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Charismatic Communications: The Intimate Publics of Chinese Buddhism

Introduction

A Buddhist temple in Zhejiang province, East China, 22 April 2017: “Is there Buddha in your mobile phone (*shoujishang youmeiyou fo* 手機有沒有佛)?” asks abbot Zhanran to his followers. “Yes” – they enthusiastically reply. Surrounded by professional video cameras, the monk is addressing a large congregation from his lavishly decorated rostrum. His voice is deep, a rich baritone. “Thousands of disciples are watching our dharma lecture. Thousands more than last time when we already had more than 400.000 viewers – we are on Facebook Live!” Deying, a nun who recently returned to China after studying in Britain, smiles excitedly as she logs in to the Temple’s public WiFi and Facebook page. She delights in her master’s screen presence as she sits only a few meters away from him.

Zhanran presides over three monasteries and a steadily growing community of dedicated clerics and lay practitioners. Over the years, he built a thriving media production house devoted to the propagation of Buddhism through video and live broadcasts. It is thanks to these screen-based media that he sustains and reinforces his relationship with his followers, in particular, by intensifying their enchantment with the charisma of a Master (*shifu* 師傅) whose numinous power is defined as being gained through ascetic and ritual practices. Similarly to other religious communities of the digital age, Buddhist practitioners approach pious self-making through their everyday reliance on digital media technologies including the multi-purpose social media, messaging and payment app WeChat 微信 and the matrix barcode QR code. Buddhist encounters with digital religion are far from being extraordinary. Rather, they constitute an intrinsic part of their social and devout lives.

In the following pages, I will give attention to the weaving of abbot Zhanran’s religious charisma through the lives of his followers. While I write through the details of some of his performances, this chapter is ultimately about the ways in which new and digital media enable religious charisma’s

Note: I want to gratefully acknowledge the help of several practitioners and offer my special thanks to Nunzia Carbone, Anna Greenspan, Paul Katz, Stefania Travagnin, Angela Zito, and an anonymous reviewer. I have changed all the names of my informants and of some locations.

<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110547849-006>

extension in the everyday sphere of practitioners' pious self-making. I attend to the basic premise that, in the current era of hypermediation and widespread growth of the World Wide Web, WiFi, blogs and virtual communities, these media must be looked at as reinforcing social networks. Stemming from a longer history of technological mediation, the emergence of Buddhist-inspired mass media in the twentieth century – for instance radio in 1930s Shanghai – has furthered the possibilities of intimate involvement with venerated Buddhist clerics (Tarocco 2011; 2017). Religion – notes Angela Zito – like the media and mediation of all sorts, “functions best when no one notices it, when people appropriate it as an always-already present aspect of social life” (2008, 728). In contrast to a belief that religious networks would be easily abandoned in the electronic age, Buddhist social networks may be more widespread and persistent now than at any point in modern history. In this sense, this chapter responds to Jeremy Stolow's call in his *Deus in Machina* to profoundly rethink the very postulation that religion and technology “exist as two ontologically distinct arenas of experience, knowledge and action” (2013, 6).

1 Methodology

Forty years ago, Walter Ong argued that different media afford different religiosities. While religion became embedded in human sociality and social networks in an era of orality, it successively took shape within visual forms of communication and transmission including writing and printing (1967). Crucially, as Roberta Magnusson and others have clearly shown, both in pre-modern Europe and in China, religious institutions were initially in the forefront of innovation in a number of technologies, including woodblock printing, hydraulic technologies and the building industries. One need only to think of cathedrals in the European High and Late Middle Ages and temples in China from the Tang to the Yuan periods (Barrett 2008; Kieschnick 2003; Magnusson 2001). Today, they are at the forefront of innovation around electronic and digital media (Grieve 2013). Since the “turn to religion” in the 1990s (de Vries 1999), critical social theorists have debated the nature and place of religion in modernity and examined religious cultures in light of what was once called the “secularization thesis”. A key assumption here is that the “mere expansion of modern communication technologies is somehow commensurate with a dissolution of religious authority and a fragmentation of its markers of affiliations and identity” (Stolow 2005, 122). This view has been strongly refuted in studies of contemporary Buddhist, Christian and other communities in Africa, Asia, the United States and elsewhere. Religious practitioners reject in practice dichotomies such as religion/media and

technology/charisma (Zito 2007; Clart 2015; Grieve and Veidlinger 2015; Campbell 2013; Stolow 2005; De Witte 2013; Tarocco 2017; Han 2016; Travagnin 2017). In 1995, Lawrence Babb and Susan Wadley edited the volume *Media and the Transformation of Religion in South East Asia*. Babb noted then that one can “visualize” religious traditions as “systems” that retain and transmit information. Encoded in a variety of ways, such information can “be disseminated and propagated in various media including speech, writing, ritual practice, and iconography” (Babb 1995, 1). In what follows, I give attention to the intimate relationship between religion, technology and charisma in contemporary Chinese Buddhism. I ask in what ways does technology provide the conditions for the reception of spiritual gifts and for making the sacred present. While others have examined its vital role in the production of national modernity and the institutions of the state (Ashiwa and Wank 2009), my own analysis primarily tracks the work contemporary Buddhism performs in the everyday sphere of pious self-making (Tarocco 2011; 2017). In witnessing present-day narratives of salvation and redemption, I look at the ongoing renewal of religion in the Chinese world and take up the idea of charisma as a relationship based on the “expectation of the extraordinary” and one that “stimulates and empowers collective behavior” (Palmer 2008, 70).

To analyze the ways in which the followers of abbot Zhanran use technologies and commodities, I draw inspiration from Lauren Berlant’s work on the “intimate public” constituted by “strangers who consume common texts and things” (2008, viii). Berlant examines the geographies and politics of women’s intimacy with a focus on consumerism, commodity, and popular culture in the United States from the 1830s onwards. She probes into a capitalist society with a social life mediated by “capital and organized by all kinds of pleasure (from personal consumption to active community membership)” to explore the relationship between intimacy and publicity and thus rethink the category of individuality in late capitalism (2008, xii). As I envision the shrines my informants assemble in their mobile phones and around the photo-icons of eminent Buddhist clerics, I concur with Zito’s insightful analysis of televised religion: “from the point of view of the mediation of social life, “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” (2003, 728).

2 Soundscapes and Technocultures

René Lysloff describes “technocultures” as social groups and behaviors “characterized by creative strategies of technological adaptation, avoidance, subversion, or resistance” (1997: 207). And, similarly to other communities the world over,

Buddhist practitioners too approach their pious self-making through an everyday reliance on media technologies that include broadcast media, QR codes and digital media. Crucially, Zhanran's followers tell me that they understand their own technoculture as tapping into the power of empathetic responsiveness (*ganying* 感應), a term Robert Sharf translates as “sympathetic resonance” (2002, 82–88). This idea is connected with key Buddhist doctrines. A proper invocation or visualization, notes Sharf, can transform the immediate location of the practitioner: “the world of the Buddhas is none other than this world – a world constructed through the activity of the mind” (2002, 118). Buddhist mindscapes and embodied ritual actions, I argue, play an important role in how practitioners understand and use modern technologies. I concur with Yuk Hui when he suggests that we need to understand the cosmological settings affecting technology lest we remain “overwhelmed by the homogeneous becoming of modern technology”, as “technics is always *cosmotechnics*” (2016, 12 and 19). This is a crucial effort because “the misconception that technics can be considered as some kind of universal remains a huge obstacle to understanding the global technological condition in general, and in particular the challenge it poses to non-European cultures” (Hui 2016, 12). Evidently, making sense of Buddhism has never been the sole province of a disembodied intellect. Buddhist cultures are deeply invested in the senses and in a bodily immanence that involves the whole of the human sensorium (Rambelli 2007; Kieschnick 2003; Kitiarsa 2008; Gifford 2011; Tan 2002; ter Haar 2014, Tarocco 2007). How have ordinary people and religious institutions adjusted to, and negotiated with, the penetrative forces of a global market economy into the religious lives of the information era? How do we begin to attend to a more nuanced and situated agency and autonomy of actors? Crucially, I argue, things are not given meaning only at the point of consumption. Charisma and aura, of persons and things, can find their way into mass-produced artifacts, digital devices and the cyberspace. For the followers of *qigong* masters, healing powers emanate from an object or an action so that one can speak of force-filled audiotapes (*daigong cidai* 帶功磁帶).

Buddhist practitioners believe that the individual and collective recitation of scriptures and their reproduction by other means are key to the preservation and dissemination of Buddhism. The Buddhist liturgical tradition of the Chinese-speaking world is an orally transmitted practice of significant historical and cultural depth. Its vocal delivery include reading (*du* 讀), reciting (*song* 誦), chanting (*yin* 吟) and singing (*chang* 唱). Clerics are trained to use “dharma instruments” (*faqi* 法器) – the drum *gu* (鼓), the small brass bowl suspended on a stick *yingqing* (引磬), the woodblock *muyu* (木魚), the bell *zhong* (鐘), the large brass bowl *qing* (磬), the cymbals *cha* (鑔), and the suspended gong *dangzi* (鐺子). Liturgical manuals have their own musical notation. Standard symbols

denote the correspondence of the strokes on the ritual percussion instruments with the utterances of the words of the texts. The rhythmic framework is not explicit and has to be practiced and learned (Ellingson 1979; Demiéville 1980; Tarocco 2001; Chen 2005). Decades before digital media became widespread, Buddhists were already very invested in the mass-mediated production of Buddhist soundscapes. In the 1930s, Buddhist publics listened to the radio station *Voice of the Buddha* (*Foyin diantai* 佛音電台). This was in all likelihood the very first Buddhist radio station in the world and was launched at a time when song became an effective technology for instructing and enforcing belief, whether in schools, in the military, and in all missionizing efforts. In a break from this tradition, Buddhist clerics created a new repertoire of devotional songs and hymns. Most notable among them was Hongyi 弘一 (1880–1942), who lived and died in odor of sanctity. Deeply interested in music, the monk’s most famous tune, the *Song of the Three Treasures* (*Sanbaoge* 三寶歌) enjoys abiding admiration and popularity (Birnbbaum 2016; Tarocco 2011). In the early 2000s, practitioners in East China told me that the exalted status of its creator, a spiritually advanced practitioner, is absolutely key to its continuing success. Hongyi’s followers experience an intimate encounter with his charisma in a plethora of piously coded mass-produced audiovisual objects, including CDs and DVDs and small-screen-based movies and videos. Diasporic Chinese informants in Surabaya, Java – a wealthy Indonesian-Chinese family – have amassed a sizable collection of DVDs. As they can only afford sporadic access to clerics, they “keep in touch” with them through digital audio-visual materials and access teachings and teachers online.¹ And the celebrated CD series *Fanbai/ Buddhist Liturgical Chant/Hymns to the Three Jewels* was sponsored by a community of Chinese clerics and lay Buddhists and professionally recorded and produced by the French musicologist François Picard. Practitioners gathered for a special Dharma assembly of Buddhist liturgical music (*Fojiao fanbai yinyue fahui* 佛教梵唄音樂法會) to sing Hongyi’s *Song of the Three Treasures* together with other more traditional liturgical materials, in a seamless sonically efficacious continuum.² While more traditional CDs of Buddhist chanting were disseminated transnationally within networks in Taiwan, China, Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, Europe and North America in the 1990s and early 2000s, during the “karaoke craze” practitioners thoroughly enjoyed practicing

¹ Pauline Chang, personal communication, Surabaya and Tretes, Java, July–September 2009.

² The first two CDs in this series are recordings of the morning and evening lessons of the daily liturgy at two different Chinese monasteries. Cf. *Chine: Fanbai Chant Liturgique Bouddhique, Leçon du Soir au Temple de Quanzhou*, recordist F. Picard, Ocora C559080 (1989) with sleeve notes by F. Picard. Cf. Tarocco (1990–2000).

“Karaoke-style singing instructions for Buddhist liturgical chanting” (*Fanbai kala OK jiaochang* 梵呗卡拉 OK 教唱). Similar products are widely available in shops of ritual objects (*fodian* 佛店) and at major pilgrimage sites (Zhou and Tarocco 2008). See Figure 1.



Figure 1: Buddhist practitioners peruse a large selection of DVDs (Photo by the author, 2017).

Buddhist ritual sounds have seamlessly extend their reach into the mundane core of everyday life as religious consumers ritually engage with these piously coded objects in the burgeoning technoscapes of the Chinese Buddhist-inspired world. As attested by its ubiquitous presence in temples and homes, they view the Buddhist recitation and chanting radio-like device *nianfoji* (念佛機)



Figure 2: Electronic Hong Kong made sutra recitation machine *Nianfoji*.

as religiously efficacious regardless of its mechanical nature (see Figure 2). For this to work, Natasha Heller reminds us, one must remember that the aura of Pure Land sound is continuously reinforced through the re-telling of miracle tales (2014). Grass-roots religious providers deploy such sonic devices and listen to DVDs for their own spiritual empowerment at home.³ And one Malaysian-Chinese informant recalls the use of Buddhist tapes and CDs in the 1980s and 1990s to ward off evil spirits in the villages outside Kuala Lumpur.

Earlier visual and sonic idioms are weaved through today's cyber-Buddhism. At one and the same time, practitioners have quickly adopted and adapted emergent media, in particular WeChat-based messaging services and audio-video sharing capabilities. Not only do practitioners rely on sound recording and reproduction to enjoy a relationship with eminent clerics in intimate settings of their choice, they also continue to use audio-visual digital resources to worship, communicate, educate and proselytize (Tarocco 2017; Huang 2017).

³ See for example the use of recordings of the cantillation of Buddha's names in the private rituals of the fortune-teller protagonist of the documentary "Fortune Teller" (*Suanming* 算命) by Xu Tong 徐童 (Dgenerate films, 2010). Yoke Voon, personal communication, London, May 2004 and June 2011.

3 Buddhist Scriptures and Cyber-Buddhism

Commissioning, copying, printing and reciting scripture are some of the traditional ways to gain merit (*gongde* 功德) for the donor who hopes to mitigate future conditions in this life and the next. Pious activities focus on objects, scripture, and support, which aim to respectively sow the “merit fields” of Buddha, Dharma (teaching/law), and the monastic community (Adamek 2005, 139). The proliferation and circulation of all manners of Buddhist electronic scriptures (*dianzi fojing* 電子佛經), suggests a shift from sharing ritual participation within a specific religious community to a more generalized collectivity that entwines intimacy with publicness. Clerics can extend their mediated reach in examples ranging from televangelism, to cassette sermons, to Internet blogging, websites and the now ubiquitous WeChat. Right before the latter became a dominant and trailblazing commercial force around 2014, in collaboration with some young Chinese scholars-practitioners, I conducted a small survey of the websites of major temples in China, namely, Shaolin Temple 少林寺, Bailin Temple 柏林寺, Tianning Temple 天寧寺, Dongshanggu Temple 東山古寺, Famen Temple 法門寺, Guo'en Temple 國恩寺, and Xinchangdafo Temple 新昌大佛寺. We also spoke to clerics and laypersons. At the time, monastic websites offered access to a wealth of up-to-date information about Buddhism alongside materials of a historical nature, including the temples' histories (*siyuan jieshao* 寺院介紹) and the biographies of their abbots.⁴ There were sections on Buddhist philosophy and the arts (*fojiao zhishi yu yishu* 佛教知識與藝術), lived Chan (*shenghuo chan* 生活禪) and archives of written documents, videos, films, and news items. The Shaolin Temple's website offered a thorough overview of its activities and ramifications in the world, including a Press 少林雜誌社, an Overseas Culture Center 海外文化中心, and even an Intangible Asset Management Center 少林無形資產管理中心. A good example of online and off-line interaction was the website of the Dongshangu Temple with its Philanthropic Company 慈善事業發展有限公司. Set up in 2007, the company accepted donations and promised to deliver clean water, food, and medical products in exchange. Five temples out of seven offered independent columns advising on vegetarianism and health (*sushi jiankang* 素食健康). Crucially, all sites gave access to copious amounts of Buddhist scriptures (*Fojiao dianji* 佛教典籍).

⁴ Cf. <http://www.tianningsi.org/fjxy/>; <http://dongshangusi.com/>; <http://www.famensi.com/fjwh.asp>; <http://www.guoensi.com/love/>; <http://www.zjxcdf.com/web/gaosheng.aspShaolin>; <http://www.shaolin.org.cn/index.aspx> (all accessed in April 2013).

All sites we looked at referenced miracle stories, hagiographic materials and examples of filial piety taken from local gazetteers and other sources.⁵ The texts could be downloaded (*jingwen xiazai* 經文下載). Shaolin's site had the largest number of texts followed by Bailin and Tianning Monasteries. In an instructive conversation at Tianning Temple in March 2013, a senior monk lamented the fact that the majority of scriptures on his temple's website were somewhat arbitrarily taken from those of other sites. And yet, the projects of digitization of the Sinitic Canon of Buddhist scriptures seemed to him like a great accomplishment. He was adamant that "so many texts have been already digitized" and that any temple in China could find what they needed for their website. He thought that Taiwan's and Hong Kong's Buddhist-inspired Internet were "excellent" because they contained "large amount of scriptures". When Tianning Temple's first website was initially created in the late 1990s, it was simply conceived of as an "information tool" for visitors and the scriptural materials on the site were not digitized by the monks but were instead taken from those of pre-existing websites.⁶ Crucially, however, the monk saw the creation on an Internet forum (*wangshan luntan* 網上論壇), as the most "necessary and urgent" addition to the temple's website. In his view, the Internet was key to the dialogue with Buddhism's "online friends" (*wangyou* 網友).⁷

4 Making Charisma

The past decade witnessed a spectacular growth of clerical avatars in China and the rest of Buddhist Asia. In this respect, it is useful to make a distinction between *religion online* and *online religion*. While the first conceives of the Internet merely as a platform for religion to work with untouched and unaffected by technology, "online religion" hints at the possibility of new forms of religiosity that the Internet enables and facilitates (Helland 2000). In their extensive engagement with digital technology, Buddhist religious leaders have learned to rely on screens, computers, and mobile phones. Cyberspace plays a significant role in reinforcing transnational ties. Not only has electronic communication

5 "Being Filial to In-laws and Freeing the Whole Family from Pestilence (*Xiaohu wengu quan-jia mianyi* 孝护翁姑全家免疫), <http://www.tianningsi.org/fjxy/> (accessed March 2013).

6 The Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association, Chinese Electronic Tripitaka Collection (*dianzi fodian jicheng* 電子佛典集成), Taiwan. The CD/CD-ROM is distributed for free. It is, however, possible to give donations to the organization that digitizes the scriptures. See <http://www.cbeta.org/donation> (accessed April 2016).

7 Tianning Temple, 21 March 2013, personal communication.

technology led to the formation of international organizations and the opening of meditation retreat centers and of other spaces for gathering, it has also helped Chinese clerics to reach out to larger and more diverse publics through Internet sermons, blogs, and television specials. Thanks to WeChat, tells me a well-known cleric, all Buddhists can “for the first time in history, be on very close terms with monks and nuns who can efficiently answer their questions, dispel doubts and reinforce religious bonds” (Tarocco 2017, 25).⁸

The followers of Zhanran I meet are willing to share healing and miracle stories with me. They use religious concepts such as those of efficacy and the numinous (*ling* 靈), of *qi* (氣) and spiritual healing (*jingshen zhiliao* 精神治療) to explain the nature of Zhanran’s powers and that of his temple’s dharma treasures (*fabao* 法寶). The magic is laid in at the point of production: from the blessed and bottled water, purified by a German water filter, to the DVD video drama of the abbot’s own conversion story. During one of my visits, I witness Zhanran lead a dharma assembly (*fahui* 法會) of several hundreds followers. In that occasion, I am offered the temple’s *fabao* and told that they are infused with the monk’s healing powers. Zhanran imparts his teachings to a very a diverse audience of devoted followers, pilgrims, temple volunteers, laywomen and men, and nuns and monks of all ages and socio-economic circumstances. Most of them hail from the metropolises of East China, Shanghai, Hangzhou, and Ningbo, and many more still are local farmers. As with most dharma assemblies, practitioners congregate to eat vegan food prepared at the temple, leave offerings, worship, and conduct a large release of animals rite (*fangsheng* 放生). “Our Master talks to everyone” – a local woman tells me. She now lives in the temple with her family – “he is very different from the others who only care about rich people from Shanghai”.

For a few days before the ceremony, the air is redolent with the smell of medicinal herbs that burn away in two large cauldrons. Flowers, fruit, and butter lamps are neatly arranged. Large quartz stones are scattered around. Pagodas of all sizes and shapes dot the monastic grounds. I am taken to a grotto that contains an ingenious internal slope leading to a white inner chamber. This is to get people to “experience the Pure Land”, I learn. “Our Temple is small but we have everything” – tells me the nun Deying – “my Master takes good care of us”. She eventually leads me to see the spring and water pond to the back of the residential quarters. She describes the numinousness that surrounds us: “there was no drinking water when my Master arrived here, so he climbed the mountain to find a spring. Once he did, he bought an expensive

⁸ WeChat, 12 September 2015, personal written communication.

German-made water filter. We now have the purest and holiest drinking water”. When I ask her about the two stunning peacocks pecking nearby, she answers: “they are such intelligent creatures – they know where my Master is in the temple. They always sleep next to him”. Later on that day, a woman in her late thirties tells me that she had prayed for months asking for a child. After her baby daughter was born, she decided to devote herself to Zhanran. She is raising her baby a vegan, a sign of robust commitment to Buddhism in the world of Chinese piety. Several others share personal stories of miracles, devotion, liberation from existential crisis, of suffering and redemption. One of the abbot’s earliest disciples to take lay ordination is an older, highly educated woman, a former high ranking cadre and Communist party member. We discuss Zhanran’s healing powers. “I was severely depressed for many years – she tells me. After becoming my Master’s disciple, I only feel peace and happiness (*anle* 安樂)”.

Many of Abbot Zhanran’s followers produce the origin stories of their piety where miraculous occurrences and conversions are entwined with technology. One cleric tells me that watching an online video of one of Zhanran’s dharma talks was the key moment in the path to her Buddhist awakening: “Three years ago I saw a video of my Master on the video-sharing platform Youku 优酷. I knew immediately that I wanted to meet him and become his disciple. I searched for more materials online for months on end. When I came back to China, I decided to become a nun.” Since childhood, she had been on a spiritual quest, reading manuals of self-help and Daoist classics. Finally, she is at peace now, she tells me. An older male cleric, now the precentor, tells me of his online encounters with Zhanran. Soon after watching one of his Master’s cinematic sermon, he decided to give up his lucrative finance job and walk all the way to the temple to meet him. He was so worried that he would not be admitted in that he cried all night at the front gate. “Sometimes” – a younger cleric tells me – “when we have a question, we watch one of my master’s videos to find the answer”.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the largest lecture hall of the temple is equipped with a large screen and a professional sound system. One of Zhanran’s followers is a trained documentary filmmaker and a former employee at one of China’s TV stations. She invites me to watch one of her films together. “I want this to be perfect – she tells me – I want people to cultivate their moral character (*xiushen* 修身) when they watch it”. The audience of clerics and laypeople gasps and rejoices as Zhanran, bathed in light, travels from one Buddhist site to the next, from Bodhgaya to Kandi, to Bangkok.

In person, Zhanran is unhurried, thoughtful and frank. “There are many kinds of skillful means but they all lead to the same final destination”, he tells me. He is adamant in his belief that digital media are key to “proselytizing and

spreading the dharma in our age” (*zhege shidai de hongfa* 這個時代的弘法). When he performs his dharma lesson, on a stage similar to those used for live performances, Zhanran’s seat is surrounded by a lavish display of offerings, photo-portraits of his masters, and various regalia. “The equipment is a gift from one of his Shanghai followers” – tells me one of the monks and a professional sound technician (see Figure 3). Printed on the white plastic backdrop is the image of the white pagoda of Mount Wutai 五台山. Loudspeakers hang from the scaffolding and from the nearby trees while two monks and a laywoman operate professional video recording equipment. Three other monks aim their cameras at people in the audience. In front of Zhanran, right before a small pagoda, is a large camera on a tripod. A sound recording station is placed at the center of the crowd, sheltered by a large umbrella. A few meters away, other monks operate a professional video editing and broadcasting suite. This is a well-rehearsed and impressive operation. For weeks before it finally takes place, the event is widely publicized on social media and further circulated within the acolytes’ own networks. A highly detailed how-to list that contains the links and instructions with which to access the live feed is circulated by the temple’s official account. It includes the monk’s official website, a mobile phone number, the account on China-based social media platform’s WeChat, that of the popular video sharing site Youku and Facebook’s live feed. The latter is officially forbidden in China but can be accessed through a virtual private network (VPN). All the clerics I meet are extremely proud of their technological proficiency (*fatade meiti* 發達的媒體) but insist that propagation would be futile if it were not accompanied by serious practice and spiritual accomplishments.



Figure 3: Monks and technicians deploy professional equipment to film, record and broadcast Zhanran’s dharma lectures (photos by the author).

In a wonderfully rich and deep voice, subtly modulated, Zhanran narrates one of his ascents to Mount Wutai together with his late teacher. He recalls how close he felt to the bodhisattva Wenshu 文殊 and tells miracle stories taken from a rich lore that extends back to medieval times. We hear of numinous encounters with the deity on the mountain paths, of the power of relics, and the healing potential of sutras recitation. The monk uses the logic of *qi*, a logic that became very common in China during the *qigong* fever (*qigong re*) of the 1980s and 1990s (Palmer 2003). In an earlier dharma lesson he gave during the SARS outbreak of 2003, and now available in a bilingual print edition, Zhanran asserted: “someone asked me today if the ceremony gives the service of treating people by using the supernatural powers to cure diseases. Did you know that the power you get from merely hearing the title of the Lotus Sutra or the chapter of the Universal Door of Guan Yin Bodhisattva is even greater than the net power generated by one hundred million *qigong* masters altogether?” (Anonymous, n.d.). In the original text, the key term here is *fagong* (發功), the magical power of a person whose mastery of body and mind culminates in the achievement of magical powers which can be projected towards others for healing purposes. Such, his followers tell me, is Zhanran’s own.

The dharma lecture I witness is a compelling performance, its content a potent mixture of Buddhist doctrine and storytelling. It instructs and entertains at one and the same time. It delves into China’s recent traumas and even offer religious explanations to infamous political events. It references, for instance the “Lin Biao incident” explaining that Mao went to Mount Wutai to pay respect to the bodhisattva and was therefore blessed, while Lin, intent at destroying Buddhism, was punished and lost his life. We learn about the relationship between Buddhism and science, Chinese medicine, the role of compassion in life. The devotees listen attentively, oblivious of heat and humidity. Zhanran’s exalted state among his followers is further explained to me in terms of skillful means – pedagogical skill is described as a defining feature of Buddha or advanced bodhisattva in several Mahāyāna texts. Crucially, *upāya kauśalya* or “skillful means” is the ability to compose a dharma lesson in such a way that it is effective for its intended audience (Osto 2008: 5–6). In numerous heartfelt conversations about their Buddhist personhood and their relation with their Master, two of Zhanran’s lay disciples tell me of his wonder-working powers and his “heavenly eye” that allows the bodhisattva to see the death and rebirth of all beings. These are the six superknowledges (*shentong* 神通) or powers of spiritual penetration, that are commonly “recognized as standard by-products of meditation” and “essential means of achieving the conversion of others” (Faure 1991, 102). They are “the descending movement of *upāya*, the “skillful means” through which the

bodhisattva reaches out to sentient beings in his attempt to elevate them”. Of course, such “penetration” of an enlightened person is not a conscious “exercise of powers but a spontaneous response to beings” (1991, 108, cf. also Pye 1978). Similarly to Hongyi, Zhanran is seen to possess “eminence”, which is an intangible but very real quality, one that followers regard as an expected “by-product of the monk’s spiritual attainments” (Kieschnick 1997, 72). This quality exists in whichever form the monk decides to manifest himself. While both clerics and laypeople experience elaborate cinematic productions collectively on a large screen at the temple, shorter videos also circulate continuously inside and out of the fast-growing social media network of Zhanran’s followers. These shorter videos are watched in the more privately defined intimate spaces of the smaller and portable screen. Like cinema, however, smaller-screen movies are “technologically mediated expressive and cognitive acts of vision which connect with, and affect, the individual and public spaces” (Voci 2010: 185). In sum, Zhanran makes charisma in real life teachings and speeches that his own media making activities and those of his followers contribute to augment and amplify. To him and his disciples, religion and technology are not distinct arenas of experience and practice. On the contrary, the widespread proliferation of digital charisma enables the emergence of a generalized community of Buddhists who are also deeply and intimately connected.

Conclusion

As James Taylor remarked in relation to Thai Buddhism, new articulations of Chinese Buddhism are “significantly implicated in local-global historical and sociocultural contexts” (2015, 219). While much thought has been put into asserting the global nature of contemporary Buddhism, we should also concentrate on local practitioners’ interventions and strategies. This is a profoundly historical undertaking in that it looks at a turning point in religious cultural production by Buddhists clerics and laypeople in the 21st century. What this allows for is the exploration of “how spiritual, moral and theological codes of practice guide technological negotiation” where religious communities “use technologies in ways that are active, creative and socially situated” (Campbell 2010, 132). Similarly to other religious groups, today’s Buddhist identities and communities are held together by modern communication technologies. They leverage mass media for they can be used to “solidify their membership, identity and belief” (Cambell 2010, 185). In contrast to those who argue that the logic of mass media and the market place affects and transforms traditional religious forms, I maintain that it is Buddhism that has historically shaped

media. The appropriation of media by religious practices is not merely a new, modern or contemporary phenomenon (Stolow 2005 and 2013). Contrary to previous technology, personal mobile technologies engender a sense of co-presence and continuous connection through sharing powerful sacramental experiences and goods. As with other systems, the present technological moment of Buddhist quotidian digital vernacular is but the latest manifestation of a long process of mediation that can be genealogically traced in the history of Chinese religious practice. Across the two sides of the Taiwan Straits, secularization and state control notwithstanding, a remarkable resurgence of interest in Buddhist practice is under way. Such renaissance appears to be intimately connected not only with the construction and role of charisma in modern Chinese societies but also with the role that technology and media play in the material realities of the Buddhist everyday (Huang 2017; Travagnin 2017; Tarocco 2017). Within contemporary religious environments characterized by networked forms of electronic and digital communication, radio evangelism, and religious video games, practice shapes and is shaped by mass media. In this chapter, while maintaining that mediation is inherent in religion (de Witte 2013, 174), I sought to complicate the view that the expansion of modern communication technology means the dissolution of religious authority. I argued instead that the spheres of pious self-making and social imaginary that are opened up by Chinese Buddhist technoculture are embedded in deep-rooted attitudes towards the nature of charisma that inform the recuperation of monastic ideals and the production of technologically mediated *fabao*. These are key to establishing, maintaining and amplifying local and trans-regional networks of online and offline followers. The sacred in the global present appears deeply entrenched in the horizons of modern communication technologies where digital media feed into and shape social and religious practices. Attention to these and to the material infrastructures that enable them sheds light on how the use and production of digital media have become integrated into Buddhist everyday life.

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