Dizang Forum:
The Formation of Virtual Buddhist Community and the Innovation of Dizang Belief in Modern China
by
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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of Religious Studies
in the Graduate School of Duke University
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

In this modern era, our lives are largely influenced by digital technology and the Internet. The interactive feature of the new technology has transformed our conventional understanding of objects. Technology that provides easiness to our life is not unmoved but actively and interactively reshapes and forms human culture and society. This thesis is based on the hypothesis that religious communities and people’s religious lives are also under the influence of and transformed by this revolution in technology.

The purpose of this thesis is the examination of the formation and operation of a Chinese online Buddhist forum called Dizang forum and analysis of how it works as a virtual Buddhist community and reconstructs the model of the traditional Buddhist community. By doing close research on how the members of the forum inherit and innovate traditional Dizang belief and practices with modern values and online technology, the aim of this thesis is to explore how technology, and specifically the Internet, transforms religion. The methodology used in this study involved gathering and analyzing data, web page analyzing, and using religious studies, historical studies, and media studies approaches.

The conclusion of the thesis is that online Buddhist forums, taking the Dizang forum as an example, have revolutionized the traditional lay community and thus transformed people’s interactions with religion.
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Introduction

As Daniel Veidlinger states, “When smartphone apps remind people when to meditate and Buddhist monks bless temples that are built out of pixels in online virtual reality systems, there can be little doubt that the Internet, mobile phones, video games, and other incarnations of digital technologies are changing the face of religion in the world today.”¹ Human beings are in an era where the whole world has been overwhelmed by the power of the Internet, even in the realm of religion. Notably, it is in the realm of religion where tradition and the most advanced technology have the most visible competition and interactions. In the case of Chinese Buddhism, the power of digital media is more overwhelming because of unique historical conditions.

Modern China (after 1919) appears to be a period of destruction for religion. When Chinese people returned to Buddhism, it was almost in ruins. Even if the sutras and the records of performing ceremonies can be regained with minimal difficulty, the traditional way to live religiously is not as easily attained. Thus, the digital era has profoundly influenced Chinese Buddhism not only because of the convenience and effectiveness of Buddhist websites and forums, drawing more people to conduct online religious practices, but also because of the vacuum of the Buddhist tradition. As a result, the reconstruction of Buddhism goes beyond the simple act of re-constructing, in fact, it

involves creating a new “brand” of Buddhism. Apart from the sanctity of online space, Buddhist online activities also add more new issues to the discussion of Buddha dharma. Since online websites provide a platform for people from different backgrounds and different parts of China to communicate, their activities create a new kind of Buddhism, which, in comparison with the traditional form, has extended boundaries and become more interactive.

**The Revolutionary Feature of Digital Media**

This paper is built on the premise that surfing Buddhist websites can be seen as part of daily religious practices. Thus, it is fair to assume that online religious activities can, to a large extent, bring new features to certain religious traditions.

It is common for a modern person to accept the claim that Internet and cyberspace are considered to be one of the most revolutionary inventions in human history and have profoundly influenced human culture. The most revolutionary feature of the 21st century that most people in the last century would never imagine is that almost everything can be digitized now. People are becoming more accustomed to the digitalization of the “real” material world and increasingly reliant on web devices such as smartphones and computers. My classmates and coworkers often say they would “rather die than go one day without the Internet”. The influence of the Internet and cyberspace is far greater than people usually think. There is also no doubt that
cyberspace and the Internet are for more than just entertainment and information. More specifically speaking, for individuals, the Internet has gradually become an important method of communicate. Without noticing, it silently occupies our daily lives. One cannot help but frequently check one’s cell phone, looking forward to a new comment from a friend on a social network. The Internet has the power to render any time without it boring and meaningless. Thus it is not an exaggeration to say that the social lives of many modern individuals are largely built on this virtual community. When people start noticing the importance of digital media it has already become a kind of inevitable lifestyle. The same phenomenon happens to many modern men and women especially young people.

The revolutionary feature of the Internet is that it not only changes and influences people’s traditional way of life; it is also “creates”. That is to say, the Internet is more than a means of information acquisition. As it disrupts our traditional way of life, it constructs a new lifestyle for modern people. As it is a sufficient source of information, the Internet also has the power to change reality. That is to say, the Internet is not only a tool to acquire information and knowledge, but itself is a way to practice – the extension of daily activity. For example, a digital media such as an online forum is an effective tool for people from different parts of the country to get involved in inter-dialogue, which does not merely mean the convenience of modern technology enables people to communicate more efficiently, but also highlights the issue of believer’s identity as well
as the transformation of authority among religious groups. This means that it is the high
time to study the digital media in terms of the transformation it brings to the issue of
identity, concepts, and even the nature of religion.

**Media Studies and Religion**

Some breakthroughs in the field of media studies have been involved in the field
of religious studies for quite a while. It has been largely discussed and accepted that
“religion and media historically have had a close relationship.”² According to Daniel
Veidlinger, at the very dawn of religion, it was already in close relation with media. Oral
transmission used to be the original form of religious transmission. Along with the
development of religion, visual transmission arose in forms such as the manuscript.³

Previous works have focused on the intersecting relation between media and religion.
Recently, with the rise of digital media, more scholars have focused their interests on
questions like how digital media affects human culture and society.

From a macroscopic perspective of the history of religious studies, the argument
of disenchantment and re-enchantment about the future of religion is one of the most
important and debatable topics, which close relates to the latest social and technical
change. Since the industrial era, much negative prediction of the future of religion has
been argued by scholars such as Max Weber and his followers. Although Weber, to
some extent, did not completely predict the extinction of religion in future society, he

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³ Ibid.
foresaw the tremendous domination of technology: “technology increasingly became an autonomous force beyond human control”. Weber even claimed that “modern technology determine(s) the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism”.\(^4\) From Weber’s perspective, the future of human society, dominated by steel and technology, left spiritual transcendence little room where the decrease of the religious world was inevitable – even, perhaps, intrinsic. In fact, Weber expressed a Faustian concern: “although effectiveness and efficiency are greatly enhanced, these come at the price of widespread problems of meaning.”\(^5\) Later scholars such as Durkheim emphasized the important social constructional function of religion; however, they maintained that the possibility of a highly individualized society was destined to end traditional religion.

In the first half of the 20th century, when the disenchanted future of human society thrilled and worried many scholars, the specific research about the mass media was in its prime. According to Veidlinger, at that time, the far-reaching and one-way broadcast mass media such as radio and TV were considered to be effectively used “to consolidate power and authority in the hands of those who control the media, who now have the unprecedented ability to shape the thoughts of millions on a daily basis.”\(^6\) This trend of mass media studies was an echo and enhancement of the disenchantment

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\(^5\) Stef Aupers and Dick Houtman, “Religions of Modernity- Relocating the Sacred to the Self and the Digital” in Religions of Modernity, ed. Stef Aupers and Dick Houtman (Boston: Brill, 2010), 15.

perspective, for it often led to the kind of thought that considers religion as one of the many ideologies produced and enforced by a group of people controlling the right of speech.

Interestingly, in the latter half of the 20th century, and especially extending into the 21st, along with the rise of digital media, scholars proclaimed the perspective of re-enchantment. Because of the interactive feature of digital media, which is directly linked with the disruption of sole absolute authority, religion might face a new future where it may flourish instead of dying out as the pioneers of religious studies pessimistically predicted. Many studies have been done concerning the new kind of religions, namely digital religion or online religions, arising in the digital era. Houtman and Aupers described the rise of computer technology as a sign of revolution in the field of religious studies from alienation to spiritual salvation, a New Age spirituality7. Thus, here arises new questions concerning issues of authority and the identity of traditional religion.

Digital Media and Chinese Buddhism

Although “Over the past few years, a number of scholars have begun to study religion and new media and have questioned how these affect notions of community,

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7 Stef Aupers and Dick Houtman, *Religions of Modernity*, 16.
authority, identity, and practice.”, as well as the future of religion, Veidlinger noticed and claimed that more research is required in the field about the intersecting relations between Buddhism and digital media.

Currently, most pioneering studies in this field are from Western perspectives. Veidlinger pointed out that Buddhism, as one of the most influential subjects of religion online, has not been paid the attention it deserves among the academic fields. Veidlinger proposed that it is important to study how Buddhism made use of media technologies during its thousands years of development. Not only because Buddhism in its nature is a religion that took advantage of media in its early days of transmission in East Asia, in the contemporary period, it also fits phenomenally well with modern digital media technologies. According to the Pew Foundation’s “U.S. Religious Landscape Survey”, American Buddhists occupy only 0.7 percent of the whole population, while other studies have indicated that “Buddhists related activities constitute around 5.3 percent of online religious practice in the virtual world of Second Life.” Other evidence shows that Buddhists appear to be highly engaged in the online environments, as Ostrowski mentioned in his discussion of the phenomenon of “American Cybersangha”, indicating the emergence of American Buddhist’s community in the virtual world. However, as the main religious force that made the best use of modern technology, Buddhism was given the least attention in any academic field, much like “footprints” of digital studies

9 Daniel Veidlinger, Iliad, 2.
10 Allison Ostrowski, “American Cybersangha,” in Buddhism, the Internet, and Digital Media (New York: Routledge, 2015), 191.
as well as religious studies. Aware of this situation, a group of scholars published a book in 2015, entitled *Buddhist, the Internet, and Digital Media*, and edited by Grieve and Veidlinger, which contains the latest studies about digital media and Buddhism in the U.S. and gives a systematic summary and analysis of the current situation and previous studies about digital Buddhism.

Thanks to this work, we are afforded a glimpse into what is going on in the field of digital Buddhism in the U.S. However, it is also notable that Chinese Buddhism has not been taken into consideration in this assembled work. Neither the studies of Chinese scholars, nor the current situation of Chinese digital Buddhism, were mentioned.

According to “The Global Religious” research conducted by Pew Research Center in 2010, China possesses 50% of the total 488 million Buddhists in the whole world, which makes Chinese Buddhism an inescapable subject for Buddhist studies and worthy of further researching. The Philosophy Department of Renmin University, one of the top five universities in China, together with the National Survey Research Center at Renmin University of China (NSRC), recently conducted a nationwide survey of current religions in China. As a result of this nationwide survey, they presented “China Religion Survey (2015)” (CRS) in July 2015. According to this report, in contemporary China, Buddhism possesses the largest percentage (14%) of practitioners to utilize digital media, such as the Internet, to proselytize.¹¹ That means, among all the major religions in

contemporary China, Buddhist institutions such as temples tend to adopt digital media to promote Buddhism. Chinese Buddhism, as the majority of world Buddhism and one of the most influential Chinese religions, officially promotes itself on the internet, which leads to more Buddhists, including monks and practitioners, to use digital media as a way to train their beliefs. For example, many famous temples build online meditation pages and online shrines for believers practicing at home.

Such higher rates of adopting the most advanced digital technology results from the increasing amount of Internet users in China. China, as a developing country is presently experiencing the upheaval of social life brought about by the Internet.

According to “the 36th Analytical Report on the Internet Network Development in China”, conducted by the China Internet Network Information Center (CINIC), by June 2015, there were already 6.68 hundred million network users in China, accounting for 48.8% of the overall Chinese population. This means that, out of every two Chinese, there is one Internet user. It is evident that, for most Chinese people, surfing the Internet has become one of the most necessary parts of their daily lives. Corresponding to the fast pace of information transfer on the Internet, modern Chinese people are now living a fast-paced lifestyle. The official adoption rate of digital technology stimulates the age structure of Buddhists. According to the China Religion Survey (CRS) (2015), the age structure in the 21st century has shifted: Buddhism tends to be more attractive to young

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people, which challenges the traditional perception that Buddhism is a religion for the elderly.

Among all the aspects of Chinese Buddhist studies, digital Buddhism is one of the most important, not only because of the growing online Buddhist population, but also because of the unique circumstances of Chinese Buddhism in the modern period. As analyzed by some Chinese scholars, as a result of constant war time from 1840-1945 in modern Chinese history and Cultural Revolution, not only was the traditional social structure ruined, traditional Chinese culture was also impacted. As other victimized countries that suffered from the world war period, modern China was facing a dark period in terms of culture, which means that the core of the traditional culture is being crushed while a new culture has yet to be established. During this “cultural dark age,” when China reopened to the world, the world had come to the era of digital media upon which the whole new culture of China is being rebuilt.

Despite their awareness of the cultural blackout of modern China, few Chinese scholars apply this to the study of Buddhism. The fact is religion is one of the several dimensions of culture that has been through a most devastating destruction during the continuous revolutions in China. To revive, the tradition and the traditional way to study Buddhism is important. However, admitting that something belongs to the past is difficult. To move on and take stock of the present is of more importance.
Chapter Overview

In Chapter 1, I analyze how practice is conducted on the Dizang forum and how this forum serves for Dizang belief specifically. In Chapter 2, I analyze the online shrines and temples standing as the substitutions for the real ones. In Chapter 3, I discuss the rise of Divination method within Dizang belief in the 21st century and Dizang forum’s role. Finally, in Chapter 4 features a discussion and analysis of how media has brought revolutionary changes in the history of Buddhism, leading to the sinification of Dizang belief. I also discuss how the Internet and digital technology have brought and will still bring more radical change to the landscape of Buddhism.

Corresponding with the revolutionary feature of digital media, the thesis of this paper would be quite revolutionary as well. With this thesis my aim is to prove that online practices, an increasing trend in China, which widens the gap between practicing at home and going to temple, not only change traditional Buddhism but, more importantly, promote questions concerning the authority of Buddhism: “What is the true Buddhism?” In short, in Chapter 4 of this paper, I present the possibility of a new genre of Buddhist community, nurtured by the online culture.
1. Belief and Practice on the Dizang Forum

1.1 Dizang Belief

In the thread “the tenth anniversary and some talks”¹, the founder explicated his original motivation to build the Dizang forum. The predecessor of this forum was called Dizang (Kṣitigarbha/Earth Store) Divination Website地藏占察網,² “inspired by ‘Sutra on the Divination of the Effect of Good and Evil Actions 占察善惡業報經’” the founder said he established this website on Aug 1st, 2002 to promote the Divination dharma gate with the electronic version of the sutra and articles around this dharma teaching. Later, with the number of members who followed instructions and teachings on this website exaggerated, he enlarged the scale and founded the Dizang forum, which marked the formation of this online community. In 2007, the forum finally became the main body of this community of online lay people.

Judging from its origin and motive, and most apparently, its name, the Dizang forum’s close connection with Dizang belief and Divination dharma teaching is obvious. In terms of online practices, co-practicing of the Diamond Sutra, as well as Dizang teaching, is most dominant on the forum. In the section called “co-practice”, where members of the forum conduct the online practice of chanting sutras, the thread for

Diamond Sutra and Dizang teaching possesses the largest record for amount of replies and views. The instruction on co-practicing of Diamond Sutra was created on June 27th, 2007 by user Shi Fang and had 2,047 replies until 2014, ranking one of the most replied records among all sutras. The constitution for co-practicing of Dizang teaching (created on July 29th, 2010, four years after the Diamond Sutra thread) had 1,672 replies until 2014 ranking the second. The threads of Diamond Sutra and Dizang teaching are the only two that have more than 1,000 replies.

Apart from threads for the practice of these two sects, members on the forum can also have seven other alternatives: Original Vows of the Medicine-Master Tathagata of Lapis Light 《藥師琉璃光如來本願功德經》 (728 replies); Sutra of the Lotus of the Wonderful Dharma (947 replies) 《妙法蓮華經》; the Teaching of Guanyin Bodhisattva (884 replies) 観音法門; Sutra of the Assembly (884 replies)《僧伽吒經》; Sutra of the Lotus of the Wonderful Dharma (947 replies) 《妙法蓮華經》; Pure Land Teaching (947 replies) 西方極樂淨土; and Mahayana Co-practice (947 replies) 大乘佛典共修. All of the nine threads of different sects are under co-practicing board or Meditation board (共修板块), indicating that meditation out of multiple Buddhist schools is eligible on the forum.

Judging by the amount of replies, meditation through the Diamond Sutra seems to be the most dominant form of practice, while Dizang belief only ranks as the second. However, if one takes a closer look at the created date of those threads, it is
interesting to find that the main thread for Dizang teaching was created in 2010, three years after the creation of the Diamond Sutra meditation thread, during which period four other main threads were created. The later creation of the Dizang thread and its lower reply record causes one to doubt whether this forum has a special connection with this particular dharma gate: is the forum just using the name of Dizang because of his popularity among lay people? Furthermore, does that mean that members of this forum do not necessarily do particular Dizang meditation? Or does it mean that the Dizang forum does not work as an online platform (道場) particularly for Dizang Bodhisattva?

Bearing these questions in mind, I traced back to the first thread posted under the meditation board. Posted by “kueikuy” on the April 22nd, 2003 the first thread was called “kueikuy is willing to participate in co-meditation (first phase)”, where forum member “kueikuy” recorded the exact date he recited Sutra on the Past Vows of Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva and how many times he did it up until the 30th time, when he posted that he had finished the whole meditation practice. Like the first, the following threads did not contain remarks on the title, but in terms of their content, were all for Dizang teaching, which indicates that the whole meditation board in its initial construction was mainly for Dizang practice. Since different sects in Buddhism are not exclusive, taking one teaching as the major path while also processing other schools is possible, especially for lay people. Counting the numbers of the threads, Dizang
meditation is dominant. That explains why the first highlighted meditation thread is for the Diamond Sutra, not for Dizang teaching.

The Dizang forum is not a general Buddhist forum but an online platform typically constructed for the Dizang school. However, from observation of its meditation board the dominance of one school among the community of lay Buddhists does not mean exclusion of other Buddhist sects. Thus, members of the Dizang forum, apart from practicing Dizang teaching, also meditate through sutras from other schools such as Pure Land and Zen (Chan) school. All these signs indicate that the Dizang forum is not only an online platform for information transmission but a real online dharma site or community for lay people to practice their beliefs. In the following sections, I examine how Dizang belief is practiced through online space and what transformation or innovation this technology brings to Buddhism.

1.2 Meditation: Chanting the Sutra

Chanting the Sutra is an important practice method for East Asian Buddhism, especially for the Pure Land school. Unlike difficult and sophisticated Zen practice and asceticism, the Pure Land school, which originated in the Eastern Jin Dynasty of China, promotes an easier to understand path toward Nirvana with less physical suffering—by chanting the name of the Buddha or Bodhisattva and reciting as well as chanting sutras.³ This particular form of meditation, with less limitation based on the practitioner’s

³ Xing Yun Master, Jing Tu Zong de Xing Cheng Yu Fa Zhan (formation and development of pure land school). Vol. 6 Fo Guang Fo jiao Cong Shu.
intelligence and environment, as well as its effectiveness, has been largely welcomed and quickly become dominant in China, especially among the masses.

1.2.1 Pure Land School And Dizang Belief

During the Tang and the Song Dynasty China, Chinese folk Dizang belief in many respects interacted and was combined with the Pure Land school. Starting from the Song Dynasty, Dizang’s image was used in Pure Land festivals. It was also recorded in some novels composed during that time when lay people community practiced Pure Land school and Dizang belief together. In Dun Huang caves, the figure of Dizang and Guanyin were positioned together on wall paintings.

Stepping into the late Tang era, the emergence of some influential sutras changed and specified Dizang’s major role as the King of Hell who vowed in Sutra of the Original Vows of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva that he would only achieve Buddhahood when all hells are emptied. Sutras composed in the late Tang period, like Dizang Shi Wang jing (ten king sutra) believed to be composed by late Tang monk Zangchuan, incorporated ten kings belief with the worship of Dizang, equalizing him with the Yanmo king. According to Ten King Sutra, all the ten kings in the hell are transformed bodies of the bodhisattva, and Dizang bodhisattva transformed into Yanmo Wang. Yanmo Wang, also known as Yama is the king of the world of the dead was

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imported to China from the Indian Buddhist tradition. In the early period of Tang Dynasty, King Yama was acknowledged as the manifestation of Taishan Fujun, the ‘Magistrate of Mount Tai’, a Chinese indigenous deity in charge of the dead and after-life. Thus from the early Tang period to late Tang period, the assimilated notion of three figures: Dizang Bodhisattva, Yama King as well as Taishan Fujun was accomplished, which finally changed all capacity and the wide range of responsibility of Dizang to focus on issues in the underworld. This active attempt of integrating Buddhist figures with Chinese indigenous deities led to later, in Song Dynasty, the inclusion of Dizang into the local deities system, which largely established the leading role of Dizang Bodhisattva in Chinese Buddhism.5

Thus the process of sinicization of foreign imported Dizang Bodhisattva objectively lifted its importance. Its distinctive figure as the king and savior of hell is widely spread and accepted. The world view of the Pure Land school extended from the heaven pure land to hell. Dizang Bodhisattva who was worshipped as the king of hell, was not only incorporated into the Pure Land belief system but also given significance.6 Therefore, Dizang belief, in Chinese Buddhist tradition, had close connection with pure land school or in other words, the presence or practicing method of Dizang belief has to a large extent, corresponded with pure land school. Thus chanting the sutra or the name

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5 Chuang Ming-hsing, “The Ti-tsang (Kshitigarbha) Belief in Medieval China” (MA diss., National Taiwan University, 1986), 151.
6 Zhang, Zong. Di Zang Xin Yang, 427.
of the Buddha, as one of the most important method in the Pure Land tradition, also has special importance in Dizang belief.

On the Dizang forum, chanting the sutra is regarded as one of the major forms of meditation for the members, which indicates an echo of the tradition. At the top of the meditation board, nine highlighted threads for sutra chanting are listed. Located at the top of all the threads is the “Co-meditation Constitution for Dizang Teaching”. Regulations and instructions informing people’s practices can be found in this thread. Examining this thread, one can form a relatively clearer picture of how these lay people practice their beliefs, how they understand the traditions and what innovations they brought to the tradition of Dizang veneration.

**1.2.2 Classical Sutras and Their Importance**

At the beginning of this thread, the creator explicitly announced that meditation is not mandatory for all members; however, as long as one’s belief toward Dizang Bodhisattva is already strong and unmovable, and as long as one can read the three sutras, one can feel free to participate in this particular meditation.

In this thread, three sutras are listed as doctrines for Dizang teaching: Sutra on the Past Vows of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva (abbreviated as the Past Vows Sutra) 地藏菩薩本願經, Sutra on the Divination of the Effect of Good and Evil Actions (abbreviated as

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the Divination Sutra) 占察善惡業報經; and Sutra on the Divination of the Effect of Good and Evil Actions (abbreviated as Divination Sutra) 大乘大集地藏十輪經. Theses three sutras have been commonly accepted as classics for Dizang belief. Thus, apparently, followers on the Dizang forum set them as core sutras based on the tradition. Assigned as homework, people joining the co-meditation are requested to chant the Past Vows Sutra and Divination Sutra respectively 30 times and chant the Shi Lun Sutra for 10 times within the time span of three months. In addition, members should hold and chant the name of Dizang Bodhisattva at least one thousand times per day.

Regulating the exact workload and time range for forum members’ daily practices, managers of the forum are capable of running large groups of more than 400,000 people, which contributes to the unification of practice.

1.2.3 Simplification and Unification of Rituals

In the thread for Dizang practice, not only are workloads –e.g., how many times one chants sutras –established, specific rituals are set to unify the meditation process. The rituals of co-meditation consist of four steps. The first is to show respect: at the beginning of the ritual, practitioners are required to chant the name of Śākyamuni Buddha and the name of Dizang Bodhisattva – three times for both. The second step is called appreciation 讚嘆, in which one should recite selected paragraph from the Past Vows Sutra to appreciate the great benevolence and power of Dizang Bodhisattva. In
step three, chanting the sutra, no error is permitted: one should be cautious with the pronunciation. While chanting it, any posture such as standing, kneeling, sitting or walking is permitted. Step four is called “holding the name” 持名, during which process the practitioner ought to chant the sacred name of Dizang Bodhisattva at least 1,000 times at 6 am and 6 pm every day. At the end of or during the whole process, the ritual hui xiang 回向, which literally means “returning”, must be completed. Hui Xiang (dedication of merit) is a dharma practice conducted to share the merits one accumulated during the meditation to other sentient beings.8

Compared with the Buddhist lay community in the real world, the online practice on the Dizang forum appears to be simpler and less restricted to the practitioner’s current environment. One can be in any preferred position or posture in any place mostly—in one’s home, primarily—to conduct the daily practice. Thus, online practice tends to be more flexible, easier to conduct, and, most importantly, more likely to become an unmovable factor for practitioners’ daily lives due to its fewer requirements in terms of space and location, along with the reduced difficulty of the online practice itself. One of the practitioners posted in his personal thread that logging into his personal account and recording his meditation process had become one of the most important routines of his everyday life. He expressed feelings of closeness with this lay people “community”. By logging onto the forum twice a day (once in the morning

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and once in the afternoon), the process of his meditation became more engaged with his daily life—“as ordinary as take a morning run”. After his morning personal practice (chanting the sutra), he often reported going to work, and during the break hour, logging back onto the forum several times or using the app version on his phone to engage in small practices such as chanting the Bodhisattva’s name. Then, after a long day of work, he said, he finished the chanting practice before bedtime. “Thanks to the forum”, he expressed in his personal thread, “I am thus able to live two kinds of life (secular and sacred) at the same time.”

1.2.4 Virtual Space as Records

The age of disenchantment was predicted arrived in the 20th century. However, we also welcomed the age of digital technology, which has led to a time of re-enchantment. Although the whole Western paradigm of disenchantment and re-enchantment has not been widely known by Chinese society, the trace of the social change in China in the latest 30 years has triggered a visible return toward re-enchantment. Chinese religions that have experienced severe suppressions and criticism (some come from politics and some from modernized common values) in the real world have survived and thrived in the virtual world built through digital technology.

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Recording daily routine has a special meaning to humans. For example, diaries and notes leave the traces of a human’s existence. To the owners, diaries often mean a secret part of the self. People may use these personal logs to find the traces of their own minds, while at the same time building up their selves. Thus, diaries are often linked with a sense of the intimate. With the arrival of the digital era, this intimate process of self-expression and creation more often take a digital form. With the increasing popularity of blog writing, the boundary between private diary and public expression seems to blur. In the case of Dizang forum, diary-like records of daily routines including private life and practice are posted on public platform. This makes threads posted in the online board of "co-meditation" the combination of privacy as well as publicity, which will generates a strong sense of belonging to the forum.

Instead of real participation and face-to-face communication in traditional group meditation, the meditation board on the Dizang forum is a mixture of privatization and group work. The formation of group meditation on the Dizang forum is the gathering of threads and all the replies under the meditation board. There are several steps involved in conducting practice as co-meditation on the Dizang forum. First, an individual creates a thread, editing the title according to a certain format (often including name of the creator and which sutra one is willing to practice); second, on the first stair of the thread, the person who would like to engage in the co-meditation usually states his or her plan, such as the amount of time to spend reciting the sutra and expected time span. Then one
should type in the *huixiang* (dedication of merit) text in the first stair of the thread, hoping the merit may benefit and be shared with other people around the world. This marks the starting and expected ending point for one’s involvement in the co-practice. As the meditation progresses, the practitioner will count each time of finishing one reciting circle. In one thread created by user “Chanlin Manbu” 禪林漫步, the thread builder recorded each time she finished reciting with sentences such as the following:

*Disciple Chanlinmanbu now has chanted the Vow Sutra one time. The total amount of chanting is 1. I'd like to share the merit to wish the world peace, the happiness of people; the flourishing of the true dharma, the constant turning of the dharma wheel; the termination of all the disasters and hindrances and the non-existence of troubles as well as diseases.*

*Pay homage to the Dizang King Bodhisattva!*

*Pay homage to the Dizang King Bodhisattva!*

*Pay homage to the Dizang King Bodhisattva!*”

Although she has been registered for more than five years, user “Chanlinmanbu” is still a newcomer to the co-meditation Board. She titled her first meditation thread for Dizang dharma teaching as “first phase”, which is a common method for users to mark the stage of their practices (one phase of practice takes two to three months). One phase of practice often refers to chanting sutras 30 times within one to three months. One can

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choose from one to three months to finish one’s meditation tasks. In the phase 1 thread of Chanlinmanbu’s practice, every time she finished one time of meditation, she would reply to her personal thread and count as one time and calculate the total times of her meditation. As of February 1st, she had accomplished the sixth time. When she has finished all 30 recitations of the sutra, she will make an announcement and end the thread. Other members on the forum can reply to her thread, usually with a simple sentence of merit such as "Pay homage to Dizang Bodhisattva" (南無地藏菩薩摩訶薩) to appreciate her devotion to Dizang Bodhisattva and as a means to transfer good merits. Picking up one example, other threads of co-practice are in a similar mode, appearing to be personal threads. Thus, the co-practice board of the Dizang forum as well as other online Buddhist forums, resemble each other in that they are a gathering of personal threads as a way to meditate within a community.

It is also interesting to observe how members manage their time in their practices. The co-practicing ritual on the Dizang forum indicates a significant flexibility of time, which means, unlike traditional co-practice, virtual meditation does not require people’s presence at the same time (same time and same location). By opening up a personal thread, online users can, in their own space, decide and arrange proper times in their days to do the meditation. In Chanlinmanbu’s thread, She regularly practices two times a day – once in the morning around 8 am, and once time in the evening at around 7-8 pm. Others who prefer to meditate in the late night will set their meditation time
before bedtime. Thus, the flexibility of time is the most prominent feature of online co-rituals. This physical absence and the different range of practice times does not necessarily lead to the fragmentation of the group. On the contrary, virtual participation, strengthens the unity or engagement of the group.

1.3 Online Praying

The act of praying is common and fundamental within a religious tradition. At the same time, with the extension of the information highway via the Internet, people have got more accustomed to publicly expressing themselves in the virtual world. In the virtual world, people are obsessed with presenting themselves and making their voices heard by the public, while, at the same time, enjoying a sense of privacy (although many cases have proven that one is not completely safe and anonymous online). Thus, compared with “reality”, the virtual world created by the Internet enables people to acquire publicity and privacy at the same time.

Given relative privacy afforded by the Internet, online forums are supposed to be places where people express their real opinions with less consideration of their social connections and limitations. The convenience and effectiveness of communication and the sense of privacy have turned out to be another factor that makes online religious practices appealing.

One phenomenon is that online praying is among the most popular practices on the Dizang Forum (ranked 3rd of 13 major boards; 1st is dharma discussion board; 2nd is
online co-meditation board). On the online praying board, there were one million posts (including all the posts and replies) in total by February 1st, 2017, which somehow reflects the most important three parts of Buddhist lifestyle in China (dharma, meditation, and praying).  

Upon examination of the “prayer” board, what stands out is the exhibition of various kinds of wishes. Some of them are for the benefit of large groups of sentient beings such as for all the poor children or all the animals being killed; some are for individual benefit or for the well-being of close relatives. Moreover, some of the threads aim to say prayers to the dead. Threads for redeeming wishes 還願 are also posted on this board. Although astounding in the number of the threads indicating a tremendous need, the basic form to accomplish online praying on the forum is unexpectedly simple. In almost all the threads, people who seek help or construct their praying state the object of the prayer and why and how the prayer wishes to benefit the object, and then type “pay homage to Dizang Bodhisattva”南無地藏菩薩 over ten times. Other members just re-post the thread and answer with the same simple sentence several times, which accomplishes the prayer. The brevity and simplicity of the Pure Land tradition once again shows its attractions here and has been perfectly adapted to the online virtual space.

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One of the earliest members of the forum set up some instructions and regulations for members to conduct the praying and redemption process.\(^\text{12}\) The member’s argument about making a wish and redeeming a vow was widely accepted throughout the forum; thus, the short article was copied, pasted, and spread on the forum. For example, in one of the redeeming vows, the member “auspicious fruit” (吉祥果) pasted the key paragraph under the main post.\(^\text{13}\) In the instruction thread, the writer makes an analogy between redeeming a vow and signing a contract. In this case, the contract is between the Buddha and the believer. The creator of the thread quoted from the “Discourse on the Stages of Concentration Practice 瑜伽師地論” to prove his argument that the contract forms the relationship between Bodhisattvas and practitioners:

\[
\text{For sentient beings of this kind, after making the promise (共立要契) with the Bodhisattva, if he or she strives to increase good acts and eliminate bad acts, then the Bodhisattva will encourage them and fulfill their wishes.}^{\text{14}}
\]

The owner of the thread interpreted the classical Chinese word 要契 as 契約 (contract), even 合同 (contract in business activities), which is the promise an individual keeps when one makes a wish in front of a Bodhisattva. Making the contract analogy, the


The owner of the thread made a modern interpretation of the ancient text, not only by word translation but through the embodiment of modern meanings. The word contract 契约 has connotations derived from modern business society, and the translation from 要契 to 契約 or 合同 is in no way a simple transformation of words but indicates a shift from personal regulated law to a more modernized business law. Thus, it reflects a shift of the relationship between the deity and the believer that Bodhisattva seems to be a sacred employee, while the believers are like employers, which decreases the sanctity or mysteriousness of Bodhisattvas.

Thus, the online praying board indicates that the simplicity of the practice of Pure Land tradition, such as chanting the Buddha's name, fully adapts to and takes a more phenomenal position in the online space. However, the Buddha/Bodhisattva-believer (lay people in particular) relationship has gone through major shifts: the believer-divine relationship has tended to be equalized. In Chinese lay people's culture, especially the particular Buddhism among the masses, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas were often worshiped in the same way as local divinities such as Guan Gong and Tu Di Lao Ye. While in modern times, especially in online virtual space, the independent identity and features of Buddhism have been stressed, most of the posts on the forum indicate that members' beliefs are strong and more rational than others could expect. Although the supernatural side of Buddhism has been largely developed and flourished in online space, a Chinese “Protestant” trend emerged that involves getting
back to the scriptures and minimizing any premier authorities such as masters and temples.

Innumerable kinds of wishes and prayers can be found on the Dizang forum. Someone may pray for a family member who has just passed away, for example. In one thread,\textsuperscript{15} the creator prayed for his mother-in-law. Replies to this thread accumulated up to four pages. Following the thread, members who see the thread will reply with a simple sentence to admire the power of Dizang Bodhisattva, by which approach they believe they can borrow and accumulate the sacred power of Dizang to pray for the repose of the dead. Created on November 12, 2016, the thread is still receiving new replies. The latest one was written on February 2\textsuperscript{nd}, 2017, which indicates that another feature of online praying is the continuity. Unlike praying in real life, which may involve going to a temple and praying in front of a Buddha’s statue – in which case one’s wish is presented in silence and often kept as a secret to oneself (in traditional Chinese mass culture, being silent about one’s wish guarantees its fulfillment), online praying makes one’s wish continuous in time and constantly blessed by others.

2. Online Worship

Apart from engaging in online meditation, other modes of practices take place on the Dizang forum. While inheriting the tradition, members of the forum as well as other online users also innovate traditional codes and patterns of practice unconsciously and sometimes consciously.

The online space is not material thus tends to be less “real”, however, to those who practice online it can also work to mediate the deities and believers. Other than the transformation of actual rituals and practices, the underlining reasons behind it are worth noticing as well. This chapter features a discussion of the latest trend among members on the Dizang forum that the Internet not only weighs heavily in people’s daily practices, but, more importantly, tends to work as substitute for a pilgrimage.

2.1 Images

Worship is an important aspect of religion; for Buddhism, it also plays a crucial role. In Buddhism, statues and images of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are believed to be the divine presence; therefore, they possess great power. It is a common custom for lay people to build shrines in their homes in China. This practice is called “inviting the Buddha” 請佛 in Chinese. To worship the statue or image, one should place it at a neat spot, regularly clean it, serve with fresh fruits and foods, and burn incense in front of the shrine every day.\(^1\) Thus, images, no matter if they are paintings or statues, often take the

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1 Hu Tongqing, “Fo jiao shi ku diao su de shen me xin tai 佛教石窟雕塑的審美心態 (Buddhist cave sculptures and aesthetic psychology),” in Vol. 7 of Ba Shu Wen Hua Yan Jiu Ji Kan 巴蜀文化研究集刊, ed. Duan Yu (2010), 412.
central space in Buddhism. If one were to step into a Buddhist temple for a certain Buddha, such as Śākyamuni Buddha, one would discover that, at the central place of the main hall, Śākyamuni’s statue sits. The central position turns out to be not only in terms of space but also to people’s religious lives. Statues basically play the central role for monks’ daily practices as well as lay people’s offerings.

The crucial importance of statues lies in their operation as the direct presence of the Buddha. Making offerings to the statues is believed to present making offerings to actual Buddhas; sutras chanted in front of images and statues are believed to be heard by Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Theoretically speaking, images are not in their own nature, sacred. That is, not all statues and images have sacred power and work as direct presence or partial presence of Buddhist deities—some procedures are required by tradition. The “opening light” ceremony 開光, a common custom in most Eastern Asian Buddhist traditions, is specified to transfer statues and images into the presence of the Buddha. Bearing crucial importance, the “opening light” ceremony requires certain conditions and rituals. Before the ceremony, at the stage of manufacture of the statue or image there is an "opening eye" ceremony 開眼, the craftsman will leave the eye of the “Buddha” as the last step to complete. By dotting the Buddha’s eye, it is believed that the statue has been given life or energy.

Thus, sanctification of a holy object in traditional Buddhism requires a series of procedures from the manufacturing process by the art crafts to actual religious rituals
performed by temple monks. At the stage of temple sanctification, apart from gathering, from which the strong power of wishes of the congregated individuals, accompanied by the sacred sutra chanting by the Sangha groups, is derived. In some large ceremonies, that still take place today, there are even flower bathing rituals and sacred water rituals for statues.\(^2\)

In recent years, with the increasingly high pace of digital technology development, as well as the wider expansion of cyber Buddhism, digital images of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas have started to appear in people's daily rituals. Some of them are photos posted on websites, and some are directly “manufactured” using painting software. What, then, are the differences between them, and do they possess religious powers? If they do, then are they just as the same powerful as those images in real life? Questions like these are worthy of discussion. According to theories of material religion, objects are not independent and exist solely as completely different substances from humans in a modern way of the understanding human-object relationship. Images have so strong power that it has the ability to "invert its relationship with reality".\(^3\) Thus, religious materials also actively participate in the self-constructing process of individual identity and how one defines and understands religions. The Buddhist image has taken a crucial position already in Chinese Buddhist traditions; its presence in digital form might refer


\(^3\) David Morgan, Ed. Key Words in Religion, Media and Culture (New York: Routledge, 2008), 100.
to some transformations to Buddhism in real life, a topic that deserves more attention and study.

Jessica Falcone, in “Our Virtual Materials”, reported on her study of Buddhists’ activities in the virtual game Second Life, where players’ avatars or simulations can move in an online space where virtual landscapes and architectures are programmed. In the virtual environment, by controlling their avatars, players can actually perform rituals such as meditation in a seated position with legs crossed in front of Buddha statues. There are many virtual temples coded with 3-D models and not merely 2-D cartoons or maps. There are also Buddha statues positioned in virtual outer space, often located on mountains. One can choose a favorite spot for meditating. Additionally, believers can burn virtual incense in front of a statue.4 Basically, in the virtual world of SL, one can do exactly what he is able to do in real life, as well as things he cannot do, such as escape from busy daily routine to find a sacred lonely Buddha statue in the middle of nowhere. Categorizing online users into two typologies, students and devotees, Falcone remarked that “students” are more likely to embrace practicing online, while “devotees” (lay people practice following certain teachers) tend to deny that controlling practice of online simulations have the same level of merits as the real life practice—even no merit. As Buddhism is an alien culture to American users of Second Life, those online practitioners tend to be "students" rather than "devotees".

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Falcone’s study on different attitudes toward online practices from the two
general typologies of practitioners to a large extent refers to the paradox between
Buddhist teachings and social-cultural structures. Due to a lack of cultural background,
Western Buddhist practitioners are more likely to incline themselves directly to
teachings rather than to authorities such as head monks—there are fewer boundaries to
them. To Western practitioners, the "non-self" principal of Buddhism set the foundation
of the merit stream between the online simulation and the real person, which ensures
that their devotion to online virtual images will accumulate good merits as effective as
worshipping real images.\(^5\) However, for most Buddhist masters and "devotees", the
whole idea of performing rituals in front of virtual images is useless and ridiculous: it is
impossible for one to gain merits from online activities. The sanctity of images and
places is the core factor that guarantees the effects of practices, which is closely related to
temple authorities sanctifying images.

Although not in the same way as Buddhists on Second Life, where users
completely live and act in online virtual space, Buddhists in China also utilize online
Buddhist images in their practices. They have close interactions with three kinds of
images: photos of real statues or pictures; 3-D constructed online temples and statues;
and digital Buddha paintings made from expert painting software. Despite having no
such online worship section, the Dizang forum, as the largest online lay community, has

become the gathering place for people who prefer online practices. People share images and websites on the forum. Unlike online games such as Second Life, users of the Dizang forum do not use avatars, but instead directly engage with digital images. For instance, online temples often appear as a piece of the digital map. By clicking a specific room on the map, the inner view of the room or hall will be presented with a digital photo of a specific Buddha’s statue or painting. Thus users directly interact with digital photos instead of controlling an avatar in a 3D environment.

On the forum, it is common to see people open threads to share self-made Buddha images created using digital picturing tools. For example, in the thread “self-made buddha image and issues concerning worship,” user “smouse” used digital tools to depict a Buddha image by himself and printed the image on paper decorated with a frame as the worshiped object for his daily practice. The posts that followed all expressed support and encouragement his act. Compared with tradition, on the Dizang forum, the object for worship no longer necessarily requires the involvement of authentic verification by temples and monks. They are still considered as the religious authority since their traditional close connection with the Buddha makes them crucial in ceremony for sanctification. Despite that, more lay people tend to be less bound to traditional regulations: the self-made Buddha image is also used in their daily practice, and it is less appealing for them to “invite” a Buddha statue from a temple to their home.

Although ordained monks are still believed by the majority of lay people, even on the Dizang forum, to possess the necessary authority to conduct the “opening light” ceremony, (posts concerning “opening light” ceremony in varies temples around China are abundant), the new rising trend to embrace the digital image as sacred object hints at a possible and unnoticed revolution among lay people. Digital technology makes the manufacture of statues and images much easier compared to even a hundred years ago. Only by using specific software can one make a delicate Buddha image. Moreover, the boundary between materials in the real world and digital simulated material tends to be blurred, and so becomes the boundary between interacting with the real Buddha image and the digital one: the digital image looks real and is easy to obtain.

Corresponding to this new trend, some websites have appeared and flourished in recent years, promoting business called “online opening light ceremony”. To use this online service, clients can upload photos of statues or merely digital images on the websites and pay certain amounts of money. The websites hire some experts to conduct an online ceremony to open light and return the sanctified pictures with a certification for sanctification.

In conclusion, the tradition of sanctification of images in Buddhism is going through series of changes. With the expansion of the territory of practicing to the online virtual world, online “opening light” ceremonies are being conducted, and, at the same
time, many lay people tend to be more rational about the image and do not see much difference between real image and the digital one.

2.2 Online Temples

There is no section for online worship or online temples on the Dizang forum. Like most regular forums, the Dizang forum only provides a platform based on words and images. Although, as mentioned in Chapter 1, the co-meditation board has a close connection with people’s daily practices, it does not provide a complete picture of online Buddhist practice. Dizang forum users also frequently visit online temples and conduct online pilgrimages. According to some threads, there is a strong need among forum users to have an independent section on the forum for worship, including virtual acts such as burning incense. User “zakmzy”, in the thread “a recommendation for independent worship section”, publicly announced his hope and need to have an online space for worship on the Dizang forum. Many members expressed similar concerns and provided a variety of reasons: disruptions or pressure from family; limited time and space; and lack of a shrine in the home. For modern lay people, however, especially for users of the Dizang forum, the Internet offers a more accessible approach. Although there is no such section on the Dizang forum, it is easy to find links for online worship.

There are two kinds of websites for online worship: online temple and online shrine. The former often turns out to be a combination of several online shrines, while at

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the same time maintaining the geographic features of real temples. “Fo Guang Zai Xian Website 佛光在線網”(http://emituofo.org.cn/) is the most popular online temple website shared on the Dizang forum. The main web page offers a 3-D bird’s-eye-view picture of a temple on the screen (Figure 1). By clicking on specific small buildings in the picture users are able to worship in front of the virtual shrines in that building. There are different buttons that corresponds to common acts to worship a Buddha, such as burning incense, sending flowers, foods, and fruits. Other rituals such as inviting lamps (ping an deng or guang ming deng) can also be conducted in the online temple.

Killing is one of the heaviest sins in Buddhism. Thus, not only do devoted Buddhists, especially those who practice Pure Land school, avoid eating meat, but they also engage in activities such as releasing animals from captivity. It is quite a common custom among lay Buddhists to purchase live fish or tortoises and release them to nature. At the top left of the online temple landscape is located a small pool for online users to free animals. By clicking the pool area, a dialog box pops up with nine different kinds of animals (as shown below in Figure 4). Users can also choose the number of animals they want to release.

As shown in Figure 1, there are 13 halls in the virtual temple: Lamp Hall 宮燈閣, for motionless Bodhisattva; Campanile 鐘樓; Hall of the God of Wealth 財神殿, where a Taoist wealth God is worshippe; Hall of Dizang Bodhisattva 地藏殿; Manjusri Hall 文殊殿; Samantabhadra Hall 普賢殿; Guanyin Hall 觀音殿; Pharmacist Hall 藥師殿; Sutra Hall
藏經閣; Head Monk’s Room 方丈室, Hall of Great Hero 大雄寶殿; Private Buddhist Hall 私家佛堂; and dagoba(stupa)舍利塔, where a virtual relic is worshipped.

The landscape features surrounding the virtual temple buildings are not merely for decoration. They also serve similar functions as they would with real temples. For example, the giant tree that stands near the center of the temple (in front of the Hall of Great Hero 大雄寶殿 and behind the Hall of the Guardian Kings 天王殿) is the tree for making wishes 許願樹 (Figure 1). As shown in Figure 2, the tree resembles other wishing trees that can be found in the real temples: wooden cards or piece of paper upon which are written with wishes are hung on the tree with red knots or ropes. When one moves the mouse on the red knots hanging on the virtual wishing tree, small labels will appear on the side marking the content of each wish and the owner’s online ID. The process to start a wish is simple: one can click on any place of the tree crown, and a dialog box will show up as in Figure 3. After filling out the owner’s name and the content of the wish, users can click on the submit button to complete the process. Thus, all activities that one can do in a real temple can also be accomplished in virtual temples. Using the mouse to click on different parts of the screen accomplishes space transformation and transfers a complicated series of acts into one simple and efficient
action.

Figure 1 Snapshot of the main web page of Fo Guang Zai Xian website

Figure 2 Snapshot of Wishing Tree on Fo Guang Zai Xian website
Other than online temples such as Fo Guang Zai Xian, users on the Dizang forum also visit online shrines for particular Bodhisattva, and websites for specific Buddhist events or festivals. For example, Buddha’s birthday celebration is one of the most popular and well-known Buddhist festivals in China. Traditionally, every year, on that day, there are ceremonies in temples to celebrate Buddha’s birthday. People will crowd in temples to attend the Buddha bathing ceremony, which is traditionally conducted by monks. The ritual of this ceremony involves using water to bathe the Buddha statue with flower shower.\footnote{Lin, Hong-Jen. “A study of the Thought of Tzu Chi’s Buddha Bathing Ceremony” (MA diss., Zhen Li University, 2014), 45.} The Buddha Bathing website\footnote{“Online Buddha Bathing Ceremony,” Zhong Fo Website, last accessed on March 2017, http://www.zgfj.cn/cj/yf/} allows people to
conduct the ceremony by themselves at home. The process to use the website is simple: one moves the mouse to control a wooden spoon to bathe the baby Buddha image. This website also provides service for people to scribe sutra online.\(^\text{10}\) Figure 4 shows the interface for scribing sutra electronically: users can copy and type sentence in the blank bar. Apart from daily online practice and worships, there is an online redeem ceremony 超度. Thus online Buddhist websites have basically covered all aspects of Buddhist rituals.

![Figure 4: The platform for scribing sutra online](image)

Recently the online temple Fo Guang Zai Xian expanded its territory to a mobile platform. Apps were developed for iPhone and Android systems, making online practice even more convenient by enabling users to conduct rituals anywhere and at any time. Nowadays, the most common scene on the bus or the subway features commuters spending most of their spare time looking down at their phones. This is understandable,

given that almost nothing cannot be achieved on one’s phone. One can read books and news, listen to music, watch films and socialize. Now, the appearance of apps such as the created Fo Guang Zai Xian makes it possible to even make a pilgrimage to a temple with one’s phone. On a crowded bus or subway, one can use the app to accomplish the whole process of worship: one might burn and put incense in front of the Buddha, set a fish free back to the pool in the virtual temple, or even participate in gathering ceremonies to celebrate Buddhist festivals with other users. Traditionally, the approach toward sanctity should not only involve conduct in a sacred place, but also requires certain movements of the body. However, in a virtual temple, the only actions necessary are merely moving one’s fingers on the phone and clicking buttons. Will the simplification of outside rituals influence the inner core of Buddhism? Rituals are like performance in theater. The movement of the body conveys not only a sense of inheritance, but also expresses religious feelings—desperate, hopeful, joyful feelings or even feelings of rage. When only the steps of rituals are kept and inherited, whereas actual performance being simplified into clicking buttons, people who conduct the ritual tend to be more rational. At the same time, they can gain a sense of intimacy with the sanctity, for the link between the sacred and the secular are in the mind and not the outside forms. Thus, the trend and increasing popularity of virtual temples and practice will lead to the internalization of Chinese Buddhism. Although the pilgrimage to real temple is still necessary and considered more sacred to many online users, more lay
Buddhist online users prefer going to online temples and increasingly feel the intimacy or closeness with Buddha and dharma.

Another issue concerning the expansion and increasingly wide usage of online Buddhist temples and shrines is whether online activities possess religious power. From the perspective of many monks and masters, even if online activity has sacred power, it does not equate to performing rituals in real temples or under the supervision of teachers.\footnote{Falcone, “Our Vritual Materials”, 181.} Buddhist master, Khenpo Yeshe Phunstok 益西彭措堪布 pointed out that while meditation it is necessary to keep away from cell phones and the internet. “Those could easily distract and pollute our minds,” said by Khenpo Yeshe Phunstok.\footnote{“An Advice To Lay Buddhists,” Khenpo Yesha Phunstok, created on September 3, 2014, http://www.xianmifw.com/forum.php?do=detail&id=140} Threads concerning this issue also frequently appear on the Dizang forum; however, replies by members indicate that many of them do not see any difference between doing rituals online and offline. They may more prefer the former because of its convenience.
Chapter 3 Divination and Dizang Forum

3.1 Divination and Dizang Belief

According to some contemporary Buddhist masters, divination, or using tools to predict the future, is supposed to contradict orthodox Buddhist teachings. Master Da An and Master Wei Xian both rejected any kind of divination.

In the blog, Master Da An stated that reliance on technique would potentially lead to attachment and poisoness. Master Wei Xian once taught that according to The Sutra of the Teachings Left by the Buddha, divination is against the right view, one of the eightfold holy path in Buddhism. Despite that, Chinese Dizang tradition has developed a series of rituals to use a tool called the Wheel for Divination to perform divination.

The generation of divination technique of Buddhism in China is not coincident but a result of cultural fusion, as divination is a core practice in Chinese indigenous culture dating back to the late Shang period (1300 BC). However, as a Buddhist product, the divination technique of Buddhism has one major difference from Chinese indigenous culture: its purpose. Theoretically speaking, Buddhists ought to use divination technique to calculate the amount of bad and good karma for any action they take as a supplement for their practice, rather than merely fulfillment of desires.

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Practically, however, lay people often embrace this practice in a secular manner: they are using divination to solve problems in their daily lives, such as choosing an auspicious day to build house⁴ and conduct a wedding ceremony.

Dizang divination method bases on the Sutra on the Divination of the Effect of Good and Evil Actions 占察善惡業報經. When it emerged during the Sui dynasty, the Divination Sutra did not receive much attention. It was even regarded as an apocryphal sutra, that is, one composed in China, by the Buddhist circle because the translator was unknown and the divination method promoted was considered heterodoxy.⁵ Later, in the Tang and Song dynasty, its low status remained: Zhi Sheng 智升 in the Tang dynasty, classified the Divination Sutra into the category of "possible fake sutras" (疑偽再詳及妄亂真錄).⁶ Thus it was not incorporated into the Buddhist Canon (Da Zang Jing) until as late as the Ming dynasty. Both the sutra and divination practice directly relate to the Buddhist view of time in Dizang belief. It is believed that there are three time periods 三時 of the dharma’s duration (buddha-kappa): true dharma 正法, semblance dharma 像法, and final dharma 末法. Within the Dizang tradition, it is commonly believed that the modern world is at the final dharma period, which does not refer to end of the world as in the Christian context, but indicates a period of decline during which achieving dharma is much more difficult than in previous periods. Based on this time view, belief in Dizang Bodhisattva arose and flourished in China. In the Divination

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⁵ Ruan Zhong Ren, “Li dai san bao ji”, 93-129.
Sutra, Dizang Bodhisattva holds the confidence to save all the sentient beings in the final dharma period, thus instructing divination technique to assist people’s practices. In other words, this technique involves the utilization of the spiritual power of Dizang Bodhisattva to predict karma accumulation in the future as well as learn previous karma accumulations.⁷

The tool for conducting divination is called the Divination (zhancha) Wheel 占察輪 (Figure 5), which consists of three groups. Each group of wheels serves different purpose.

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Figure 5: A set of wooden divination wheel

Ouyi Zhixu, a Buddhist master in Ming dynasty China, wrote several articles to promote Divination practice. His instructions concerning specific rituals when conducting divination is still followed by contemporary practitioners.

Before beginning divination, there is a series of rituals to be conducted.

The first step is to worship Buddhas from ten directions with dedicated hope and wish for the salvation of all sentient beings. Then, one bows specifically to Dizang Bodhisattva with the wish of salvation of all sentient beings. The second step involves gathering tools such as the divination wheel and other objects needed during the divination and thinking about all the beautiful and good things in the world such as
music, food, bed, flowers, medicine, jade and jewelry and so on. Bearing in mind that this divination is not conducted for oneself but for all sentient beings, one wishes and is willing to share the good karma gained from this divination to benefit other sentient beings. Then in the third step, one should think of temples, pagodas, dharma halls, and any other sacred objects and then contemplate the emptiness of things and the importance of detachment. At last, one should silently chant the name of Dizang Bodhisattva over one thousand times. In short, this process of pre-arrangement before real divination process mostly happens within one’s mind. The short meditation serves the purpose to prevent people from becoming attached to the technique and bear benevolence in mind instead of getting lost in selfish desires.\textsuperscript{8}

The function of the divination wheel is simple. All of the pieces are thrown in one group, just like throwing dice. What is important is how to express the results. Basically, the explanation of the appearance of pieces is all about numbers. Different arrangements of the pieces refer to different numbers. The sum of numbers conveys different meanings. This is how the divination wheel works in general.

The three groups of divination wheels are used on different occasions and in different situations based on the aim of divination. Group 1 contains ten pieces. Each one of them records one good karma and, on the other side, a contradictory evil karma. For example, if one piece has a good karma “no killing” on it, then the other side is

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“killing”. This group of pieces belongs to confession karma, and before using it, one should perform the rituals to confess one’s sins. After chanting the name of Dizang Bodhisattva over one thousand times comes the process of throwing. All ten pieces should be thrown horizontally with palms up on a table covered with a clean cloth. One must make sure all pieces are scrolling on the table and record the side of karma that faces upward. What will result is an arrangement of ten karma, which might be all good, all bad, or, most frequently, partially bad and, partially good. The arrangement indicates all kinds of karma one has accumulated, which is a sign for future practice. This wheel group aims to urge people to consciously avoid bad karma results and develop as well as enhance the good karma they have accumulated.

There are three pieces in group 2, representing the body, mouth, and consciousness, respectively. Each wooden wheel has four sides: one has a drawing of thick line; another has a thin line drawing; one has a deep scotch in it, the other has a shallow scotch in it. How the lines are drawn indicates good karma: the thick one represents that one has accumulated abundant good karma over a long period which has already had an effect on the person, while the thin one indicates less good karma that only accumulated recently. Corresponding to that, scotches thus represent bad karma: a deep one indicates large accumulation of bad karma which has already influenced the person, while the shallow one represents a small amount of bad karma. Group 2 should be used based on the divination results of group 1.
Group 3 contains six pieces. To perform the divination, one should throw the pieces together three times (the number of times is important). The gesture for this is palm up, and all the pieces should be thrown horizontally—neither downward or upward. If one is left-handed, one should throw toward the right and if one is right-handed, one should throw toward the left. For each throw, it is important to record the positions of the pieces, which relate to specific numbers, and then add them up to find the final answer. Numbers extremely small or large such as 1 or 184 indicate the presence of Dizan Bodhisattva, which makes the result the most reliable. The divination wheel pieces in group 3 are mainly for predicting or divination to answer specific questions.

From the ritual and steps of divination technique, it can be observed that this technique serves mainly for practicing purposes and is specifically designed for lay people. The concept underlying this set of tools is how to conduct self-practice in secular society. In Buddhism, it is impossible to avoid accumulating bad karma by living a secular life, even without considering, karma accumulated in previous lives. Thus, this technique of divination assists lay people to obtain a generous picture of their karma history to help guide their actions in the future. Because it addresses the needs of the laity, this technique has been widely accepted and practiced on the Dizang forum.

3.2 Tradition or New Trend?
Although the technique of Divination (*zhancha*) can be dated back to the very beginning of Dizang belief, it is not a widely-accepted method in tradition. It was not accepted as true method 正法 by authoritative temples until the 21st century. Thus, the phenomenon of the widespread of this technique among practitioners is a product of the past 20 years. The questions, then, are exactly when did this method appear and how did it spread so quickly?

The fate of the divination technique is closely linked to the status of the Divination Sutra. After its appearance in the Sui dynasty (581-618) and the expansion and development of Dizang belief in the Song dynasty (960-1279), the Divination Sutra became one of the three major sutras for Dizang belief in China. However, no records indicate that the divination method has been developed and widely practiced by Buddhists. There have long been heated debates over the orthodoxy of Divination Sutra since the Sui dynasty⁹. Until the Ming dynasty, however, with the shift of the status of Dizang tradition and the accomplishment of the Jiuhua temple in Anhui Province (believed to be the place of Dizang Bodhisattva’s presence), the Divination Sutra was recollected in the canon Da Zang Jing 大藏經. Master Ouyi Zhixu 藕益智旭 (1599-1655), Buddhist master during the Ming dynasty, strongly promoted the Divination Sutra at that time. He has written articles explaining the rituals to perform divination. Other than

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articulating basic steps, Master Ou Yi also suggests the right time to conduct divination, which provides the earliest records.

Although historical record shows there are Buddhist masters that promote divination practice, it remains unknown mostly among contemporary practitioners and was not spread to a large audience. Remaining mostly ignored by the mainstream Buddhism for several centuries, in the early 20th century, Master Hong Yi 弘一法师 paid great attention to the Divination Sutra and manufactured a divination wheel set based on the description in the sutra. Receiving that set of tools as a gift from Master Hong Yi, Master Meng Can 夢参法师 promoted this technique to other Buddhists in the late 20th century. Before Meng Can’s attempt, many Buddhist masters had not heard of or barely knew divination practice. As late as in the 21st century, especially in recent years, a few Buddhist temples started officially promoting divination as orthodox practice. Thus, it is fair to say divination technique is an innovated new trend in contemporary Chinese Buddhism. However, the prosperity of this new trend is not only due to the promotion of Master Meng Can; it is also a byproduct of the new media age.

3.3 Divination Technique and Dizang Forum

As stated in the previous section, although the divination practice has become a new trend in the past 20 years, this is not the first time in history to see its promotion. Why has similar promotion succeeded in the contemporary age while it failed in history,
given its appeal to lay people? The Internet and online forums are key factors for the new Buddhist phenomenon.

The former site for the Dizang forum was the Dizang Divination Website, a simple site created to introduce and promote Dizang teachings. Divination technique was the core of the promotion. Although not mentioning through what channel, the founder of this site and the Dizang forum admitted that Master Meng Can had largely influenced him. The method introduced on the Dizang Divination website interested many people and the site became the first online platform in mainland China to do business in divination wheels. It could be claimed that online communication and commerce have contributed substantially to the promotion of divination practice. As early as 2007, both the Divination website and Dizang forum stopped selling divination tools. On the largest online commercial platform (www. taobao.com), online commerce of divination wheel set officially began (Figure 6).
Figure 6. Commerce of divination tools on taobao.com

More importantly, the conversion pattern of Chinese Buddhists is in flux.

Contemporary Buddhism is largely influenced by online networks. Online websites, forums, and social medias provide people with opportunities to get to know other people’s lives, world views, and beliefs thus facilitating conversion. The Dizang forum has played an important role in expanding the group of believers as well as promoting Dizang tradition and divination. The Divination website and Dizang forum were the first encounter with the divination method for many practitioners. User “yi xiao xue
sheng” posted his personal experience with divination practice. In the thread, he talks about the first time he learned about divination on the Dizang forum. By reading discussions and instructions on the forum, he purchased one set of tools and started performing divination. In the rest part of this thread, he shared his own experience about how this practice contributed to his career success and so on. Similar posts stating the important role of the Dizang forum for the conversion of others could be found not only on the Dizang forum, but on other websites as well. Many new forums concerning Dizang belief have recently emerged, and, among almost all of them, divination practice has been considered as a necessary approach for Dizang tradition.

The expansion of the Age of Information has contributed to the huge online market for sacred objects, which, in return, results in further promotion of the tradition. Consumerism, especially online consumerism, stimulates the circulation of sacred objects and also blurs the boundary between religious objects and other popular goods.

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4. Media Revolution and the Community of Dizang Belief

4.1 Development in Printing Techniques and Traditional Dizang Community

"All communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even those) are imagined."\(^1\) The revolution in media has already transformed the traditional view of the community. From the very beginning of the flourishing of Dizang belief, media has played a potentially crucial role in its expansion and development among lay people.

Among all the three major sutras in Dizang belief, two of them were largely ignored among Buddhist circles before Ming dynasty. Other than Divination Sutra, another important classic in Dizang belief, Sutra of the Original Vows of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva 地藏本願經, faced the same situation. Emerging during the Tang dynasty, the Vow Sutra also faced doubts concerning its authenticity. The version of this sutra that is circulating now on the market all identify the translator as Siksananda 實叉難陀, a monk traveled to China around 695 CE. However, in Buddhist Canon Da Zang Jing 大藏經, compiled in Ming China (1372 A.D.), the translator was recorded as Fa Deng 法燈 or Fa Ju 法炬, which indicates the ambiguity of the real origin and identity of the translator of this sutra. Thus, the unclear origin and translator resulted in long-term

marginalization of both sutras among doctrinal Buddhists during the Tang and Song dynasty.

Nevertheless, despite the low status of these two sutras in the Tang and Song dynasty, it was during that period of time when Dizang belief arose, developed, and gained large groups of believers. During the Tang dynasty, the most authentic sutra for Dizang belief was Shi Lun Jing, the Dasacakra-ksitigarbha Sutra, re-translated and promoted by Master Xuan Zang 玄奘. After Xuanzang’s famous journey to India, during which he imported original sutras back to China, he became one of the most privileged monks during his lifetime as well as in the whole Buddhist history. Thus, through his action of the interpretation and incorporation Shi Lun Jing into canon, Da Ji Jing 大集經 tremendously increased Dizang Bodhisattva’s status. Xuan Zang’s effort quickly led to the development of Dizang belief among monks and lay people. There was a swift rise in the number of objects devoted by lay people concerning Dizang Bodhisattva such as wall paintings, silk drawings, and cave sculptures. During the Tang dynasty, all the artwork concerning Dizang depicted him as a young monk, which indicated the influence and dominant position of Shi Lun Jing.

The incorporation of the Divination Sutra and the sutra of Vows into Buddhist doctrinal sutra collections officially started the rise to prominence of all three sutras. This transformation of the two sutras’ status from marginalized fake sutra to authentic dharma actually has close connection with the rapid and wide spread of ganying stories
in Song dynasty. With the corruption of the Tang dynasty in A.D. 907 as well as the war era of ten countries and five dynasties, the once dominant theoretical Buddhism declined,\(^2\) while, at the same time, Chinese Buddhism welcomed the dominant era of folk Buddhism or mass Buddhism. Dizang belief also experienced a time of infusion with indigenous Chinese folk culture. The Song dynasty was a period of time when the novel genre first emerged and rapidly developed in China. What is worthy of notice is that, for the masses in the Song dynasty, sutras were not the primary sources for Dizang belief; collections of *ganying* stories 感應故事集 were. Ganying stories comprise a genre of Song novels about spiritual folk tales. Derived from both Taoist tradition and Buddhist sutras, ganying stories tended to position Bodhisattvas into the framework of Taoist deities’ social structure, infusing them with Confucian moral values such as filial piety. In the golden age of traditional block printing, the printing technique, as well as the quality of paper and ink, was largely developed in Song China, which, as a result, led to the success of the book industry. Thus, ganying stories were able to spread.

Constructed in those ganying stories, the image of Dizang Wang Pusa (*Dizang* King Bodhisattva) as the highest governor replacing indigenous deity King Yanmo 閻魔王, taking charge the hell, became widely accepted. The most popular resource for those ganying stories, the status of the sutra of Vows among the masses was quickly upgraded.

\(^2\) Li Si Long, “Min su fo jiao de xing cheng yu te zheng (the formation of folk Buddhism and its characteristics)”, *Beijing University Academic Journal* (1996 No. 4): 55-60.
Thus, the perfection of printing technology, as well as the popularity of ganying stories, altogether transformed the image of Dizang Bodhisattva from a foreign imported young monk into the Lord of Hell dedicated to saving all the souls suffering in the underworld. In this case, media played a crucial role to form the unique image of Dizang Bodhisattva that is still influential in contemporary China.

4.2 Virtual Buddhist Community

If the improvement in printing techniques and circulation of ganying stories present a case about how media forms shared beliefs and, in a sense, triggered the emergence of folk Dizang communities, then the information revolution in contemporary China, with the development of the Internet and related technology, has gone one step further to build virtual communities of lay people stronger and more influential than any historical periods.

As stated in previous chapters, there are many shared practicing methods on the Dizang forum, such as co-meditation, online worship, and conducting divination practice. More importantly, members of the forum feel a strong sense of belonging to the forum. Thus, online Buddhist forums are no longer merely platforms that present people's arguments or opinions, but lively Buddhist communities.

The history of media has witnessed several revolutions of technological development— from printing to wireless radio and from television to the Internet. All those revolutions in media contribute to the transformation of culture, people's
communication mode. Just as the historical development in printing techniques contributed to the transformation of Dizang's figure as well as lay people communities, the Internet, as the latest technology revolutionizing people's daily lives, has also brought about radical changes that touches the very foundation of our conventional understandings of religion and community.

4.2.1 Time & Space Knot

One of the biggest advantages of online forums is their capacity to present every action and comment one makes online. As long as the server still functions, theoretically, the data will stay there forever. Therefore, any minor action online could be great or easily generate the sense of greatness. What is more fascinating is the function of keyword searching—the most basic function that makes a major difference. Just by typing in a word and clicking the search button, results related to that word will show up within one second. Within a short period, you may be presented with results accumulated over a decade. At one time all moments appear. Therefore, in the online world, the moment you take action will always link to one moment in the future, far or near, which revolutionizes the idea of linear time. At one moment, you are speaking with a voice generated several months, years, or even decades ago, which makes a "knot" of time. The "knot" of time is necessary for the self-conservation and continuity of a community. Throughout Chinese history long-lasting communities of lay people that stand out as a cultural phenomenon are seldom found. People's actions are drowned in
the ocean of time; thus, most communities are short-lived and easily disappear with no traces. Online space makes the virtual community as long-lasting as ever.

The online community breaks the traditional sense of place as well. In our physical world, it is common knowledge that one cannot exist at several places at the same time. Online forums also revolutionize our physical law of space and our notion of religious community. For example, the Dizang forum has a section called "Me and Forum", which is the section in which one can most obviously sense the break in the conventional concept of space. The "Me and Forum" section serves to hold unified activities on the forum for Buddhist festivals or specific days, such as the forum’s founding date. Interestingly, the type of activity most common in this section is sharing photos. For instance, the activity on the 13th anniversary of the foundation of the forum involved users sharing photos of the temples nearest to them, which is called “posting temples, shai si miao (晒寺庙)”. To attend the activity, one simply needed to take a picture of the temple near their locations and upload it. From Beijing to Zhejiang and from Sichuan to Shanxi, the activity intuitively presented the state of existing in multiple places, which tied a knot of space.

Thus, by observing the functioning of the Dizang forum, it can be found that, because of the "knot" of space and time, online Buddhist communities can last longer and are not bound by the same geographical constraints when compared with traditional lay people communities.
4.2.2 Interactive Standardization

The main major difference between historical media such as printing and television is that online platforms, especially forums, are less one-way and more interactive. Unlike traditional forms, online communication is much easier for the expression of people who possess less power. It is obvious that the Internet is also under macro-control from countries, and people with high social status have more opportunities to express themselves and generally receive more attention. However, individuals with less power are still living in the best time to make their voices heard by the rest of the world.

In terms of Buddhism, the arrival of the age of Internet provides more possibility or more room for innovations and creations from the side of the masses. On the Dizang forum, the action of posting threads is one step to create a version of Buddhism: everyone is equal on the same platform to speak about their own understandings of concepts or practicing methods. As long as the argument is persuasive and instructive, anyone's opinion can be influential. The anonymous nature of the forum not only enhances the equality of the right to speak but also enables people to create another identity. Thus, on the highly interactive online platform, people create their ideal Buddhism, and at the same time, invent their online identity.

It seems that more freedom in the online world means more boldness to overcome the authority in the real world. On the Dizang forum, the words from
Buddhist masters are respected but not taken as superior in nature. Threads criticizing opinions from some masters frequently show up as well. People actively post on the forum not only to express themselves, but, most importantly, to potentially present and their perspectives on Buddhism to others. Because of the knot of time and space, this influence form members expands the boundaries and limitations of the physical world to influence more people and add new features to the community.

However, even if there is supposed to be more space for the actions of individuals to make a difference online (which ought to lead to religion with more individual color), paradoxically, the online platform has stronger power to provide a standardized or unified version of a Buddhist community. Although the online platform provides a similar equal chance for the creation of an individual religious space, the whole forum actually leads to a highly standardized online Buddhist community that exceeds the scope of Chinese Buddhist history. It results in the formulation of a standard routine of people's online practice. With the huge number of members (458,437), through designing the function of practicing sections and setting rules to post threads, over 450,000 of lay practitioners' practice processes has been standardized. The knot of time and space on the online platforms also guarantees the intensity and continuity of standardization within the online community.

There is another meaning of the intensified standardization. It seems that people are more active and have more freedom as well as power to speak publicly online.
However, activity in the virtual world may result in standardization in reality. The imagined freedom in the virtual world generates feelings like satisfaction, which might take away the necessity to speak up in reality. However, the suppressed continue to face societal pressures.

China might be among the countries where religious people feel more pressure from society. According to a statistic study on lay people’s religious lives in Zhejiang and Fujian Province, China (also believed to be the two most Buddhist provinces), there is an obvious tendency among local lay Buddhists not to be involved in any temple activities, but to mainly practice at home: only 30% of practitioners reported regularly attending temple rituals. Another survey, conducted by Renmin University, indicates that contemporary Chinese people are unwilling to self-define as religious.

Being somewhat religious in China seems to be the paraphrase for participating in cult activities. In order to avoid the pressure from surrounding society, many people instinctively choose to avoid conducting any rituals in public or even in private life. This situation is also reflected on the Dizang forum. According to many threads from users explaining how they came to the forum, many people perform Buddhist rituals online because of the pressure came from their colleagues, friends, and theirs families. Thus the interactive feature of online platforms gives more freedom for religious activities to a certain extent, however, paradoxically, it leads to the standardization of practice.

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3 Li Xiang Ping, “Xin yang dan bu gui shu de fo jiao xin xing shi (a study on the religious life of lay Buddhism in the district of Zhejiang and Fujian),” *World Religious Study* (2004 No.1): 44-46.
4.2.3 Internalized Publicity

As mentioned in the last section, communication on online forums can be a deconstruction for our conventional understanding of time and space. The intertwined co-existence of different moments in the linear time span and different locations contributes to the intensified sense of community in terms of its size or geographical scope. Any actions online leave traces, and any statement can be publicly viewed. We are living in a time with much more publicity than before because of the Internet. However, with the development of digital technologies and update of online platforms, online practices can basically cover all aspects of one's religious life. This extended reach in the virtual community tends to lead to internalization in the real world. That is when people would rather move fingers on a screen to burn virtual incense for the Buddha than perform whole rituals in reality. The intensified publicity of the online world results in an internalized attitude in reality, to some extent. Thus, compared to traditional Buddhist communities, the new communities that exist in online forums are the consequence of a series of deconstructions of traditional values and world views.

4.3 Competitions Between Forums

Having examined the inner function and mechanism of the Dizang forum, it is also worthy exploring how other online Buddhist users or communities perceive what is presently the largest Buddhist forum in China. A search of the forum’s name, “Dizang Luntan” on Google, turns up 38,800,000 results. Upon closer examination of
the titles on the first search results page, three out of ten of the results are actually
criticism claiming that the forum is poisonous and people should stop using it.

Additionally, if one puts the cursor in the search bar right behind the name of the forum,
one can see that a keyword associated with this forum is “地藏论坛谤法” (Di Zang Lun
Tan Bang Fa), which literally implying that Di Zang Forum is guilty of slander against
Buddhist Dharma. “Bang Fa (谤法)”, the religious accusation toward the Di Zang forum,
actually means making slander and injurious comments against other Buddhist sects or
temples and often refers to inter-temple conflicts. In Buddhism, being guilty of slander
against other Buddhist groups is one of the most serious crimes. Because each temple is
actually blessed by a certain Buddha or Bodhisattva, speaking critically of a temple of
monks, equates to blaming Buddha in front of his face. On Google, there are in total, 37,900 results accusing the Di Zang forum of attacking the true Buddhist teachings (正法Zheng Fa).

The critical search results against the Di Zang forum are posts and articles of all
kinds on other major online forums or blogs. One of the earliest created was in 2007,
when the Di Zang forum was first established as an independent forum. Most of these
posts targeted at the Di Zang forum appear not only on major Buddhist cyberspaces,
such as Fo Jiao Wang (Buddhist Web page), Di Zang Yuan forum, and the other
Buddhist forums, but also on webpages about general topics, such as Tian Ya forum, the
most popular online forum in mainland China and Sina blog, the largest personal blog webpage.

Whether Dizang forum really denigrates dharma is not the concern of this thesis. The most interesting question is this: who hates the Dizang forum so much? Many such threads have one common point: at the end of each post is a recommendation to go to another forum such as the Dizang Yuan forum 地藏緣論壇 or Buddhist Study forum (Fo Xue forum 佛學論壇). The former is mentioned more often. Thus, the poster might be one of the members of Dizang Yuan forum, which interestingly indicates a competition for power in cyberspace. Other than the Dizang forum, there are many Buddhist forums that have emerged in recent years, some of which (like the Dizang Yuan forum) also have a substantial number of members (over 35,000).

In conclusion, the Dizang forum has its unique innovations in traditional Buddhist practice to adapt to cyberspace, and, by now, online practices can cover almost all the aspects of real world religious life. However, corresponding to the activity of religious communities online is the situation that religious activity is gradually losing space in Chinese society and the possibility of the intensification of this situation. Because of the pressure from society, more people might feel a need to find space for practicing their faith in the online world. With the emergence of more large online Buddhist forums, the online world seems to have become a new territory for the competition for power. Some famous historical temples have online temple sites to
provide convenience for online practice. It is fair to expect more expansions and
developments of online religious communities.
Conclusion

Nowadays, media increasingly demonstrates its power to shape human culture, society, and, more importantly, the mode of human interaction. Choosing specific media or platforms to communicate or obtain information influences, to a certain extent, the way people think and communicate with the world. A cultural phenomenon such as religion also changes depending on its platform.

On the Dizang forum, the traditional method of practicing finds its way and is intensified to adapt to the online environment. It breaks up the traditional face-to-face mode of communication, but forms an online virtual community larger in its size than any community of lay in history. On the contrary, given the remote communication that takes place in cyberspace, it creates more of a sense of reality than the traditional forms of communication. People from different backgrounds and different areas of China are unified together on the forums and through the design of columns of the forum, people's beliefs and understandings toward religions as well as their daily routines, are transformed and reshaped. Without actual physical presence, large scale of co-meditation practice can be conducted. Also, without face-to-face communications, members gain a stronger sense of belongings than they may get from the real world.

With strong belief and prior emphasis on Dizang belief, the forum serves mainly as a platform for Dizang Bodhisattva. On the praying board, the phenomenon of the
revelation of Dizang Bodhisattva in cyberspace, believed by most of the members, intensified the active sphere of Dizang Bodhisattva.

By examining the mode of practice on Dizang forum, I find that chanting the sutra, and praying are two major practices conducted by members. Both of them are typical practices in the pure land tradition. The flourishing of chanting the sutra as well as praying on the forum also indicates a continuity of tradition on the online platform. However innovations are also obvious, people also endow new meanings and new procedures into traditional practices.

The Dizang forum is also a gathering place for many online worshipping websites such as online temples and online shrines. Logging onto online temples to conduct worship seems to have become increasingly popular in recent years. The emergence of those online temples and shrines has ensured that online practices can cover almost every aspect of offline practice.

The online platform also generates a new way of practicing. The cooperation of online platforms and businesses has resulted in the wide circulation and increasing popularity of divination wheels. Marginalized for thousands of years and never widely practiced, the time for Dizang divination method seems to have finally come in the digital age. In this sense, the online forum is also a center of new culture. While the tradition tries to find its way to adapt to the platform, online cyberspace incorporates and promotes new method into the consciousness of mainstream Buddhism.
Unnoticeably, the media has largely influenced Chinese Buddhism and Dizang belief in Chinese history. The first important influence came from the printing revolution and then came the contemporary digital revolution. However, this time, because of the revolutionary feature of the platform, our conventional community has been completely deconstructed. Nowadays the cyberspace has already become the new territory for different Buddhist communities. In the future, religious belief especially Buddhist belief might tend to be more internalized and private because of the change of the territory. As a new genre of study, there is much space to fill in the future in the field of online studies of religion, such as the spread of Buddhist legends online and its reformation of the traditional Buddhist legendary structure. Future work could investigate Buddhism in social medias and so on.
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