heller argues that the ubiquitous Buddha-recitation device (*nianfo ji* 念佛機), a portable radio-like object that uses digital sound files to chant the name of the Buddha, is regarded by practitioners as religiously efficacious. “As to their mechanical nature, the aura of Pure Land sound has always been produced in the space of belief, and the Buddha-recitation device requires little more than belief—attested and reinforced through miracle tales—to replicate it” (Heller, 2014). Religion, media, technology and the “things in between” are far from being in an

¹⁹ The original text reads: 沒有網絡的活我現在只是一個寺廟中的普通的和尚。

²⁰ The first text reads: 佛教徒可以用現代社會媒體第一時間近距離的親近法師們。更有效率的答疑解惑。增加了彼此之間的宗教感情; the second one reads: 內外兼修, 提筆練字, 其實是修心。

antagonistic relationship. Jeremy Stolow (2013: 6) contends that “the very supposition that religion and technology exist as two ontologically distinct arenas of experience, knowledge and action” needs to be revised and revisited (see also Stolow, 2005; Zito, 2007). What seems to be at stake is rather “how modern media technologies and religious techniques of the body interpenetrate and inform each other in the materialization of religious presence” (De Witte 2013: 66).



Image 4: Elegantly designed nianfoji from a temple in Ningbo. Photo: Francesca Tarocco.

From his monastic base in Jiujiang (九江) in southern China, Daoxin (道心, b. 1982), whose self-description as a “product of the Internet age” appears at the beginning of this article, is an outspoken proponent of cyber-Buddhism. He is a proficient and regular user of social media platforms, including WeChat and Weibo (微博). For as long as he was able to, before it was blocked in China in 2014, Daoxin also experimented with an Instagram account under the alias SHIDAOXIN, which he still uses when traveling abroad. This Instagram photo-diary bears evidence of the monk’s sheer enjoyment of technology and self-presentation; the viewer can scroll through dozen of Daoxin’s “selfies” taken with the ubiquitous iPhone, which is often in the frame, reflected in a mirror. All the photos posted are highly stylized. Daoxin appears in most, occasionally striking poses, at other times looking straight at the camera. He wears different types of fine-looking monastic attire, displaying a great attention to detail, color and appearance. Besides the monk’s *self*, the visual diary documents his religious *practice*,

from his journeys to monasteries in Tibetan areas to his vegetarian meals. In this he is not alone; several other Chinese monks have taken to Instagram to document their personal and religious journeys and travels across Buddhist Asia.²¹



周一请吃素。
素食不仅是潮流，更是健康。
素食不仅是饮食，更是文化。
素食不仅是说说，更是坚持。
释道心，如是说。



Image 5: Daoxin's Wechat Moment: On Monday Eat Vegetarian Food

Daoxin's Buddhist blogging life has been equally dynamic. With more than one hundred and ninety thousand followers by June 2012, his online proselytizing and self-cultivation practices seem to resonate with the educated urban youth looking for a Buddhist-inspired lifestyle. His wry and humorous texts and captivating images feel current and relevant to readers.²² His commentaries offer them a very vivid glimpse of the monk's psychic life. The following are some excerpts from a text posted on Weibo in 2011.

I am a youth born in the 80s, and I am interested in new things. Now I am an expert of all sorts of things, including 3G, the Internet, the dissemination of Buddhist teachings...in a word, I am just fashionable (*chao* 潮)!! ...Ordinary folks understand the world in a superficial way. Can monks be fashionable? Can we venture into the entertainment industry? The answer is: "Everything is possible." Monks also have dreams as they wander through this earthly life. What I hope to accomplish by employing the Internet as a modern tool of communication is to show the society a different idea, calling forth more youths to think about their

21 An equally prolific user of Instagram as a visual diary and archive of his spiritual journey is the young monk Yao Lin, whose alias is Ven_Yao_Lin.

22 See http://weibo.com/shidaoxin#_loginLayer_1444116458910 (accessed September 2013). Zhou Tao, Shanghai, 22 September 2013; W. personal communication, 25 October 2013. Alvin Li, Shanghai, 13 September, 2015.

own lives. I am not simply advocating Buddhism. As a monk, I bravely stand in front of the public. I love being a monk as a profession with all my heart. It is precisely because of my deep respect for this profession, that I give voice to it.” ... “I want to introduce the Buddhist community to the positive and fashionable mainstream culture.” We are not living in the past; deeply buried gold no longer shines. We must learn how to suitably promote and package ourselves (*yao hui yi chuan he baozhuang ziji* 要会宣传和包装自己). The Buddha is not some noble untouchable being hiding in a monastery deep in the mountains: I hope to introduce Buddhist wisdom to more people. I am not publicizing what interests me personally for my own pleasure; I am setting out to change society (*wo yao gaibian shihui* 我要改变社会).²³

In our WeChat conversations, Daoxin explains that social media are a wonderful tool for clerics in that they can be used to cultivate an intimate bond with other Buddhists (*zongjiao ganqing* 宗教感情), and a sense of religious fellowship. He writes that younger monks who have graduated from China’s Buddhist Institutes (*xueyuan pai de fashimen* 學院派的法師們) are very active on the Internet and social media groups. WeChat encourages the creation of private groups of users who can exchange messages, videos and voice messages with multiple people at the same time. In these cyber-communities, lay Buddhists can be saved from the ‘red dust’ (*hongchen* 紅塵), the human world of the suffering un-enlightened mortals.²⁴

Older monks also engage with cyber-Buddhism. Some of them use WeChat to communicate with their communities of followers while others, perhaps unsurprisingly, use it as diary of sorts—an archive—to record and display their self-cultivation practices.²⁵ Korean clerics, notes Joonseong Lee, engage in a process of de- and re-territorializing intensities of the self during which spirituality is practiced and the self is cultivated. “This territorializing process creates temporary unities that include strong and positive dynamics by which the priests attempt to achieve their religious ideal” (2009: 113). Chinese monks and nuns want to record a spiritual journey and their self-cultivation practices (*xiuxing* 修行) in order to *share them* within translocal digital social networks. In doing so, a conversation takes place, one that clerics control.

23 我也是个80后的年轻人，喜欢新鲜事物。我现在是各种达人，3G达人、网络达人、佛学传播达人，一个字描述我就是——潮！！

一般人对于周围的世界理解是肤浅的，和尚到底可不可以时尚？和尚到底可不可以进入娱乐圈？和尚能不能出唱片？答案是，一切皆有可能。

和尚也做梦，梦游人间路。我做的只是以网络这种现代传播方式，希望给社会带来一种不一样的思想，引起更多的青年人思考自己的人生。我不是单纯的宣扬佛教。

作为和尚，我勇敢站出来，我十分热爱和尚这个行业。因为我爱这个行业这么深，我才去为它呼喊、发声

我要将和尚这个群体推到主流、乐观、时尚的风口浪尖。

现在不是过去那个时代了，酒香也怕巷子深。要会宣传和包装自己，佛也不是躲在深山老庙里的高贵、不可接近之物，我希望让更多人接触佛教智慧。我将自己的喜好放大，不是为了自娱自乐，我要改变社会

24 Daoxin, WeChat written communication, Shanghai and Jiujiang, 28 September, 2015.

25 Changfa, personal communication, Hangzhou, 21 June 2015.

The monk Jiqun (济群) and the nun Rurui (如瑞) maintain WeChat public accounts experienced by thousands of followers. In the essay “Examination of lay Buddhism” (*Jushi fojiao tanjiu* 居士佛教探究), published on his personal website, Jiqun defends the primary role of clerics in both offline and online communities.²⁶ According to his disciple Jian Yi, he writes all the texts uploaded on his WeChat public account and is fully in control of his digital persona. “He would not let others write. I feel that he writes from the perspective of an enlightened mind.”²⁷

“Have you seen those traps?” asks emphatically Jiqun in a WeChat post accompanied by a drawing of many people’s heads looking down a sinister-looking well. Some twenty thousand people clicked on the page to view it minutes after it was posted; several hundred pressed the ‘like’ button or left comments, many more shared the post. Here is the text, which is characteristic of Jiqun’s communicative strategy:

Many see the world as unpredictable, filled with traps (*xianjing* 陷阱) that are easy to fall into in an inattentive moment. The truth is, this world’s traps are tangible; those who have encountered corresponding social and life experiences can discern whether something is a trap or not, and so are not baffled by them. Even those lacking in experience should not be too easily deceived, so long as they attempt to act prudently, and take precautions. The traps that are most difficult to keep away from are precisely the invisible ones that lurk in our own minds. These traps are terrifying, not only because we are incapable of escaping from them, but also because few are able to detect their presence. Even after we fall into one, we keep digging deeper, as if it were the way out.

These traps are the products of negative spiritual channels, which are constantly at work. For instance, one’s hatred of someone may be aroused; if this hatred is not curbed promptly, but instead allowed to play out, one will take in much of the material of which this channel is composed. Indeed, the heart has a peculiar editing function, transforming various materials, whether relevant or irrelevant, into evidence that agitates hatred, dragging us deeper into its quagmire. Sometimes, with some kind of help, we are able to climb out of the trap. However, as long as the trap remains present, we will fall right back into it whenever we think of the person we hate, echoing the Chinese proverb, “anger arises with every thought of it.” If we continue to dig deeper into these spiritual traps, then our lives become cycles in which we perpetually fall from one trap into another, a world of eternal darkness and endless suffering. Therefore, we must carefully examine our inner selves to discover the whereabouts of these traps. Meanwhile, we ought to train our strength in mindfulness and awareness (*peiyang zhengzhi zhengnian de liliang* 培养正知正念的力量) and thoroughly clear

26 See <http://jiqun.com/dispfile.php?id=32> (accessed 10 September, 2015). Jiqun WeChat public account ID is Jiqunfashi 济群法师. Rurui’s WeChat ID is ruruifashi2015 如瑞法师法语.

27 Jian Yi, Shanghai, 25 September 2015.

out the traps, rather than attempting to obscure their surfaces, which only serves to conceal real dangers and pressing crises.²⁸

Jiqun's WeChat public account is also an archive of his public appearances. The monk is shown thinking, gazing, meditating, smiling; his demeanor hinting at inner happiness and strength (see image 2). "Who is the freest person in the world?", he asks in 2015, "the answer is: the Buddha. He fully liberated himself through complete renunciation, and the monastic community he leads is a group that pursues freedom." Online encounters with Jiqun, the practitioner is promised, can awaken their *bodhicitta*.²⁹ This is not new, tells me a pious Taiwanese practitioner, the significance of the cognitive subject in realizing the world of matter is a teaching expounded in one of the most important scriptures of the East Asian Buddhist tradition, the *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra* (維摩詰所說經), a text popular in China since the fourth century. The scripture explains that the Pure Land (淨土) of the Buddha's kingdom (佛國) is far from unattainable, it is here and now in this world, in the "land of people and creatures". The bodhisattvas must purify their "minds" (*xin* 心) in order to realize the pure land. This "mind of enlightenment" or "desire of enlightenment", the *bodhicitta* (*putixin* 菩提心), constitutes the much aspired to Buddhist ideal of the bodhisattva's Pure Land (*pusa jingtu* 菩薩淨土).³⁰ Ultimately, Jiqun and his digital dharma followers understand cyber-Buddhism as a contemporary instantiation of "skilfulness in means" (*fangbian* 方便), namely the special ability of enlightened beings to strategically intervene to rescue others from ignorance and the entanglements of karma.

The nun Rurui's (如瑞) posts in her public account often consist of video clips of her dharma talks or of her lectures to lay audiences. Here, images of mountainous landscapes and details of traditional paintings are used to generate a sense of otherworldliness. Over mellifluous piano music, the nun's deep voice, slow and deliberate, discusses the horrors of daily life and their possible Buddhist cure. Her fine regional accent together with the intimate and soothing quality of her beautiful voice contributes to producing

28 The original text, posted on 11 September, 2015, reads: 看见那些陷阱了吗? 许多人都觉得世事难测, 处处陷阱, 稍不留神就落入圈套。其实, 世间陷阱是有形的, 具有相应社会经验或人生阅历便能识别真伪, 不为所惑。即使涉世不深, 只要带着防范之心审慎行事, 也不至轻易受骗。最难防范的恰恰在于我们自身、在于心中各种无形的陷阱。其可怕之处, 不仅在于我们无法逃避, 更在于很少有人能意识到。甚至, 我们在落入陷阱后还会将它越挖越深, 以为这是人生出路所在。陷阱恰是负面 心灵 频道 不断工作的结果。比如对某人生起嗔心: 若这念嗔心不能及时制止, 而是反复播放, 我们就会收集到很多关于这个频道的素材。事实上, 心有着奇特的编辑功能, 能将种种有关乃至无关的素材统统演变为嗔心所需的证据, 使我们在嗔心的泥淖中越陷越深。虽然, 我们有时也会因这样那样的帮助爬出陷阱。但只要陷阱还在, 但凡想起此人, 仍会一头栽下去, 就像俗话说的那样, "想起来就有气"。若是心灵陷阱越挖越多, 那我们的一生, 就会从这个陷阱落入那个陷阱, 永远暗无天日, 永远遭受伤害。所以, 我们要仔细审查内心, 发现陷阱所在。同时, 培养正知正念的力量, 彻底清除陷阱, 而不是简单地在表面掩盖一番, 那样就会埋下更深的隐患, 更重的危机。

29 Apart from WeChat and Weibo, Jiqun's organization has so far produced more than 30 DVDs of the master's lectures and dharma talks. These are available in the author's personal archive.

30 T. personal communication, Taipei 12 December 2014. See also Tarocco (2011; 2013). The text is available online at <http://tripitaka.cbeta.org/T14n0475> (accessed 1 September, 2015). It is fully searchable in the Chinese Buddhist Electronic Texts Association (CBETA) digital version of the edition of the Chinese Buddhist scriptures, the 大正新修大藏經.

a sonic antidote to the cacophony of China's urban life and the macho pomposity of its public standard-Mandarin pronouncements.³¹

In Taiwan, Buddha Light Mountain, one of the largest and wealthiest Buddhist organization of the Chinese Buddhist world, is constantly evolving its presence in cyberspace. Its ever-expanding activities are mediated by applications: QR codes are offered here and there and within the apps themselves, but also on physical objects, allowing users to scan the code with their phone and become deeply enmeshed with Buddha Light's activities. The organization's cybertemples, while closely associated with physical sites in Kaohsiung, inevitably transcend them. One can take virtual tours of the monastic grounds and watch videos that show old photographs and describe the symbolism of the architecture. Attempting to simulate a real-life experience of ascent, the viewers enters the temple from the Mountain Gate (*shanmen* 山門) while listening to the voiceover commentary of the charismatic leader and founder of Buddha Light Mountain, Master Hsing Yun. Geomancer and engineer at once, the monk, in whose name thousands of digital religious goods have been created during the last three decades, extols the role of Buddhism within modern Chinese societies. In a narrative of redemption and overcoming personal and religious disaster, his is a tale of the successful transplantation of mainland Buddhists to Taiwan and the rest of the world, and from backwardness to cyberspace. Here, committed practitioners and occasional visitors alike can delve into the visual pleasures of an imagined past and escape the strictures of their daily lives. Cyberspace enables Buddha Light's clerics to summon, preach and proselytize. The Buddhist journey of conversion can happen without travel. Thus, Cyber-Buddhism offers multiple channels of communication that encourage discursive interaction. It spawns a proliferation of religious knowledge and assists religious lives (Veidlinger, 2015; Murcotte 2010; Chandler 2004).

Ultimately, Buddha Light Mountain, Rurui, Daoxin and Jiqun share very similar attitudes toward the Buddhist monastic ideal and the role of clerics in cyberspace. The view that expansion of modern communication technology means the dissolution of religious authority appears increasingly discredited. On the contrary, urban Chinese Buddhists, alongside other practitioners, have proved to be brilliantly adept at extending their mediated reach in examples ranging from televangelism, to cassette sermons, to Internet blogging, websites and WeChat (Zito, 2008, 2007; Stolow, 2005; Moore, 1994; Tarocco 2007, 2011; Fisher, 2014). Mass-produced goods, from DVDs to MP3s, are seen as material emanations of charisma and artifacts that materialize religious ritual. Religious consumers ritually engage with piously coded digital objects in the burgeoning Buddhist-inspired technoscapes of the Chinese world.

Conclusions: Technologies of Mediation

Is there, asks Angela Zito, "something about mediation itself that resonates with modern ideas of religiosity so that dedication and immersion in media-worlds, online or in front of the TV set, the meticulous attention to their internal semiotic minutiae, can

31 Rurui's Weibo account is <http://weibo.com/u/2203416793>; Jiqun's main website is www.jiqun.com.

come to displace or replace more traditional religious practice, providing the sense of community connection or personal transcendence we have previously associated with religion?” (Zito, 2008; see also Plate 2009; Campbell 2013). The rise of cyber-Buddhism suggests an affirmative answer to this question. As we further theorize media and mediation, we must thoroughly engage with the many modes in which digital media are understood, adopted, and used vis-à-vis earlier Buddhist-inspired practices. “From the point of view of the dialectical mediation of social life”, maintains Zito, “religion” and “media” can be seen to function in surprisingly intimate ways, and to form even more potent forms of social practice when deliberately intertwined. They both involve and mobilize epistemological and cosmological matters of the constitution of the real” (Zito 2008). In the context of cyber-Buddhism, practitioners use various media forms (visual, aural, and haptic) with a modern sensibility. They create new senses of the self and its environs, both social and built. Cyber-Buddhists facilitate exchanges of religious ideas and religious objects, both within the Chinese world and beyond it, and they thereby continuously increase their participation in the flow of information, images, sounds, social ties and commodities. In *Religious Commodifications in Asia: Marketing Gods*, Pattana Kitiarsa and others show that the fetishizing of material things as a means to a spiritual end is not new to capitalism, though it has now taken on new characteristics (2008).

Today’s Buddhists use all manners of pious commodities—portable, wearable and electronic—to “defy discrete conceptions of materiality by constructing piety and efficacy *through* commodification and consumption rather than outside it” (Tarocco 2011: 640). Thus, cyber-Buddhism and Buddhist-inspired technocultures must be understood in the context of a theory that accounts for human sociality more deeply through mediation of all kinds, and which allows us to connect Buddhism’s present lived realities to its own history of sophisticated investment in objectification and mediation. Moreover, practitioners’ religious experiences would not be meaningful outside of a larger narrative of salvation, sense-making, and personhood. In this respect, digital scriptural repositories, for instance, allow them to be only a few clicks away from accessing the vast scriptural tradition of the Chinese Buddhist canon, its unique divine efficacy stored in their smartphones.³² As the miraculous objects live by the practitioner’s own body, digital information is no longer incorporeal and ghostly; cyberspace enables a Buddhist-inspired life of ritual, self-cultivation, vision, and visualization. One can even say that Buddhist media *is* religion, ubiquitously permeating personal, social, and economic life. If life is lived through smartphones and social media, then the “praxis of religious life” cannot happen independently of these media, which encourage the sharing of images and texts as part of a larger religious script. If cyber-Buddhism is resolutely social and works with the dominant mass cultural codes of a common media culture, then the constant flows of Buddhist-inspired “moments”, and the call to lead a “Buddhist life”, provide clerics and lay Buddhists alike with individual narratives and contexts. Buddhist technocultures of the Chinese world are profoundly invested in sharing and the social: within the synesthetic world of cyber-Buddhism,

³² <http://tripitaka.cbeta.org/> (accessed 1 Septemebr, 2015). The CBETA homepage contains a QR code that allows one to download the entirety of the Buddhist Canon via WeChat.

Chinese subjectivities integrate technologies and media innovations in their everyday religious practices.

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