ABSTRACT

This article explores the use of communication technology for the dissemination of Buddhist narratives in post-Mao China. It presents a case study of how a thousand-year old Buddhist Longquan Monastery located in the outskirts of Beijing became an avant-garde of modern Buddhism in China with the help of communication technology. The analysis focuses on online rhetoric of Master Xuecheng, the abbot of Longquan and president of China’s Buddhist Association, and new media strategies used by the proponents of modern Buddhism to form connections and to create new meaning. The author seeks to determine (a) whether new identities concerning citizenship and nationalism are forged; and (b) whether technology serves as a platform to popularize Buddhism online and offline. The argument is made that by constructing rhetoric that links technology with Buddhism and utilizing new media, the monks of Longquan strive to constitute the religious authority of modern Buddhism and its spiritual leader, Master Xuecheng.

Keywords: Communication Technology, Intercultural New Media Studies (INMS), Modern Chinese Buddhism, Online Rhetoric, Rhetorical Analysis, Social Media

INTRODUCTION

During the past decades, the rise of globalization has triggered a ubiquitous utilization of communication technologies with revolutionary effects in every public and private domain. Consequently, the positioning of religious beliefs and rituals has been challenged by technological transformations. As a result, there is a growing transformational trend in contemporary Buddhist discourse worldwide: traditional Buddhist narratives become subject to change as some interpreters call for a “worldly-civic engagement” and link to divine concepts in a layman-friendly manner. These narratives use Buddhist traditional beliefs and practices to offer spiritual enlightenment and suggest strategies of sustainable solutions to the world’s social and environmental problems, creating new communication channels powered by technology to reach geographically, demographically and socially diverse audiences.

The turn of the millennium in China was marked by the revival of Buddhism as a belief system (Wang, 2013). After being relentlessly persecuted during the Cultural Revolution, Buddhism took on a new life (Lu-Hai, 2015). Signifying this remarkable development, the ancient
Beijing Longquan Monastery\(^1\) officially reopened on April 11, 2005 for religious practice. Today Buddhism, introduced to China by Indian missionaries two thousand years ago, is not only revived but also thriving (Ling, Liu, & Xie, 2005; Poceski, 2009). According to the Pew Research Center (2012), half of the world’s Buddhists live in China, comprising 18.2% of China’s overall population.

Technology has occupied a prominent place in the efforts to revive Buddhism in China. Launched in 2008, Longquan’s website, “Voice of Longquan” (www.longquanzs.org), was not the first Buddhist voice in Chinese cyberspace. However, it became the first to incorporate social interaction technologies such as microblogging and mobile text and voice messaging. The monastery’s website, with its rich multimedia content, is regularly updated. It features short videos and audio sutras in different languages and comics and animated versions of Buddhist teachings aiming to attract people from around the world, including young generations (Lu-Hai, 2015). Thus, “Keeping up with the times” has become a central theme for the development of Chinese Modern Buddhism and for Beijing Longquan Monastery, in particular.

Venerable Master Xuecheng, the abbot of Famen, Guanghua, Southern Shaolin, and Longquan monasteries, became the first Buddhist monk in China to start blogging on February 21, 2006. Since then, he has continued to connect with his followers worldwide via multiple digital platforms on a daily basis, and has earned a celebrity status as a prolific blogger (Modern Abbot Promotes Buddhism, 2012; Tang, 2012b; Xinhua, 2015b). His main blog hosted by China’s popular microblogging platform Sina Weibo is translated into several languages by volunteers and generates millions of page views.

In one interview, Xuecheng expressed his perspective on modern Buddhism: “Buddhism should keep up with the times and embrace modern technology to promote Buddha’s teachings in an innovative and recipient-friendly way” (Tang, 2012a, p. 41). At the same time, he urges his followers to stay connected with traditional cultural values: “In an era of globalization when humanity faces multiple challenges ranging from pollution to ecological imbalances and dwindling resources, Chinese Buddhists should take on the social obligation of reviving traditional culture and promoting a wholesome spiritual life” (New Tech Promotes an Old Religion, 2013). In 2015 in recognition of his efforts to engage Buddhism and its practitioners more deeply with contemporary issues, Xuecheng was elected president of the Buddhist Association of China (B.A.C.), which guides Chinese Buddhists (Xinhua, 2015a).

This study examines how one-thousand-year old Buddhist Longquan Monastery located in Beijing’s Haidian District became an avant-garde of modern Buddhism by incorporating new technologies. The author aims to determine (a) whether new identities concerning citizenship and nationalism are formed in the learning of Buddha’s teachings through the strategic rhetoric of Xuecheng, and (b) whether technology serves as the platform to perform rhetoric and to popularize Buddhism online and offline. It is argued that by strategic appropriation of digital technologies and online rhetoric, the religious authority of Longquan Monastery and Master Xuecheng is augmented and sustained in national, international, and intercultural settings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The restoration of Buddhism in China brought back old and rigorous religious traditions as well as gave birth to new forms of Buddhism influenced by Western worldviews (Higgins, 2012). Modern Buddhism has become more relevant and adaptable to the changing society, as Buddhist monks started to preach in a more secular way, introducing new ideas advised by the recent developments in the larger society, and even appropriating the use of communication technology (Xu, 2015). However, these changes have also created tensions between Buddhist traditionalists and...
12 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the product's webpage:

www.igi-global.com/article/remaking-ancient-virtues-for-the-virtual-world/136851?camid=4v1


www.igi-global.com/e-resources/library-recommendation/?id=2

Related Content

IWBs as Support for Technology-Related Projects in EFL Education in Brazil
Doris de Almeida Soares (2010). Interactive Whiteboards for Education: Theory, Research and Practice (pp. 238-249).
www.igi-global.com/chapter/iwb-support-technology-related-projects/41622?camid=4v1a

Debranding Digital Identity: Personal Branding and Identity Work in a Networked Age
www.igi-global.com/article/debranding-digital-identity/191320?camid=4v1a
Use of SNSs, Political Efficacy, and Civic Engagement among Chinese College Students: Effects of Gratifications and Network Size
[www.igi-global.com/article/use-of-snss-political-efficacy-and-civic-engagement-among-chinese-college-students/115158?camid=4v1a](www.igi-global.com/article/use-of-snss-political-efficacy-and-civic-engagement-among-chinese-college-students/115158?camid=4v1a)

The Hyperception Model: What Happens When You Do Not Know Your Significant Other's Friends Offline
[www.igi-global.com/article/the-hyperception-model/250262?camid=4v1a](www.igi-global.com/article/the-hyperception-model/250262?camid=4v1a)