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Hashtag "Together Against the Pandemic": The Role of Chinese Buddhism and Digital Media During the Covid-19 Pandemic[1]

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Since the beginning of the pandemic in late 2019 and early 2020, lockdowns and the need for social distancing have impacted religious institutions, communities, practices, beliefs, and identities. Communal gatherings are a central part of religious life. The community is the place where religious memory and traditions are maintained and transmitted. In her book *Religion as a Chain of Memory*, Danièle Hervieu-Léger (2000) argued that the religious community is the crucial link between the past and the present, helping individuals maintain a connection to their religious heritage and providing a sense of continuity in an ever-changing cultural and religious landscape. While the social and emotional support networks create a sense of belonging and identity, collectively performed rituals connects the individual and group to their religious heritage and transmits religious beliefs and values. Considering that lives were claimed by the Covid-19 pandemic, Baker et al. (2020) remarked that under 'normal' circumstances, death and mourning would increase communal gatherings and religious rituals but due to the need for social distancing, religious groups had to adapt their interactions to these new constraints. Thus, "the pandemic is triggering an increased need for religious traditions while at the same time significantly altering the expressions of those traditions" (Baker et al. 2020: 358). An example is the Shanghai Jade Buddha Temple, which adopted a hybrid format by live-streaming rituals and dharma instructions for practitioners at home. Not only do religious groups have to adapt the ways of reaching their members and maintaining community structure, but also scholars who conduct ethnographic studies must find new methods to conduct research. Closed borders, health measurements, visa restrictions, etc. all pose serious constraints for participant observation and interviews – two classic methods of ethnographic data collection.

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This study on the influence of a global health crisis on contemporary Chinese Buddhism in mainland China, builds both on digital means to gain access to the field and studies by scholars working on the intersection of Chinese Buddhism and digital media. These include studies on monasteries utilizing digital technologies, such as Stefania Travagnin's research on the integration of robotics in promoting Buddhist teachings at the Longquan Temple in Beijing (2020) and her study of online ritual services provided by the Nanputuo Temple in Xiamen, which examines how the internet restructures ritual performance and ritual authenticity (2019). Her research also looks at Chinese social media and its utilization by individual monastics who post their spiritual journeys as guidance and inspiration for their followers. Focusing on the charismatic monk Daoxin 道心 (b. 1982), Francesca Tarocco notes that the "sharing of images and texts [becomes] part of a larger religious script" (2017: 169) that permeates the private and social lives of netizens, i.e. individuals who actively participate in online communities, discussions, or activities by sharing information and expressing opinions via social media. This also leads to the creation of networked communities and sacred social spaces, a concept demonstrated by Huang Weishan (2017) in her research on the Taiwanese lay Buddhist organization Tzu Chi 慈濟 in Shanghai. At the same time, blog posts are not only the inspiration of their readers but also act as channels through which monastics express their religious identity, allow their readers to partake in their lives, and facilitate the exchange of information among practitioners, students, and professors. Beverly McGuire calls such blogs 'online repositories' (2017: 157) of a variety of information. Those online repositories constitute one entrance point to the Buddhist field of this study.

As prevention and control measures for Covid-19 enforced by the Chinese government constitute challenges and opportunities for religious communities and their practice, this paper examines how Buddhist actors react, adapt, re-create, and rationalize the transformation of their religious practice under these special conditions as well as what role Buddhism assumed during the fight against the pandemic. I first focused on how pandemic prevention measures had been communicated through various channels, such as academic journals, social media, and websites of Buddhist temples. I then collected and analyzed information published online by the Buddhist Association of China (*zhongguo fojiao xiehui* 中國佛教協會, hereafter BAC) in *The Voice of Dharma* (*fayin* 法音) and in *China Religion* (*zhongguo zongjiao* 中國宗教).[2] Both journals provide redacted and officially sanctioned information, not only on religion in China in general but also more specifically on Buddhism and how the Covid-19 pandemic has affected the configuration of the Chinese religious field. This content analysis aimed to understand how digital technologies are integrated into spreading the

[2] - Since its founding in 1981, *The Voice of Dharma* has published numerous articles on Buddhist related issues, including doctrinal interpretations, education, culture, and art. As the mouthpiece of the BAC and indirectly the Chinese state due to a state-corporatist structure of religious associations in China, it serves as the authoritative channel for the release of important policy decisions by the BAC and the state. Founded in 1995, *China Religion* is a journal under the auspices of the State Administration for Religious Affairs, which itself is part of the United Front Work Department (UFWD) since 2018. The UFWD is a key agency within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) responsible for managing and influencing various groups and individuals both within China and abroad to advance the party's interests. Thus, it is not surprising that this journal can and is used to serve the state's reform, development, and stability policies. It mainly provides information on religious work, explores religious issues, and conducts academic discussions.

dharma, how ritual practices and sites of worship have changed due to the pandemic, and how lay followers have adapted to this situation. The specifics of this analysis will be explained in the third section. Moreover, I conducted digital ethnography on the microblogging platform Sina Weibo (*xinlang weibo* 新浪微博) and multi-purpose messaging and social media app WeChat (*weixin* 微信)[3], as it opens up opportunities to understand the behavior of practitioners and organizations of Chinese Buddhism through video diaries, photo uploads, live streams, blog entries, online communities, etc. Without being physically there, we can have access to the lives of practitioners, enabling us to capture and assess ritual practices as they happen. I have used my personal Sina Weibo and WeChat accounts to access public profiles of monastics and monasteries. Since most of this research was carried out from Taiwan in late 2022 and early 2023, I was only able to find written reports, photos, blog entries, or videos of rituals conducted during the first year of the pandemic. A rather thorny issue was that the online content of some monasteries – be it videos, courses, rituals, etc. – was accessible to members only, which required a Chinese phone number. Unfortunately, my Taiwanese phone number was of no use. Despite this and the fact that the Chinese internet is heavily censored, there is still enough data 'flying around' to enter the Chinese religious landscape from across the Taiwan Strait.

For this reason and because on-site fieldwork was not possible in mainland China during the pandemic, I examine the role of Chinese Buddhism during the Covid-19 pandemic from the perspective of digital religion to question how digital technology has become an important virtual bridge between religious professionals and their followers. I believe that anthropological studies in the 21st century can no longer disregard the integration of digital media in the dissemination of religious ideals and how the digital medium itself shapes and conveys information. Hence, digital ethnography can provide methods to collect a large body of data in a relatively short period of time by using social and digital search tools, thereby supplementing traditional methods such as participant observation and interviews. Digital ethnography invites us to pay attention to the humans behind the screen and reflect on the important question of what it means to 'do' religion[4] and even 'be' religious in a 'connected' world.

Entering the Field from Afar

Digital media and technology are developing at an increasingly fast pace and are accessible through a variety of devices. Consequently, religious content on the internet is expanding, changing, and reinventing itself year after year, especially in times of social distancing and global lockdowns when sermons, communal practices, and rituals cannot be conducted physically. Religious groups and practices are not static monoliths but rather

[3] - Since its release in 2011, WeChat has become one of the most widely used social media platforms in China and beyond. For its massive user base, not only in China but also among Chinese-speaking communities around the world, it has become an essential tool for communication, social networking, and e-commerce in China. Sina Weibo is similar in some ways to X (formerly Twitter) and allows users to post short messages, photos, videos, and links. It is a popular platform for discussions, news dissemination, and entertainment in China. Like WeChat, it has a significant user base, although its focus is more on public content and discussions compared to WeChat's private messaging capabilities.

[4] - On the modalities of 'doing' religion in China, see Adam Yuet Chau (Palmer, 2011: 67-84).

creative fluid communities that adapt to changes in their environment. As a result, different forms of overlapping and constantly evolving digital media formats have emerged over the last decades.

Digital media and its underlying technologies allow us to go beyond geopolitical borders and explore how religious ideas and practices are brought into new contexts, thereby providing the opportunity to study the 'translocative' (Tweed, 2011) dimension of religious practices as they move across virtual space. Yet, when following those movements across different virtual environments – from websites to social media accounts, chat groups, video channels, etc. – the ethnographer is presented with a variety of methodological challenges. Contrasting with the conventional notion of ethnography, namely the premise that in order to obtain data one has to spend time with people, interact with them, and try to understand their worldviews to develop first-hand knowledge of how meaning is constructed, digital ethnography has to reflect on how it constructs its 'field' and how the 'non-bodily presence' of the researcher affects or does not affect the digital field. This applies in particular to the involvement of the ethnographer in his or her ethnography and to the personal experience of being in the field. Regardless of whether online or offline, carrying out fieldwork not only requires following people, stories, conflicts, and biographies (Marcus, 1995) to delimitate the field but also to ask the right questions to see the emergence of networks of relationships and the meaning of social acts in different contexts. As Vered Amit (2000: 6) aptly noted:

> The ethnographic field cannot simply exist, awaiting discovery. It has to be laboriously constructed, prised apart from all the other possibilities of contextualization to which its constituent relationships and connections could also be referred. This process of construction is inescapably shaped by the conceptual, professional, financial and relational opportunities and resources accessible to the ethnographer.

Thus, the construction of the ethnographic field is not only determined by the research agenda but also by the amount of time the researcher spends in the field (online and offline), the duration of which depends on financial resources and the ability to build trust with the community under study. Conducting digital fieldwork compels us to adjust how we define the empirical site of our research, as it is "more difficult to determine where 'the field' begins and where it ends if it does at all" (Barendregt, 2021: 171). Due to the fast-changing pace of internet technology and new kinds of mediated ways of interaction, Massimo Airoldi (2018) suggested further differentiating the digital field into "contextual sites" that are relatively stable bounded online communities and fluid "meta-fields" that amass scattered communicative content, such as hashtags on Twitter or Instagram. Both represent different approaches to the ethnographic field. While the former concerns situated self-presentations at a micro level, the latter focuses on social representations on the macro level. Although these field sites are inherently digital, they are nevertheless embedded in the socio-cultural reality of the individual who chooses the time and place for entering them. Christine Hine (2015) aptly argues that the internet is an embedded, embodied, and everyday phenomenon in contemporary society. We should not ground our ethnographic fieldwork on fixed dichotomies between online and offline realms, as the presence of the internet has become a normal part of our lives.

Conducting participant observation plays a vital role within these new contexts, allowing the ethnographer to switch between the roles of an anonymous peripheral observer to a complete participant. But, with new contexts arise new ethical and practical dilemmas. One challenge is navigating the blurred boundaries between public and private online spaces. A website, a blog, or a Twitter post may be regarded as a public space, yet it cannot be automatically assumed that it is permissible for research purposes or that the creators of such material are aware that their posts may be transformed into data without their knowledge. Although the internet seems like a public database waiting for us to be explored and included in research projects, we should decide case-by-case whether it is necessary to obtain informed consent before recording online interactions.[5] Another challenge is the ethical dilemma of identity disclosure. With online spaces rife with flaming, hate speech, and the risk of altered behavior, ethnographers must consider how much they reveal about themselves. Fake identities provide ample opportunities to conduct 'covert operations' and seem to allow the ethnographer to obtain unadulterated 'natural' data, as one's presence does not influence the behavior of the research subject. Yet, using a disguised persona when engaging with research subjects violates the "principle of care" (Boellstroff, 2012: 129-131) and poses prospective risks to the individual and/ or community. Relationships of trust and mutual respect should underpin sound ethnographic research, even in the virtual space and especially in private chat rooms that are not open to the public.

Censorship is another major challenge, particularly within the Chinese internet ecosystem. The Great Firewall of China is a comprehensive and extensive system of online content control and surveillance implemented by the Chinese government that aims to maintain strict control over the flow of information, suppress dissenting voices, and protect the ruling Communist Party's interests. Apart from content filtering, keyword blocking, and real-name registration, social media platforms like WeChat and Sina Weibo are heavily monitored and censored. Posts and messages that discuss sensitive topics or criticize the government can be removed, and users can face consequences for sharing such content. It is important to note that internet censorship in China is not uniform, and the government periodically adjusts its censorship policies to respond to emerging issues and events. The extent of censorship can also vary by region, with stricter controls often enforced in politically sensitive areas and times, such as during the early weeks of the Covid-19 pandemic when the Chinese authorities clamped down on anything portraying China in a 'negative' light (Zhong et al., 2021). Thus, anything that remains on those platforms, namely everything we see, has been vetted by an algorithm.

The human factor in ethnographic work is certainly pivotal, but so are the technologies themselves that operate behind the curtain. Code and algorithms have become agents of knowledge production since the content one is presented with is highly curated and specifically made for the individual user. Based on past engagement, recommendation algorithms generate the social media feed and dictate what we see unless we actively search for specific content. Algorithms are therefore not rigid, fixed code but rather

[5] - One may refer to Ryan Williams' reflection on ethics for the virtual researcher (2023) or a relatively early publication on virtual research ethics, edited by Elizabeth Buchanan (2003).

"broad patterns of meaning and practice that can be engaged with empirically" (Seaver 2017: 1). Algorithms are thus not to be understood merely as a cultural element, but as culture itself, which is produced situationally through culturally conditioned practices in the first place. Sebastian Dahm and Simon Egbert (2021) call for an ethnography of algorithms, attempting to penetrate the opacity of algorithmic technologies and disclose the processes of categorization, formalization, and datafication that take place behind the scenes of our everyday technologies.

For the purpose of this study, I identify two perspectives: (1) official online publications found in *The Voice of Dharma* and *China Religion*, as well as (2) contextual fields and meta-fields. The former is a digital technique of the ethnographer's toolkit that allows us to examine historical change over time, the presence of certain words, themes, or concepts within a set of qualitative data. As Peter Forberg and Kristen Schilt point out, "analyzing digital content does not make a digital ethnography" because it does not necessitate "reflexive decisions about the researcher's participation and self-presentation" (2023: 6) in the field. Interviewing and participant observation, by contrast, presuppose a co-presence of the researcher and thereby constitute a "reactive interaction" (Small, Calarco, 2022: 12) between the research subject and the researcher. Thus, to extend the content analysis, I went through websites of the BAC and various monasteries as well as browsed through hashtag feeds and accounts of Buddhist masters on Sina Weibo, including #together against the pandemic (*gongzhan yiqing* 共戰疫情), #join hands to fight against the pandemic (*xieshou kangyi* 携手抗疫), and the accounts of the abbot of Shaolin Temple Master Yongxin 永信 and the abbot of Shanghai Jade Buddha Temple Master Juexing 覺醒, as both temples were mentioned comparatively often in *The Voice of Dharma* and *China Religion*. Conducting interviews was non-essential to this study, as I aimed to explore general themes of Buddhist involvement in Chinese society during the pandemic. I, therefore, remained a passive observer of the digital activities that were unfolding on my screen. I was still part of the production of data as I was weaving together observations made on different platforms. To contextualize the content analysis from these observations, I shall first investigate Buddhist techno-culture.

Buddhist techno-culture in Mainland China

Monastics in mainland China have been keen to utilize all sorts of print and digital media to reach out to Buddhist practitioners. These interactions between religious groups and their followers have been studied by scholars working in the fields of Chinese popular religion (Clart 2012) and Chinese Buddhism (McGuire, 2017; Laliberté, 2017; Tarocco, 2017, 2019). As Buddhism is a highly complex and diversified field in mainland China, this section shall only focus on some general observations regarding the utilization of digital media in the context of Buddhist practice and dharma propagation. Although this means zooming out onto the macro-sphere, we can still apply Louise Connelly's cluster mapping typology of religion in cyberspace to categorize and illustrate the complexity and interconnectedness of Buddhism on the mainland. Aiming at developing a new typology of religion in cyberspace, Louise Connelly attempts to categorize religious cyberspace to illustrate its complexity and interconnectedness. Her study provides a

frame of reference for analyzing religious groups present on the internet and proposes a cluster mapping typology that is divided into four categories: virtual worlds and games (VWG), mobile applications (MA), websites (W), and social media (SM) (Connelly, 2015: 58–59).

As far as I am aware, there are no virtual worlds or games comparable to Second Life in China where one can join an online community of practitioners to practice meditation or conduct rituals in a virtual temple setting. There are, however, countless websites of major and minor temples with different functions, starting from solely providing information about the temple history, its current abbot, Buddhist doctrine, and news feeds that inform about upcoming events to more interactive ways to engage with visitors of their websites. On the website of the Longquan Temple (*longquan si* 龍泉寺) in Changning, Hunan Province, for example, it is possible to enter a short conversation with a monastic when having questions about Buddhist teachings –provided that there is a registered an account and a monastic is online. Under the tab "Cloud Classroom" (*yunzhong kecheng* 雲中課堂) registering for an online class on Pure Land teachings, posting questions and commenting in a forum, reading all sorts of reports on previous dharma ceremonies and retreats, and even job browsing listings for employment at the temple is made feasible. Dharma lectures and dharma ceremonies are live-streamed and recorded on their website, allowing practitioners from all over China, and possibly the world, to tune in as the event unfolds, and to re-watch it after it has finished (Longquan Temple, 2023). The website of Nanputuo Temple (*nanputuo si* 南普陀寺) goes a step further and includes an online Buddha Hall and Online Memorial Worship Site, enabling devotees to 'worship' Buddhas and Bodhisattvas from the convenience of their homes (Nanputuo, 2023). As Travagnin (2019) has noted in her study on modalities of the online ritual practice of Chinese Buddhism, the internet changes the mode of ritual performances and impacts ritual authenticity and efficacy. In the case of the Nanputuo online Buddha Hall, ritual practice is reduced to a few clicks on a website and a verse for the transfer of merit, which leads to "significant changes in the ritual process" (Travagnin, 2019: 294), including separation from the ritual space of the temple, no interaction with monastics, new online terminology, and exclusion of bodily and material movements for offering objects. Due to the website's structure and the ritual services offered by Nanputuo Temple, Travagnin's study is set against the dualistic framework of offline v. online and online-religion v. religion-online. Rituals are not necessarily performed either online or offline, either individually in front of a screen or collectively in the temple. Buddhist rituals have become hybrid online/ offline events during and after the pandemic, as evidenced by "Amitābha Triple Contemplation Services" (*sanshi xinian* 三時繫念) conducted by Pure Land Societies (*jingzong xuehui* 淨宗學會) in Taiwan.

Before Master Xuecheng 學誠 (b. 1963.) resigned as the abbot of Longquan Monastery (*longquansi* 龍泉寺) in Beijing and president of the BAC in 2018 after allegations surfaced that he had engaged in sexual misconduct and misappropriated financial funds of the temple, not only the website but also the utilization and integration of digital media into the circulation of Buddhist content made it one of the most innovative voices of Chinese cyberspace. Although it was not the first Buddhist website

in Chinese cyberspace, it was the first to include social interaction technologies for example microblogging, voice messaging, and mobile text, as Zhang Fan reports (2015). Its multimedia content featured videos and audio in various languages, animations, and comics of Buddhist teachings, intending to appeal to a younger more global audience. Xuecheng himself started blogging on China's most popular microblogging platform Sina Weibo as early as 2006. In an interview in 2012, he said "Buddhism should keep up with the times and embrace modern technology to promote Buddha's teachings in an innovative and recipient-friendly way" (Tang, 2012). His open-minded position towards embracing modern technology attracted large numbers of the younger tech-savvy generation of Chinese that favors "connectivity instead of seclusion and that emphasizes practical advice over deep philosophy" (Hernández, 2016). But Longquan Monastery is not only known for its innovative website or tech-savvy generation of monastics and lay followers, one of its most famous monastics is the robot-monk Xian'er (*xian'er jiqiren* 賢二機器人) who was created in the context of a collaboration of the monastery and lay experts in artificial intelligence in 2015. Xian'er's career as a robot monk built upon cartoons, 3D animation, and books written and published by the Animation Centre at Longquan Monastery since 2013. Travagnin points out that although the characters and stories are produced by monastics at the Animation Centre, most of its content is related to Xuecheng's teachings, creating an alternative channel to promote his ideas – even until today after he resigned as abbot (2020: 131). Travagnin further notes that during field research at the monastery, Xian'er was able to interact with visitors and discuss Buddhist doctrines and matters of life. It even raises objections and questions about the significance of one's inquiries if it is unrelated to Buddhist teachings. The Robot-Monk "reflects and embeds […] Dharma teachings, and thus has become an exemplary Buddhist product in this new media and high-tech age" (2020: 143).

Although Connelly's cluster map typology focuses on the usage of the internet by religious groups, I believe that it should be extended by a fifth category, termed 'robotics and artificial intelligence (AI)', to adequately reflect the increasing diversification of technology within the Buddhist and religious field. Xian'er is only one example of combining AI, robotics, and the dharma. Upon entering the Taipei temple of the Taiwanese Buddhist order Fo Guang Shan 佛光山, one may also encounter a robot that, although not as sophisticated as Xian'er, moves around and answers questions related to Buddhist teachings.

Websites, mobile applications, social media, and robotics/AI have become an integral part of spreading religious ideas. Although separated by two screens and possibly thousands of kilometers away from each other, social media is a powerful tool for religious organizations to share, create information, and interact with their users. When subscribed to the beliefs of a certain (religious) group, social media has the power to create and reinforce a feeling of belonging to a larger virtual and imagined community through daily notifications, as it brings one in direct contact with religious specialists and other members of a group, regardless of time and space – something that was impossible before the invention of the internet and social media. From the comfort of one's own home without ever leaving it, one can participate in rituals, and communal

practice, and learn about the latest news of their master and community. This raises an important question: what does it mean to 'do' religion and even 'be' religious in a connected world? Religious experience, expression, expertise, and practice are certainly no longer restricted to the physical world but extend into a virtual world that fosters religious innovation and change.

Chinese Buddhism in Action: Working Together to fight against the Pandemic

This section discusses how Chinese Buddhism on the mainland has responded and adapted to the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020. Since I am currently based on the other side of the Taiwan Strait, conducting field research within China was impracticable at the time of writing. However, with China now beginning to open its borders, it may become feasible soon. For this reason, I have collected information published in *The Voice of Dharma* by the Buddhist Association of China and in *China Religion*. Both journals provide information not only on Buddhism but also on religion in China in general and how the Covid-19 pandemic has affected the configuration of the Chinese religious field. Moreover, I have conducted digital ethnography on microblogging websites such as Sina Weibo that open opportunities for understanding the behavior of practitioners and organizations of Chinese Buddhism through video diaries, photo uploads, live streams, blog entries, online communities, etc. Thus, without being physically there, we have certain access to the lives of practitioners, enabling us to capture and assess ritual practices as they happen.

Content Analysis: The Voice of Dharma and China Religion

Before looking at the specifics of how Chinese Buddhism has responded to this unique situation, let us first look at what has been published and who has written on the subject in both journals. The aim is not to provide an in-depth conceptual or relational content analysis, but rather to determine certain themes, concepts, and trends. Since the Covid-19 Pandemic started in late 2019 but only began to receive broader news coverage in China in early 2020, I have only included articles starting from February 2020 to the end of 2022. I have based my search of relevant articles on keywords that often appeared in the news and that related to anything conducted online, as I was interested in how Buddhism used digital media during those two years. These eleven keywords include 'pandemic' (*yiqing* 疫情), 'prevention and controlling' (*fangkong* 防控), 'fighting/resisting the pandemic' (*kangyi* 抗疫), 'Covid-19' (*xinguan feiyan* 新冠肺炎), 'plague' (*yibing* 疫病), 'pandemic prevention' (*fangyi* 防疫), 'donations' (*juanzeng* 捐贈), 'exchange forum' (*jiaoliuhui* 交流會), 'video' (*shipin* 視頻), 'online' (*xianshang* 線上), and 'dharma ceremony' (*fahui* 法會). The first four keywords alone produced 109 (*The Voice of Dharma*) and 154 (*China Religion*) search results in 2020. Yet, one year later it was down to only 23 (*The Voice of Dharma*) and 10 (*China Religion*) search results, and in 2022 merely 13 in *The Voice of Dharma* but 39 in *China Religion*. The other keywords did not produce any significant results in *China Religion* (only 3 entries in two years). As for *The Voice of Dharma*, there are 67 search results from 2020-2022. We will discuss them below. It is important to note, however, that these numbers do not represent the number of articles, only the number of times these words appeared in

both journals over the past three years. Looking at these numbers alone, they indicate a declining trend in addressing and explaining the pandemic.

When looking at who wrote those pieces for The Voice of the Dharma, four different periods emerge: **February–March 2020**: A Buddhist interpretation of the pandemic dominated. BAC monastics focused on scriptures, mental well-being, and charitable acts. All articles that contain at least one of the above keywords were written by either the BAC or monastics in central positions of the BAC.[6] While the BAC published official announcements of new policies and health measurements to control the pandemic situation, the monastics included discussions on how diseases are explained in scriptures of early Buddhism (Cheng Gongrang, 2020: 23-27), how to understand and fight the virus from a Buddhist point of view (Shi Shenghui, 2020: 14-15), how to keep a calm and collected mind to stop the virus together (Shi Yanjue, 2020a: 10-11; Shi Guangquan, 2020: 19-20), prayer texts and various pictures of monastics donating medical supplies to hospitals and non-profit humanitarian organizations, such as the Red Cross or Beijing Charity Foundation (*beijingshi cishan jijinhui* 北京市慈善基金會) (The Voice of Dharma, 2020: 81). **April–August 2020**: Government agencies and officials took over, shifting the discourse toward state ideology, while Buddhist voices diminished. Most articles were written by government agencies or officials, such as the United Front Work Department (*tongzhanbu* 統戰部, hereafter UFWD) (2020a: 1; 2020b: 7), general secretary of the Communist Party, Xi Jinping 習近平 (2020: 4), and the former director of the State Administration for Religious Affairs of China, Wang Zuo'an 王作安 (2020a: 5-6). Only one announcement regarding Covid-19 measurements was made by the BAC in April (2020: 5) and one article by Master Yanjue 演覺 called for the normalization (*changtaihua* 常態化) of preventive measures to achieve a moderately prosperous society (*xiaokang shehui* 小康社會) (2020b: 8-9). Consequently, a religious reading and explanation of the virus had to yield to official political discourses within two months after the first article on the outbreak of the new coronavirus was published. The discourses used in these articles contain well-known concepts such as 'a Community of Shared Destiny for Mankind' (*renlei mingyun gongtongti* 人類命運共同體), 'Patriotism for a New Era' (*xinshidai aiguo jingshen* 新時代愛國精神), 'Socialism with Chinese Characteristics' (*zhongguo tese shehuizhuyi* 中國特色社會主義), the above-noted 'moderately prosperous society', etc. and emphasize cultivating a national spirit to fight against the pandemic. **September 2020–End of 2021**: Politically charged language disappeared. Reports focused on local activities and conferences rather than the pandemic itself, including conferences of local BAC branches (*daibiaohui* 代表會), exchange forums (*jiaoliuhui* 交流會), commemoration ceremonies (*tupi fahui* 荼毗法會), international online conferences (*xianshang yantaohiì* 線上研討會), and donation ceremonies (*juanzeng wuzi* 捐贈物資) were published. Articles on the pandemic situation almost completely disappeared

[6] - Including Master Shenghui 聖輝 vice president of the BAC and president of the BAC branch in Hunan; Master Yanjue 演覺 abbot of Guangji Temple (*guangjisi* 廣濟寺) in Beijing and president of the BAC; Master Benxing 本性 director of the Fujian Buddhist College and member of the permanent council of the BAC; Master Guangquan 光泉 vice-secretary of the BAC and vice president of the BAC branch in Zhejiang.

and were only indirectly perceptible through these reports. **Since 2022**: Local reports continue, with a resurgence of articles from Xinhua News Agency highlighting Xi Jinping's speeches.

Surveying the journal *China Religion* by using the above-mentioned four keywords (*yiqing*, *fangkong*, *kangyi*, *xinguan feiyan*), a similar but slightly different trend can be perceived. The bulk of the keywords appeared in titles from February to June 2020, namely 130 results within five months (154 in total for 2020). Although *China Religion* does not center on one single religious tradition within China, most of its publications during the last three years of the pandemic were inclined toward Buddhism.[7] Within this timeframe, there was a variety of topics written by different authors addressing different readers. For example, several articles on Buddhist communities in Shanghai 上海, Wuhan 武漢 (Shi Mingxian, 2020: 88-91), Huangzhou 黃州 (Shi Chongdi, 2020: 88-90), and Xiaogan 孝感 (Dong Wenfeng, 2020: 34-35) tell the stories of monastics and lay devotees working together to raise money for medical supplies, even if it means to organize an online auction to sell art pieces – as Shanghai Jade Buddha Temple (*shanghai yufosi* 上海玉佛寺) did to collect around 3 million RMB (Juequn Centre for Humanistic Buddhist Studies, 2020: 58-59). Then there are multiple articles on religion in general that emphasize that the five religions need to work together and must be positive role models for their followers to comply with government health management regulations (Zhang Zhengyan, 2020: 8-9). In addition to this appeal, there are reports on local implementation of anti-pandemic measurements in the religious fields written by government officials of the UFWD (Wang Zuo'an, 2020b: 6-7; UFWD, 2020c: 84; Editorial Board China Religion, 2020a: 4-7). Lastly, there are also accounts of government officials of the UFWD working with religious actors to implement regulations, organize medical supplies, and distribute products for daily needs (Editorial Board China Religion, 2020b: 18-19; UFWD, 2020d: 83; Zhang Zhipeng, 2020: 28).

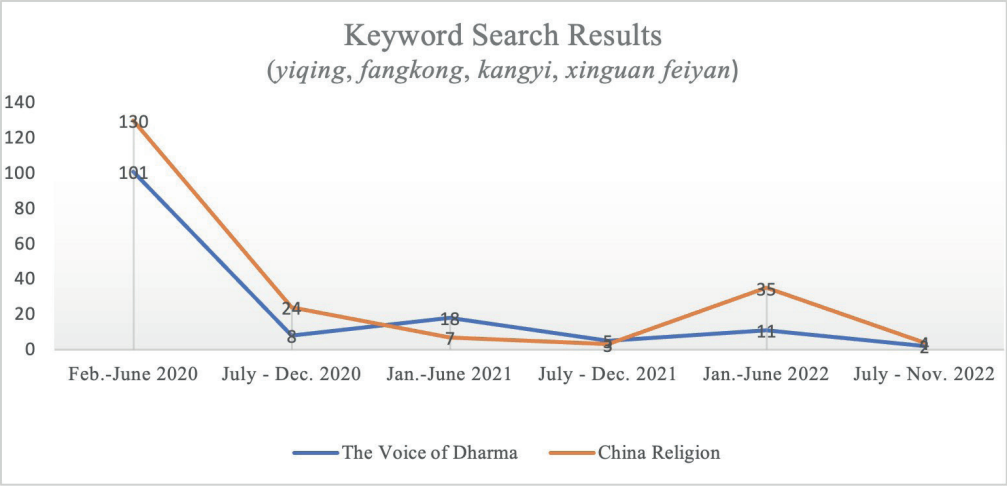
Starting from May 2020, the same political parlance takes on center stage as in *The Voice of Dharma*, underlining the importance of the patriotic work of religious actors and officials in fighting the pandemic (Wang Zuo'an, 2020c: 7-9; Shi Yanjue, 2020: 10-12). Thereafter, from July to December 2020, the four keywords only appeared 24 times in two articles on Shanghai Jade Buddha Temple (2020: 17-19) and Shaolin Temple (*shaolinsi* 少林寺) (Zouxiang, 2020: 88-89), providing updated information about the donation efforts of both temples and in two articles by the UFWD on the normalization of anti-pandemic measurements in the religious field (Chang Shoufeng, 2020: 61-63) as well as the impact of the pandemic on religious colleges (Huangjia, 2020: 50-51).

Since then, in 2021, the four keywords have appeared 10 times in articles including reports of officials inspecting religious sites (Chang Shoufeng, 2021: 39-40) and highlight the significance of the 'sinicization' (*zhongguohua* 中國化) of religion in China during the 'great fight against the pandemic' (*weida kangyi* 偉大抗疫) (UFWD,

[7] - Over 185 results for 'Buddhism' (*fojiao* 佛教), 112 for 'Daoism' (*daojiao* 道教), 65 for 'Protestantism' (*jidujiao* 基督教), 52 for 'Catholicism' (*tianzhujiao* 天主教), and 58 'Islam' (*yisilanjiao* 伊斯蘭教) – the five officially recognized religion in China.

2021: 42-43), which – in its own right – appeared in 128 articles, almost twice as many as in 2020. Finally, a search for the four keywords in 2022 shows that *China Religion* only published related articles within three months from April to June 2022, all of which are general accounts of how religious groups are working together to organize medical supplies and raise donations as well as reiterations of government policies (Ma Yufei, 2022: 5-6).

This short report demonstrates that both journals were highly engaged in reporting Covid-19-related issues during the first half year of 2020, including an anti-pandemic announcement by the BAC or government agencies, fundraising events, donations and distribution of medical supplies, religious explanations of the virus and how to live with it, etc. In the Summer of 2020, the number of articles on the pandemic generally declined, but pieces by government officials increased, possibly aiming at uniting the Chinese population under the leadership of the Communist Party. The reason for the decline of Covid-19-related articles might be that China only reported a few thousand active cases from January to early March 2020. After that, the number of cases dropped to about one hundred per day, until a new wave of positive cases drove the case numbers up again from February to June 2022, according to data provided by John Hopkins University (2023). There may therefore be a correlation between the confirmed case and the number of pandemic-related articles in the Buddhist journal *The Voice of Dharma* and *China Religion*. Figure 1 summarizes the above discussion.



In the following, we shall look at how Chinese Buddhism has reacted, adapted, and reorganized itself as it faced a new pandemic situation, triggering weeks – if not months – of lockdowns and social distancing.

Chinese Buddhism (re-)acts

As previously mentioned, the first few issues of The Voice of Dharma contained Buddhist interpretations of the virus, its meaning, and how to combat it. Accordingly, I will begin this discussion with one of the earliest reactions, published in February 2020. During a speech given to the Politburo Standing Committee of the Chinese Communist

Party (*zhongguo gongchandang zhongyang zhengzhiju changwu weiyuanhui* 中國共產黨中央政治局常務委員會) on January 25, 2020, Xi Jinping said, "Life is of paramount importance; when a pandemic breaks out, a command is issued, and it is our responsibility to prevent and control it."[8] Following these instructions, the vice president of the BAC, Master Shenghui, wrote about how Buddhists can help defeat the coronavirus in a piece for *The Voice of Dharma* (Shi Shenghui, 2020: 14-15). He described the virus as being the biggest evil (*emo* 惡魔) currently poisoning our world and that stopping its spread equals practicing the good dharma (*shanfa* 善法) – the cultivation method that leads to awakening. He thus exhorted his readers first to recognize that since sentient beings possess a Buddha nature, all Buddhists should sympathize with everyone infected with the Corona disease and use Buddhist wisdom to alleviate their pain. Second, Buddhists should work together with all citizens. He emphasized,

> although we are not doctors and nurses and do not have the expertise to heal and care for the sick and cannot fight on the front line in the prevention and control of the epidemic, we can, through our practice and wisdom in the present moment, dedicate ourselves as Buddhists to overcome this epidemic disease (14).

The wisdom he refers to does not mean speaking in lofty theories about the virus, but rather strictly complying with the Party and State requirements for the prevention and control of the epidemic as well as donating money and goods, reorganizing communal practice, and promoting individual practice at home. Third, since Buddhism considers the relationship of humans with other sentient beings and nature based on circumstantial retribution (*yibao* 依報) and direct retribution (*zhengbao* 正報), external conditions can change according to one's state of mind and faith, for 'faith is the source of all good deeds and achievements' (15).

It is therefore understandable, that in light of the spread of Covid-19 in mainland China since January 2020, the BAC issued preventive measures for monasteries that normally attract countless numbers of devotees during the Spring Festival Golden Week Holiday (24th – 2nd Feb.). According to the announcement on January 22, monasteries must organize their activities based on an appropriate scale and not exceed the number of visitors that can be accommodated; implementation of safety measures such as disinfection and ventilation; and they should control the 'civilized use of incense offerings' (*wenming jingxiang* 文明敬香)[9] of its visitors (BAC, 2020a: 7). However, only seven days later on January 29, it announced that all on-site activities must be suspended and that four measurements must be implemented to minimize the spread of the virus (BAC, 2020b:7). These include:

1. Monasteries and Colleges should close their gates, practice self-cultivation, and chant sutras for the blessing of all sentient beings.
2. All Dharma Ceremonies should be suspended.

[8] - 生命終於泰山，疫情就是命令，防控就是責任 (Li Jieqong, 2020).

[9] - The concept of *'wenming'* (文明), often translated as civil, civility, civilization or culture, is part of Chinese political discourse and has enthusiastically been propagated by the Chinese state for decades to exhort its citizens to behave as a proper citizen. It prominently appears in propaganda discourse in the public space on banners, advertisement, and pamphlets. See Boutonnet (2011) and Moreno (2018) on the history, etymology, and current usage of this concept.

3. Monks of monasteries and colleges should not leave their place of residence to visit other places during the outbreak.
4. All monastics should focus their mind and body, study the scriptures, and practice diligently.

Echoing the second official announcement by the BAC, the president of BAC, Master Yanjue, similarly urged local Buddhist associations, monasteries, and Buddhist colleges to shift to 'isolation and focus on pure practices' (*biguan qingxiu* 閉關清修). Yet, at the same time, he urged BAC associations across China to work together to circulate the latest information about the pandemic, to advise devotees to use scientific methods to fight the pandemic while calming their minds by employing Buddhist teachings, and to raise funds to donate material support to areas most affected by the virus (Shi Yanjue, 2020). On February 15, 2020, on Weibo Master Yongxin 永信, the abbot of Shaolin monastery, prompted his followers to participate in his hashtag 'Fight Against the Pandemic Check-In Campaign' (*zhanyi daka xingdong* 戰疫打卡行動) and to vow (*fayuan* 發願): "believe in science, believe in the motherland! Beating the epidemic starts with me!" (Yongxin, 2020a). Except for encouraging Buddhist colleges to switch to distance education in the early stage of the outbreak in China, there seems to be no swift change to utilizing digital media to ensure the continuation of dharma lectures or ceremonies.

Yanjue encouraged fellow monastics and devotees to chant sutras (*songjing* 誦經), recite the name of Amitābha Buddha (*nianfo* 念佛), and pray for blessings from the Three Jewels to stop the pandemic. Pictures in the February issue of *The Voice of Dharma* depict monastics and lay devotees from different provinces standing in front of temples, charity organizations (e.g., the Red Cross), and hospitals either holding large donation checks or presenting a variety of medical supplies. Only monastics from Hong Kong can be seen praying in front of supplies, performing a religious service to bless them (The Voice of Dharma, 2020: 81). The following March issue of *The Voice of Dharma* also includes a variety of pictures of monastics in Japan, South Korea, the United States, and Sri Lanka, presenting medical supplies to local Buddhist groups and government agencies (The Voice of Dharma, 2020: 67-68). On Weibo, Master Yongxin shared pictures of him and his monastic disciples meeting via video conference with overseas branches of the Shaolin temple in Europe and Southeast Asia to organize the distribution of material aid supplies worth 2 million RMB (Yongxin 2020b). This shows that one of the main responsibilities of Buddhism in mainland China was – possibly still is – to use their transnational networks to raise funds, acquire medical supplies, and distribute them either in China or abroad. The pictures try to suggest a quick, controlled, and organized reaction to the pandemic. They also illustrate that the Chinese state is willing to outsource the delivery of emergency relief and social services to non-state actors operating nationally and internationally as long as their interests overlap – a point that André Laliberté has also made in his paper on the Buddhist revival under Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao (2011: 117-122).

Buddhism in China only has a relatively small field of (legal) activities. The constitutionally protected right to 'religious freedom' allows individuals to have the freedom to choose a religious faith, but not to collectively practice it in public spaces. Consequently, rituals, prayers, and instructions are only allowed within temples. Gareth Fisher (2014) notes in his study on Buddhist urban lay practitioners in Beijing that Buddhism is only allowed to become visible when it serves economic interests, provides social and charitable services, and assists in the diplomatic agendas of the state (205). The slogan 'love the country, love the religion' (*aiguo aijiao* 愛國愛教) highlights this priority of patriotic feeling towards the country over personal preferences regarding one's faith because *aiguo* comes before *aijiao* and *aijiao* has to be grounded in *aiguo*. In a paper on the instrumentalization of Buddhism for foreign policy purposes, Yoshiko Ashiwa and David L. Wank write "this basically means that clerics must obey the CPC [Communist Party of China] and work for its goals" (2020: 3). Buddhism has been tightly incorporated into the Chinese party-state through a state corporatist institutional arrangement, which provides the government with a channel to exert its power more effectively when dealing with religious issues. This is reflected in the fact that the BAC – the only legal representative body for all Buddhist groups in China – is subordinate to the State Administration of Religious Affairs (SARA), which is itself part of the United Front Work Department (UFWD), an organization that formulates CCP ideology and manages relations with non-party groups. BAC leaders are chosen behind the scenes by the UFWD (Ji Zhe, 2008: 249).

This means that when monastics from China travel around the globe to meet in a 'non-state capacity' with other Buddhist groups, their mission is not just to exchange views or provide other countries with medical supplies but rather has a strong political implication, namely "winning over the trust and friendship of neighboring Buddhist countries" (Chung, 2022: 259) and to influence the politics and societies of these countries. During the 1950s and 1960s, the Chinese state used Buddhism not only to spread anti-imperialistic messages directed at the USA in neighboring countries, including Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Vietnam, Japan, etc. to present itself as the protector of world peace but also to improve diplomatic relations with these countries (Xueyu, 2013: 110-116). Nowadays, particularly under Xi Jinping, Buddhism was chosen by the state to globally promote the 'excellent Chinese traditional culture' (*zhonghua youxiu chuantong wenhua* 中華優秀傳統文化) to 'tell the China Story well' (*jianghao zhongguo gushi* 講好中國故事). The goal is not to spread Buddhist teachings, but to "further the aspiration of the Communist Party of China (CPC) for China to be recognized as a country that has inherited a civilization in the modern world" (Ashiwa, Wank, 2020: 2). In the context of a global health crisis when China tried to distance itself as the cause of the virus, portray itself as a critical global power to provide medical supplies, and highlight the struggles of Western countries to fight Covid-19 to underline the effectiveness of its model of governance, Chinese Buddhist sending personal protective equipment to Sri Lanka, South Korea, Japan, the Philippines, and the US amounted to 'mask diplomacy'. This is because, as Brian Wong of The Diplomate wrote, providing emergency relief gives China "significant access to

the critical infrastructure within the states that open themselves up to China, as well as the opportunity to foster sentiments of gratitude and tit-for-tat reciprocity" (2020) This echoes Xueyu's research on Buddhist public diplomacy in the 1950s.

In terms of organizing religious services to fight against the pandemic on a metaphysical level, the Hong Kong Buddhist community stands out again. In an editorial, the editors of *The Voice of Dharma* provide a general overview regarding measurements implemented at various monasteries across China. All 15 reports on monasteries in mainland China have three points in common: (1) Each monastery strictly follows the anti-covid policies of the government and strengthens its love for the country and religion; (2) Donations were rapidly raised and given to either charity organizations (Shanghai Charity Organization, Red Cross), branch associations of the BAC, or directly to areas that had been hit by the coronavirus. Lingyin Monastery (*lingyinsi* 靈隱寺) in Hangzhou 杭州, for example, provided over 10 million RMB in funds for the construction of the so-called 'instant hospitals' (*huoshenshan yiyuan* 火神山醫院) in the pandemic's epicenter, Wuhan, which were built within two weeks; lastly, (3) monasteries took on the role of purchasing, collecting, and distributing medical supplies (The Voice of Dharma, 2020c: 33-37).

Apart from donating face masks to schools and retirement homes, Buddhist communities in Hong Kong organized a dharma ceremony to fight the pandemic via metaphysical means, called 'The Hong Kong Buddhist Community Prayer Service for the Prevention and Relief of the Pandemic' (*xianggang fojiaojie fangyi xizai qifu fahui* 香港佛教界防疫息災祈福法會) held at the Hong Kong Buddhist Association Cultural Centre and live-streamed via Facebook on February 20, 2020 (Hongkong Buddhist Association 2020a), accumulating over 20,000 views since then. In a letter to Buddhist temples, monasteries, and practitioners from February 23, 2020, the Hong Kong Buddhist Association also called for a collective recitation of the Heart Sutra (*xinjing* 心經) or the Great Compassion Dharani (*dabeizhou* 大悲咒) at home every night at 9 pm to accumulate merit (*gongde* 功德) and bring about an early end of the Pandemic (Hongkong Buddhist Association 2020b). This was not, however, a collective Zoom event or streamed on Facebook, but rather an appeal to individual practice.

The reason for the different approaches to dealing with the pandemic in mainland China and Hong Kong might be that since the second and third announcements of the BAC on February 8, 2020, the general emphasis has been on supporting charity organizations and hospitals with donations as well as finding a scientific solution, not a religious one, as the seventh section of the 'Ten Guidelines to Prevent and Control the Pandemic' (*fangkong yiqing huilu shitiao* 防控疫情匯錄十條) states. It reads, "do not rely only on faith, but pay particular attention to science; do not underestimate the enemy [i.e. pandemic] at this time but learn [scientific] knowledge quickly!"[10] (BAC 2020c: 13). The emphasis on science has political undertones along the lines of 'do not believe miraculous stories, believe and follow what the government tells you.' Apart from emphasizing scientific knowledge, this guide also urged for the active involvement

[10] - 不只靠信仰，更要講科學，此时莫輕敵，知識抓緊學。

of the Buddhist community in spreading this knowledge to the public and advising devotees to stay at home. It should be noted, however, that since my data is based on official reports here, there may well have been monasteries other than those mentioned in The Voice of Dharma that organized and promoted collective chanting and rituals online.

Despite containing the spread of the virus and decreasing case numbers in China in April 2020, the BAC released another statement advising that all Buddhist organizations shall not hold any religious activities, as the virus continues to spread internationally. Therefore, all dharma ceremonies during the Buddha's Birthday (normally in May) were suspended. Monks were encouraged to express their remembrance of the Buddha by chanting sutras, Buddha recitation, and meditation. Regarding Buddhist Colleges, the BAC emphasized that although 'classes are suspended, learning continues' (*tingke bu tingxue* 停課不停學). Therefore, teachers should experiment with innovative ways of teaching and learning during the pandemic, including video teaching or distance learning via Zoom, WeChat, Tencent meetings, and online platforms (BAC, 2020d: 5). At this stage, it still seems that digital media is only used for educational purposes in Buddhist colleges but not for live streaming of dharma lectures and ceremonies.

In an article published after the 12th and 13th meeting of the Joint Conference of National Religious Associations (*quanguoxing zongjiao tuanti lianxihui* 全國性宗教團體聯席會) in June 2020, Yanjue (2020b, 6: 8-9) summarized its central points as follows:

1. Continuation of the 'Double Halt, One Postponement' (*shuang zanting yi yanchi* 雙暫停一延遲) and 'Four Dos and Four Don'ts' (*siyi sibuyi* 四宜四不宜) policy.
2. Spreading positive energy by re-tweeting Xi Jinping's important speeches, producing prayer videos, and videos of individuals in their fight against the pandemic.
3. Cultivation of a compassionate spirit to aid everyone affected by the virus.
4. Raising money for disaster relief in China and abroad (South Korea, Japan, Philippines, Cambodia, Sri Lanka, USA), because "we are deeply aware that the future of Buddhism is closely linked to the destiny of the nation' and that '[we need] to alleviate the suffering of sentient beings" (8).
5. Persisting in the sinicization of Chinese Buddhism and promoting a patriotic spirit.

Of interest for our discussion is that both joint conferences were convened online and that Yanjue encouraged Buddhist communities in China to share videos of personal experiences fighting the pandemic, broadcast sutra recitation videos or audios, and prayer videos via WeChat and the internet. For example, in early February, the BAC published 'Eight Vows to Pray for Blessings' (*bayuan qifuwen* 八願祈福文) and a video showing hospital scenes, tirelessly working officials, closed monasteries, praying monastics, material donations, etc. – all against the background of emotive, solemn music, and chanting monks (BAC 2020e). As these videos and animations are

unidirectional, they do not allow for any sort of interaction and connection between the monastic community and their lay followers. This sort of passiveness of digital media only allows for individual consumption at home. In the following, however, we shall look at one monastery that developed more interactive ways and tried to spread blessings across the world wide web to contain the virus – Shanghai Jade Buddha Temple.

Case Study: Shanghai Jade Buddha Temple

As news broke that a new coronavirus was spreading fast in China and abroad, Master Juexing 覺醒, abbot of the Jade Buddha Temple in Shanghai, decided to close the temple's gates on January 24, days before the city government informed the public about preventive measurements. Jade Buddha Temple has considerable experience in charity projects and disaster relief services (Cao Shuhong, 2009: 48-49, Shi Juexing, 2010: 68-70) which is why it immediately started raising funds to provide medical supplies for areas that have been affected the most. For that reason, together with the Shanghai Charity Foundation (*shanghaishi cishan jijinhui* 上海市慈善基金會) and Shanghai Auction House (*shanghai paimaihang* 上海拍賣行), Juexing launched the first Buddhist online charity auction in Shanghai. The auction included calligraphy pieces by Master Juexing and a selection of Buddhist cultural artwork. Within days, all artworks were sold, and he wrote on Weibo on February 1: "All proceeds from today's auction will be donated to the Shanghai Charity Foundation to purchase medical protective equipment for Wuhan medical institutions in the fight against the pandemic" (2020a).

Throughout February 2020, he continued posting several pictures of volunteers, monks, and himself standing behind all sorts of supplies, which were then loaded onto trucks to be sent to hospitals in different provinces where they were unloaded by monks and volunteers. On February 11, he commented: "We are confident that we will win this battle [*zhan* 戰] against the pandemic, take off our masks soon, and embrace the fragrance of spring" (2020b). The same 'battle' imagery is used by the Jade Buddha Temple. Under the hashtag 'Together Against the Pandemic' (*gongtong zhanyi* 共同戰疫), the temple also posted numerous pictures of monks wearing masks and gloves loading and unloading medical supplies, but also pandemic prevention guides for office workers or cute cartoon monks reminding netizens to wear masks and to wash their hands regularly (Shanghai Jade Buddha Temple, 2022a).

Posts addressing the pandemic, including uplifting quotes, poems, images of Buddha statues, and re-tweeted news, mirror the same pattern identified for *The Voice of Dharma*, i.e. from February to March 2020, Juexing actively engaged in explaining the pandemic in Buddhist terms, demonstrated the Buddhist sangha's commitment to soliciting donations to purchase (overseas) medical supplies, and showed their distribution through their networks. Thereafter, between March 2020 and February 2022, only a handful of posts related to the pandemic on Juexing's and the temple's Weibo accounts could be found. Beginning in March 2022, as the number of confirmed cases began to rise again, Jade Buddha Temple closed its gates from March 14 to

July 1, 2022 and performed dharma ceremonies behind closed doors.[11] The temple then resumed distributing medical supplies and shared images of these efforts with the public (Shanghai Jade Buddha Temple, 2022e).

In order to bestow the gift of fearlessness or confidence (*shi wuwei* 施無畏) – one of the three kinds of giving (*bushi* 布施) that are considered essential on the Buddhist path towards awakening – Jade Buddha Temple began actively promoting scientific knowledge, guiding devotees to correctly understand, prevent and respond to the pandemic. For example, on its official WeChat account, it not only published various articles that called for the 'protection of life' (*husheng* 護生) and a vegetarian diet by referring to Feng Zikai's 豐子愷 (1898-1975) 'Paintings for the Preservation of Life' (*husheng huaji* 護生畫集), Master Yinguang 印光 (1862-1940), and Master Taixu 太虛 (1890-1947), it also released videos of a cartoon monk who explains how to work from home. Apart from reminding its audience to wash their hands regularly, the cartoon monk also encourages his viewers to continue their daily practice by chanting sutras and reciting the Buddha's name (Juequn Centre for Humanistic Buddhist Studies, 2020: 58-59). Additionally, the temple began chanting sutras for the sick and medical staff – one of the few religious activities to combat the virus on a metaphysical level during the early stage of the pandemic.

In the October issue of *China Religion*, Juexing wrote "the more difficult the times, the more important it is for Buddhism to play its part. I am willing to use my strength to take up my social responsibility, to guide the faithful to turn their anxiety into positive motivation and to be the guardian of life" (Shanghai Jade Buddha Temple 2020: 19). The social responsibility he speaks of reflects his motto 'aiming for the fastest, broadest, and longest' (*yi zuikuai zuiguang zuijiu wei mubiao* 以最快最廣最久為目標) possible fight against the pandemic, under which Jade Buddha Temple continues its fundraising projects. These projects aim at either acquiring the financial means to purchase medical supplies or donating the funds to other charitable organizations.

Another social responsibility was to take care of the spiritual needs of his followers. On January 25, 2020, Juexing initiated a 49-days 'Dharma Ceremony to pray for blessings and to alleviate calamities' (*xizai qifu fahui* 息災祈福法會) and from February 16 to March 7, monastics of Jade Buddha Temple held a series of 'Emperor Liang Repentance Dharma Ceremonies' (*lianghuang baochan fahui* 梁皇寶懺法會), 'Protecting the Country and Preventing Calamities Dharma Ceremonies' (*renwang huguo xizai fahui* 仁王護國息災法會), and 'Medicine Buddha Dharma Ceremonies' (*yaoshi fahui* 藥師法會). Since it was not possible for lay devotees to join the on-site ceremonies, Jade Buddha Temple streamed them on its social media channels. Likewise, all courses that were normally carried out at the temple were pre-recorded by Juexing and then sent to his followers.

[11] - Dharma ceremonies included a seven day recitation of the 'Sutra of the Medicine Buddha' (*yaoshi jing* 藥師經) starting from April 22 (Shanghai Jade Buddha Temple, 2022b), a 'Lamp-Lighting Wisdom Prayer Ceremony in honor of Manjushri Bodhisattva's Birthday' (*wenshu pusa shengdan diandeng qihui fahui* 文殊菩薩聖誕點燈祈慧法會) on May 4 (Shanghai Jade Buddha Temple, 2022c), and a 'Buddha Bathing Ceremony' (*yufojie* 浴佛節) on May 8 (Shanghai Jade Buddha Temple, 2022d), dedicating the merits of the recitation to the public and end the pandemic.

A third social responsibility was to spread a correct understanding of the pandemic. To this end, Juexing invited medical experts and scholars to launch an online life education course, that educated the public regarding the Chinese lifecare system and guided them to value life through courses such as 'How Buddhism Understands the Pandemic' (*fojiao wenming ruhe lijie yibing* 佛教文明如何理解疫病), 'How to Improve Immunity' (*ruhe tigao mianyili* 如何提高免疫力) and 'Integrating Chinese Medicine into Hospice Care' (*zhongyiyao rongru anning liaohu* 中醫藥融入安寧療護) (Shanghai Jade Buddha Temple, 2020: 17-19).

Distributing donations, spiritual guidance, and offering (Buddhist) education are the three approaches of the Jade Buddha Temple to fight against the pandemic. Apart from transporting medical supplies to their destinations and performing dharma ceremonies behind closed gates, Jade Buddha Temple relocated its activities into the virtual realm, be it on its website, the video streaming website Tencent, or on the microblogging platform Sina Weibo where the temple tweeted and re-tweeted countless short uplifting quotes from scriptures, pictures of Buddha statues and monastics distributing supplies, prayers for an early end of the pandemic, and videos of Juexing under the hashtag 'Together Against the Pandemic.' This is just one example of how Buddhist communities in China have readily adapted to the new normal, namely the disembedding of our experience of place and the restructuring of proximity and distance in the context of global modernity – in this case, catalyzed by a global health crisis.

Conclusion

With the increasing integration of internet technology into daily life, religious practices and identities continue to evolve in the digital sphere. Rituals are a perfect example of this, once confined to specific physical locations, many are now performed in virtual environments, transcending space and time. In the early days of the internet, online rituals were nothing more than a text-based interaction on bulletin boards and list services, showing minimal forms of engagement. Since then, more than 30 years have passed and virtual pilgrimages, meditation sessions, prayer sermons, discussion groups, dharma lectures, offerings, etc. have become part of religious online activity. Christopher Helland (2012) notes that these developments challenge traditional religious structures, as individuals now have the freedom to explore and interpret religious texts independently, thereby challenging religious authority. Similarly, Heidi Campbell (2010) argues that digital technology can alter religious practices, rituals, scriptures, and authority structures.

In China, despite the state's tight control over cyberspace, the internet allows users to search for and upload certain religious information that are non-subversive to the state to a variety of platforms, including social media sites that potentially reach millions of netizens. While this rarely challenges religious authority, it does change the format and location of practice. Digital media has profoundly impacted Buddhist practice by transforming how communal activities are conducted and how individuals engage with their faith. The accessibility and inclusivity fostered by virtual communities centered on individual monks or their monasteries have connected people separated by time and

space, at the same time however, it has broken up traditional ritual settings in terms of spatial, temporal, and bodily integration of the individual. Today, through the lens of a camera, one can (virtually) be part of a dharma ceremony as a silent participant who can leave and return at any time. In addition, social media allows religious leaders not only to spread their messages more widely and interactively, but also to create a more personal connection with followers through comments, likes, and shares. As Hervieu-Léger (2000) noted, the continuity function of the community, which creates links of memory between the past and the present, extends not only into the future, providing a sense of direction, but also into the virtual realm, where it creates networks of people and places that were previously unconnected. For example, while online educational courses or videos from the Shanghai Jade Buddha Temple are one-directional and do not allow for interaction and exchange, Weibo allows its users to comment and share posts, and WeChat allows its users to discuss Buddhist ideas in private chat groups. Longquan Temple in Changning, Hunan Province, is another example of a monastery that offers a hybrid format of Buddhist practice, namely on-site and "cloud classroom" participation. The latter is open to a global audience – provided that one knows Chinese and has a Chinese phone number.

Digital technologies and social media have become a resource skillfully utilized by religious groups to reach into the daily lives of their community in times of separation, whether because of social distance or because of day-to-day life, but also to reach out to followers in distant places and to create a virtual community of like-minded people. It is because of this ability to transcend geographical boundaries and tap into the lives of countless people that the Chinese state can use it to spread political propaganda more effectively. One such indicator is language. Language plays a crucial role in shaping perceptions and influencing the way people understand and respond to situations. When resistance to the pandemic is described in terms of battle or struggle, as in 'Together Against the Pandemic' (*gongtong zhanyi*), there are several implications: (1) Framing the pandemic response as a battle taps into feelings of nationalism and patriotism and portrays China as a resilient and determined nation capable of overcoming external threats, thereby fostering national pride and solidarity. (2) It also reinforces the state's role as a protector and leader in times of crisis, while signaling to the public the need for compliance with government directives, thereby strengthening authoritarian governance structures. (3) At the same time, it elevates healthcare workers, frontline personnel, and those adhering to preventive measures to the status of heroes and even martyrs, as evidenced by the story of Li Wenliang 李文亮 who tried to warn the world but was silenced by the government and later became a central figure in a narrative promoting the Chinese Communist Party's effective handling of the pandemic. In the case of the Jade Buddha Temple, the use of the 'battle (*zhan*) – language' emphasizes the collective, determined, and urgent nature of the response required to combat the pandemic and aims to mobilize the community, reinforcing the idea that everyone – including Buddhism – has a role to play in overcoming the crisis and protecting public health.

Looking through the articles and reports of *The Voice of Dharma* and *China Religion*, we are presented with a sanitized, rational, patriotic, and hard-working picture of

Buddhism that did not focus on metaphysical means via dharma rituals and dharma lectures to fight the pandemic. Monasteries throughout China used (or had to use) their vast transnational networks and resources to raise funds and buy medical supplies not for themselves but also for areas that have been hit by the virus – even abroad in Japan, South Korea, the USA, and Sri Lanka. Since 'day one', their role was to help organize and distribute these supplies. Since Buddhism in mainland China is closely incorporated into the party-state apparatus, its role in organizing and distributing medical supplies to foreign countries has had a distinct political undertone especially because China aimed at portraying itself as the good Samaritan and reliable partner in the fight against the pandemic. The fact that the BAC sent various personal protective equipment to East Asian and Southeast Asian countries is reminiscent of its diplomatic role during the 1950s and 60s. It also plays a part in Xi Jinping's unprecedented efforts to promote Chinese Buddhism in countries with a shared Buddhist heritage to influence the perception of China in those countries.

The result of this intimate relationship between the state and Buddhism was to serve as a bridge between the government and devotees to disseminate new policies and scientific knowledge amongst them, particularly in times of crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic, as my content analysis of *The Voice of Dharma* and *China Religion* has shown. This was even emphasized by Wangyang 汪洋, a member of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China, during a speech for the Spring Festival Symposium for Leaders of National Religious Organizations in Beijing on January 27, as he stressed that religious groups are the bridge between the Party and the government to unite and connect with the religious community (Xinhua News Agency, 2022: 4). This role as intermediary between the state, the monastic community, and broader religious community is accentuated in times of crises by using secular and political discourses.

By scrolling through the news feeds of monastics and monasteries on Sina Weibo, WeChat, or their websites, bits and pieces of information can be found that explain the pandemic in Buddhist terms. During the first half of 2020, the Buddhist community in mainland China tried to define the emergence and meaning of the new pandemic, for example, describing it as the "biggest evil that poisons our world" and that jointly fighting against it means practicing the good dharma. Though Shanghai Jade Buddha Temple launched online courses and performed dharma ceremonies during the early months of the pandemic, most interaction with lay followers remained unilaterally through WeChat articles and videos, Sina Weibo blog entries, Tencent streams, and publications on their website. The central message promoted adopting scientific and hygienic living habits—a narrative strongly aligned with the Chinese government's public health campaign. Regardless of the content, digital platforms have become an integral part of contemporary Chinese Buddhism, fostering new interactions between religious specialists and followers while expanding spaces for religious cultivation both offline and online.

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Abstract:

This case study explores the influence of a global health crisis on contemporary Chinese Buddhism in Mainland China. As prevention and control measures for Covid-19 enforced by the Chinese government constitute challenges and opportunities for religious communities, this paper examines how Buddhist actors react, adapt, re-create, and rationalise the transformation of their religious practice under these special conditions as well as what role Buddhism assumes during the fight against the pandemic. I will therefore focus on how pandemic prevention measures have been communicated through various channels, such as academic journals, newspapers, social media, and websites of Buddhist temples. Regarding journals, I will collect and analyse information published online in 'The Voice of Dharma' and in 'China Religion'. Both journals provide information not only on religion in China in general but also on Buddhism and how the Covid-19 pandemic has affected the configuration of the Chinese religious field. To complement redacted and officially sanctioned articles, I will further conduct digital ethnography on the microblogging website Sina Weibo and instant messaging app WeChat, for it allows us to understand the behaviour of practitioners and organisations of Chinese Buddhism through video diaries, photo uploads, live streams, blog entries, online communities, etc. Without being physically there, we have access to the lives of practitioners, enabling us to capture and assess ritual practices as they happen, thus inviting us to pay attention to the humans behind the screen and reflect on the important question of what it means to 'do' religion and even 'be' religious in a wired world.