Digital Religion in China: A Comparative Perspective on Buddhism and Christianity's Online Publics in Sina Weibo

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Abstract:

The proliferation of social media in China has provided traditional religious authorities with multifarious digital features to revitalise and reinforce their practices and beliefs. However, under the authoritative political system different religions pick up the new media to varying degrees, thereby showing different characteristic and style in their social media use. This paper examines the public discourse about Buddhism and Christianity (two of the great official religions in China) on China's largest microblogging platform-Sina Weibo, and seeks to reveal a distinct landscape of religious online public in China. Through a close look at the social media posts aided by a text analytics software, *Leximancer*, this paper comparatively investigates several issues related to the Buddhism and Christianity online publics, such as religious networks, interactions between involved actors, the economics and politics of religion, and the role of religious charitable organizations. The result supports Campbell's proposition on digital religion that religious groups typically do not reject new technologies, but rather undergo a sophisticated negotiation process in accord with their communal norms and beliefs. It also reveals that in China a secular Buddhism directly contributes to a

prosperous ‘temple economy’ while tension still exists between Christianity and the Chinese state due to ideological discrepancy. The paper further points out the possible direction for this nascent research field.

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1. Introduction

In a healthy civil society ecosystem, religion plays an important role in providing a location for moral debate and the articulation of competing social visions. Religious institutions also bring assets to civil society because they can manoeuvre leadership, volunteers, and material resources to solve some social issues (Miller 2011). However, in irreligious or ‘atheist’ countries in particular, the landscape of religion and its social significance has remained vague and understudied.

This paper is an effort made to reveal religion’s digital landscape on Chinese social media. The religious study of social media is still a nascent subfield due to the still fast-growing media environment, and the literature is particularly scarce in terms of religion in a country which claims its prevalent ideology as atheist. This article investigates the religious online public on China’s popular microblogging platform, Sina Weibo, which centralizes mainly urban users. Buddhism and Christianity, which enjoy wide popularity among Chinese urban populations, are the main research objects and are comparatively analyzed to show different negotiation processes related to their social media use in accordance with their communal norms and beliefs.

In China, religion has survived the government's brutal eradication during the Cultural Revolution of 1966–1976. After the Opening Up and Reform in the late 1970s, in spite of the Chinese Communist Party's continuous atheistic ideology, many kinds of religions have been reviving and thriving throughout the country. A large number of surviving temples, churches and mosques have resurged and developed quickly as the religious policy eased, along with the springing up of various religious activities. As also an important component of civil voluntary organizations, these religious groups have supplemented the still inadequate and inefficient Chinese social welfare system by reaching out to those who are not covered by government benefits and thus have grown to be a major force in Chinese charity sector.

As this religious revival rapidly developed, the Chinese Party-state has never relaxed the mobilization of state apparatuses and resources to monitor, control, and selectively suppress types of religious groups or ideologies that seem to threaten the Party-state's authority (Perry 1985). The freedom of religion is provided for by the country's Constitution, yet with an important caveat: the Chinese government protects what it calls "normal religious activities", which in practice are defined as those taking place within government-sanctioned religious organizations and registered locations of worship. The government forbids any "activities that disrupt social order, impair the health of citizens or interfere with the educational system of the state" (P.R.C. Const. chap. 2, art. 36). The ambiguous standards for such activities have flexibly endowed the government with a wide discretion in deciding what to protect and what to repress.

There are five officially sanctioned religions in China: the Buddhist Association of China, the Chinese Taoist Association, the Islamic Association of China, the Three-Self Patriotic Movement of the Protestant Churches, and the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association. Religious groups are required to register with the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA), or its provincial and local offices (Religious Affairs Bureaus, 'RABs'), which are responsible for monitoring and judging the legitimacy of religious activities. Proselytizing is permitted and protected by law in private settings or within registered houses of worship. However, in many local practices, proselytizing in public or in unregistered churches or temples is strongly discouraged.

A significant number of unregistered or underground churches or temples still exist in China. They are not officially banned, but are not allowed to conduct religious services openly. Many kinds of folk religions are not officially protected, but are sometimes tolerated by authorities. These religious activities constitute a grey market of religion and spiritualities with ambiguous legal status. According to Fenggang Yang's (2011) 'triple-market model' of religion, there is: a red market of religion in China that comprises legal religious organizations, believers, and activities; a black market of religion that is illegal; and a grey market of religion, including illegal practices of legally sanctioned religious individually and organizations, religious practices that are carried out in the name of culture, science and

politics, and so on. Currently, under the heavy regulation, the black and grey markets are inevitable.

The numbers of the religious population in mainland China still remains an open question. Even statistics from different official sources differ greatly for various reasons. Buddhism and Daoism do not have membership systems and believers do not necessarily belong to a particular temple or shrine, with many believers practising the religion at home. Protestant and Catholic churches have a membership system, but the leaders are often reluctant to report the accurate number of adherents to protect them from the authority's campaign-style interrogations. Thus, most of the numbers available are believed to be serious underestimates of the actual numbers of believers (F. Yang 2011).

Nonetheless, we can get a reasonable estimate of numbers of believers for different religions through a combination of various sources of data (see Table 1 below; see also Wenzel-Teuber 2014). It is worth noting that in some cases no new statistics are available for a larger sector of religious life in China. Nonetheless, the older data can still give a certain amount of orientation.

Religion	Estimate of population	Percentage of Chinese population	Source
Buddhism	244 million	18.2%	Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion and Public Life in 2012
Protestantism	58.04 million	4.1%	Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion and Public Life in 2012
Islam	23 million	1.6%	Chinese Islamic Association
Daoism	12 million	0.8%	Chinese Spiritual Life Survey in 2007
Catholicism	12 million	0.8%	Holy Spirit Study Centre

Table 1: Estimates of the population of the five official religions in mainland China

Religious groups in China are also geographically concentrated. A rough indication of the geographic distribution of religion is based on the 2004 Chinese government economic census that reports the number and location of economic institutions, including officially registered religious organizations (see Figure 1). According to this mapping, Protestantism is dominant in the east, Buddhism in the south, Islam in the west, and Catholicism in northern and central regions of the country (Pew Research Center 2012).

Figure 1: County denomination map of religious organizations in China

This section just gave an overview of religion's status quo in China's context. In the following sections, this paper will discuss why religion serves as an interesting subject for inquiry in new media environments. It will also explore the different nature of different religious networks on Weibo, examine secular Buddhism and the resulting 'temple economy' which is delicately projected in the Buddhist online public, and probe into the confrontational relationship between Christianity and the Chinese state.

2. Digital religion and social media

Research about digital religion has emerged as a new scholarly subfield, but has the potential to offer broader insights into the social practices emerging within new media culture. Digital religion represents a distinct cultural sphere of religious practice that is fluid and flexible thanks to the nature of the Internet, supporting a new social landscape for the contemporary spiritual world (Campbell 2013a, 2013b). In recent years the most remarkable changes affiliated with Web 2.0 have been ushered in by social media, such as social networking sites, microblogs, user-generated content and online games. Thus, how religious communities adopt and negotiate these new media has naturally become an area of academic inquiry. The affordances and practices of social media have in many ways transformed and reconfigured existing religious beliefs, practices and structures.

Campbell (2010) develops a theoretical framework that is useful and applicable to religious study in the social media environment: the 'Religious-Social Shaping of Technology' (RSST) approach. This approach proposes four layers of investigation: history and tradition, core beliefs, negotiation, and communal framing. Based on the general proposition that views technological change and user innovation as a social process, the approach proposes that religious groups typically do not reject new technologies, but rather, undergo a sophisticated negotiation process in accordance with their communal norms and beliefs. Campbell's approach has provided a valuable theoretical guide, not only for religious studies and the sociology of religion, but also within Internet studies, media studies and political science. For instance, the approach has been used to study internet trends and implications (Campbell 2013b), the divinity of iPhone use (Campbell & LaPastina 2010), and digital/video gaming (Grieve & Campbell 2014).

A number of empirical studies on digital religion have investigated Anglophone social media's implications in different societies. For example, Cheong (2012) investigates a range of communicative uses and appropriations of Twitter to understand microblogging as a religious practice, including its benefits and limitations for religious community building. From her viewpoint, tweeting can serve as various forms of "microblogging rituals" (p. 191) to deepen our understanding of the bonding social capital built and maintained within religious communities. One valuable aspect of Cheong's research is that she provides a template for comparative international research to examine the implications of microblogs in other cultures and contexts.

Cheong particularly expresses interest in the development and circulation of religiously related tweets in contexts where government regulations have tightened control on the media, for instance, in China. Based on an innovative theoretical framework that combines Maturana and Varela's notion of 'autopoiesis' with Cooren's ideas of 'incarnation' and 'presentification', Cheong *et al.* (2014) provide a rich analysis of the co-constitution of one of the largest Taiwan-based spiritual non-profit organizations, Tzu Chi, through organizational leaders' appropriation of digital and social media, as well as through mediated interactions

between Tzu Chi's internal and external stakeholders. Their research expands upon the catalogue of common economic and relational behaviours by overseas Chinese, advances the understanding of Chinese spiritual organizing, and reveals the contingent role of digital and social media in engendering transnational spiritual ties to accomplish global humanitarian work.

In *Digital Culture and Religion in Asia*, Han and Nasir (2016) share a case study on Falun Gong's info war and investigate how this disputed belief system formed its digital strategy to attempt to dispel and counter its portrayal by the Chinese government. The study explores the ways in which religion, technology and politics operate for Chinese religions as well as religions in China.

In a collection of works on religion and media in China (Travagnin 2016), Weishan Huang draws on Campbell's online religion theory and looks at the way in which the nonprofit Tzu Chi organization in Shanghai and its members use social media – specifically WeChat – to construct a sacred space and religious community that connect them globally.

These studies provide valuable guidance for the study of digital religion in China, and contribute to the scarce literature and empirical studies in this area. Nevertheless, most of them either focus on the practices in regions outside the mainland (e.g., Hong Kong, Taiwan), or fall short of putting the newest platforms of social media under scholarly investigation, which has left the digital religion landscape in mainland China understudied. This paper is thus an attempt to respond to this inquiry and shed a light on religion's online dynamics against the backdrop of China's authoritarian system and its immanent censorship.

3. Data and methods

The time frame for data collection was one month from 1 April to 30 April, 2014. A random sampling of available posts on the topics during the month was conducted on Sina Weibo. Multi-word key terms were used to locate as many relevant posts as possible. For example, when people talk about "Buddhism", they may recite Buddhism teachings or quotations of renowned religious figures without mentioning the term at all. Therefore, for Buddhism, I used a combination of "Buddhism", "Buddha", "Buddhist", or "master" (a title of respect for a Buddhist priest) as key terms and harvested all relevant posts. For Christianity, the key terms were "Christianity", "Christian", "Jesus", and "priest/pastor". These terms were also used to identify users' profiles, because the religious actor is also one focal interest of this study. About 10,000 raw posts for each religion were obtained. The data then went through a text editing and formatting process for technical and data-management purposes. The usernames of private individuals have been replaced with pseudonyms in this paper and any identifying information has been removed.

Because of the novelty of digital religion research in the Chinese social media context, the introductory but fundamental elements like the main actors, the content of the public discourse and the ways people use Weibo to communicate religious issues are the key aspects under investigation. These aspects are explored through qualitative content analysis with the aid of the text analytics software *Leximancer*, which is used to analyze the content of collections of textual documents and to visually display the extracted information. The information is displayed by means of a conceptual map that provides a bird eye view of the material, representing the main concepts contained within the text and how they are related. Apart from viewing the conceptual structure of the information, this map allows users to perform a directed search of the documents in order to explore instances of the concepts or their interrelations.

A *Leximancer* Concept Map consists of two components: a visual display of concepts and their relationships to each other. The concepts are clustered into high-level ‘themes’ that have some commonality or connectedness as seen from their close proximity on the Concept Map. The colour of the cluster represents the importance of the theme, meaning that hot colours (red, orange) denote the most important themes, and cool colours (blue, green), denote those less important. The bar chart displayed beneath each concept map in this paper ranks the most important themes relative to one another. The size of the Theme circle has no bearing as to its prevalence or importance in the text; the circles are merely boundaries. Prevalence is determined by the number of Concepts present in the Theme and this is indicated in the Thematic Report. The histogram bars are also colour-coded (hot - cold) to further signify the prevalence of the Theme, and this colour is carried through to the Theme circle boundary colour. The connectivity score is to indicate the relative importance of the themes (the most important is the top Theme at 100%). This score is calculated using the connectedness of concepts within that theme, giving us a way to measure the importance of a theme within the dataset.

This paper attempts to show a distinct landscape of the religious online public in China, purportedly the most atheist country in the world (WIN-Gallup International 2012). The analysis focuses on what people tend (not) to discuss in the public and how this religious online public is associated with a broader Chinese socio-political context. With this goal in mind, a zoom-in analysis of the concrete Weibo posts is conducted, with a particular emphasis on comparing religious online publics and exploring the complex interrelationship between religion, new media, community and the Chinese state.

4. Outreaching/introverted religions networks

The emerging religious network on Weibo is mainly composed of religious actors (including institutions, preachers, believers and laities), the follower–followee relationship and interactions among these actors. According to Tajfel’s social identity theory, social groups usually can be categorised into two general types, ingroups and outgroups, where a person cognitively identifies as being a member and not a member respectively (1974). For example, people may find it psychologically meaningful to view themselves according to their race, culture, gender, age or religion. And this psychological membership of social groups and categories is associated with a wide variety of phenomena. Tajfel’s typology is particularly useful in this study not only to refer to the different groups of religious actors on Weibo, but also to describe the nature of the interaction network, namely, the network containing mainly ingroup communication versus the network containing both ingroup and outgroup communication.

Drawing from this typology, the Buddhist online public on Weibo presents as both an ingroup and outgroup network that connects a large number of believers and even common citizens to renowned Buddhist figures, institutions and organizations, and forms a ‘third space’ (Hoover & Echchaibi 2012) where small spheres of interaction occur as people communicate spirituality around their daily lives. In this Buddhist network main actors consist of venerable Buddhist figures (e.g., masters, abbots and Rinpoche (a title given to a Tibetan lama)), temples and shrines, organizations (e.g., the China Buddhist Association, religious charitable foundations), and other users that promote Buddhism and Buddhist culture and beliefs. Though not assuming religious roles, non-believers are also participating agents within this network, proactively interacting with the above-mentioned actors.

These Buddhist figures and organizations usually have hundreds of thousands of followers, and enjoy popularity not only among Buddhists but also among non-religious laities. As a result, the interaction within this network is open and inclusive, which means it can cross the boundaries between the religious figures and the general public, and between believers and non-believers. The topical network covers Buddhist doctrines and practice, Buddhist life philosophy, Buddhist figures such as Buddha, and Buddhist historical sites such as shrines, temples, mountains, and monasteries (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Concept map of Buddhist topical network

Master Yancan (@masteryancan) is one of the most popular religious celebrities on Sina Weibo, with 47 million followers at the time of writing. His official title is the vice president of the Buddhist Association of Hebei Province, and the abbot of Panlong Temple. He became well-known on Sina Weibo thanks to a viral video in 2012, in which he appeared at the famous Buddhist site Mount Emei, giving a speech about life philosophy with a strong accent that Chinese netizens found very funny, while constantly being “harassed” by wild monkeys and a tourist’s dog. He continues gaining repute through diverse media channels, including social media and television programs. Master Yancan’s sudden fame carries a clear hallmark of viral marketing, which is particularly salient in a social media environment. Most

importantly, his secularized style of preaching and digital religious practice have significantly narrowed the distance between the general public and Buddhism, and blended into the conventional practices as a new construction and a supplement of religion in the secular world.

Compared to the Buddhist network, the Christian network on Weibo tends to be a more confined ingroup one, with a flock of followers mainly consisting of young educated, middle-class people in urban cities. The main religious actors within this network are priests, pastors, churches, Christian organizations, and other users that are dedicated to promoting Christianity. Non-believers are not excluded from the network, but most interactions surrounding the faith talk are more likely to occur among Christian believers and online religious authorities (e.g., religious celebrities, organizations). So what are they talking about? After examining the posts published by various Christian actors on Weibo, the researcher found that most of the content was Christian teaching, psalms and hymns, biblical stories, and prayers, which in return received the followers' praises to God in the comments and replies (see Figure 3). This formal and ritualistic discourse is similar to what occurs verbally under the roof of churches. On the whole the Christian topical network is theologically oriented and much less dynamic compared to the Buddhist one.

Figure 3 Christian topical network

This echoes with Cheong's (2012) claim that "microblogging rituals" can deepen our understanding of the bonding social capital built and maintained within religious

communities. In the meantime, however, some scholars' (Hogan & Wellman 2013; Lundby 2013) critiques of the enthusiastic claims for cyber-churches still hold, because digital Christianity does not act on its own as a new discipline that is radically divorced from the real and the offline. Rather, it is more of a reconfiguration of existing practices, beliefs and infrastructures, seeking to complement, amplify, and ultimately, reinforce this ancient religious practice.

When looking at religious communities' negotiation processes in response to the various affordances offered by a given technology, Campbell's RSST approach proposes four layers of investigation: history and tradition, core beliefs, negotiation, and communal framing. Drawing on this approach, in this paper the distinction between Buddhism and Christianity can be attributed to their historical circumstances and core values, which set a basis for understanding how and why they respond to media technology in particular ways. Buddhism, originally from ancient India and now the most populous religion in China accounting for 244 million out of the 1.4 billion Chinese (Pew Research Center 2012), deeply grounded itself in a number of political regimes in history, and through the vicissitudes over centuries it has incubated a cohering interest with Chinese politics and even become an integral element of national traits. One evident proof is the numerous historical Buddhist sites nationwide, which are for all people to worship regardless of their beliefs. Buddhism's impact is so profound that it has become an integral part of Chinese culture.

Christianity came from the West and was the second religion to arrive in China—after Buddhism and before Islam. Through several waves of development in China, Christianity is believed to be China's fastest growing religion in the 21st century (Centre for the Study of Global Christianity 2013). Although Christianity has taken root in Chinese society in the past hundred years, it has always found it difficult to blend into Chinese culture. Unlike Buddhists who pay homage to the religious sages resembling those in ancient legends and myths of Daoism, and unlike Muslims who are born into Islamic ethnic families and simply follow their own customs, most Chinese Christians become Christians by conversion rather than by birth or cultural choice. Differences between Christian practice and local folk religion have actually increased over centuries rather than moving towards a more fully acculturated Chinese Christianity, and these differences have been created as local Christianity "has gradually been bound into global networks and institutions" (Harrison 2013, p. 6).

Nowadays, the religion is mainly polarized between Jidujiao (Protestantism) and Tianzhujiao (Catholicism); between the government-supported Three-Self churches and independent "house churches"; between the country churches of rural people and city churches of Chinese middle-class people, rich business people and the highly educated. The Chinese government's continuing containment and occasional persecution towards Christians adds to the complexity. This explains well why Christianity is still deemed a minority

religion in China and why the Christian network, either online or offline, is inclined to show clear ingroup traits.

Identifying religious communities' background and beliefs leads to considering their use of and response to new media in particular ways of acceptance, rejection and/or re-configuring. The result shows that they do make use of social media to a certain degree with members' engagement of different traits. Members and leaders of different religious communities make use of and talk on new media in different ways so that studying this reveals important identity narratives and how they seek to frame themselves in a social media environment.

5. Secular Buddhism and the 'temple economy'

In the Buddhist topical network, many posts are informational messages about famous temples, shrines and monasteries throughout the country. Such content is usually generated by institutional users, such as travel agencies and local tourism bureaus, to promote the local tourism economy. It is crucial to examine these commercial aspects of the religious online public because it helps us to unpack some peculiar facets of religion in a fast-growing secular state like China. To describe this social phenomenon, this paper uses the term '**temple economy**' to specify an economy developed from faith tourism in which people travel for pilgrimage, missionary or leisure purposes, from the circulation of sacred commodities such as incense, amulets and crafts, and from the cultural fairs that promote religion as well as other folklores.

Religious tourism has long been a contested topic in academia because religion is often assumed to be other-worldly in nature, and thus, attributed to absolute divinity and spiritually pure qualities which are logically furthest from materialism. However, religion and economics never exist separately from one another in the actual practices of religions, for instance, the theologically and doctrinally sanctioned acts of offerings and donations (Yu 2012). Especially in China's case, the religious revitalization is by and large driven by the market due to the strong correlation between religious tourism and economic importance. Given that the country possesses a large number of historical attractions and World Heritage Sites listed by UNESCO, among which one-third are classified as religious monuments of Buddhist and Taoist origins (World Tourism Organization 2011), China's temple economy has gained rapid growth with official acceptance, and often state support, to maintain and develop religious sites.

As one result of the revival of religion and spiritual tourism, sacred commodities and religious-cultural fairs have also enjoyed unprecedented effervescency. From the yearly event the China Xiamen International Buddhist Items and Crafts Fair to the China International

Halal Food and Muslim Products Fair, such commercial activities have showcased a wide range of religious products and services in the contemporary Chinese religious supplies industry and the general cultural gifts and handicrafts industry. In this paper, one reflection of this ‘commoditised’ religion on Sina Weibo is the large number of marketing and advertising posts of sacred goods such as Buddhist sutras, amulets, prayer beads, jewellery and incense. The sellers include ordinary people who do such business for profit, monks and Buddhist organizations for sustaining particular temples.

Similar to lighting votive candles in Christian churches, wearing Buddhist amulets or accessories also has a symbolic meaning of the prayer’s devotion. Yet the Buddhist rosary has more instrumental usage in counting the number of times a mantra is recited while meditating. The number and the material of beads also represent different meanings that can be related to Buddhist metaphysical thoughts. The same also applies to many ritual materials in the religion. This extraordinary attention to materiality, according to Glassman (2008) in his review of Rambelli’s (2007) work about the objects in Japanese Buddhism, is

essential for an understanding of how Buddhism came to pervade all aspects of everyday life...all the various phenomena under investigation...an ongoing attempt on the part of Buddhist actors to transcend the mere physicality or ‘thing-like nature’ of objects. In theory and in practice, through both ideological and ritual means, these materials, be they natural or the work of human artifice, were circulated in a sacred economy of meaning. (p. 407)

This Buddhist notion of materiality is shared across the Buddhism of Asian countries like Japan, China and Thailand.

Another manifestation of this temple economy is the regularly held temple fairs (*Miaohui*), both in urban and rural areas. Originally, the temple fair was a solemn sacrifice activity adjacent to Buddhist or Taoist temples that was designed to transmit tenets and increase votaries, usually involving activities of worshiping deities, performing rituals and entertainment. Religious beliefs, discourses and practices were at the core. Some Buddhist sites still reserve the traditional form of temple fairs to celebrate birthdays of religious sages such as Buddha. Nowadays, the temple fair has gradually become a site for mass gathering for much truncated religious activities, and more for commodity exchange and other cultural activities. Famous temple fairs, such as the Altar of Earth temple fair in Beijing and the Longhua Temple fair in Shanghai, have become customary local festivals with different features in different places.

For example, on 17 May of 2013, users posted about local temple fairs:

@user1: Today is 8 April in the Chinese lunar calendar, Buddha's birthday. But when I was little I did not know why there was temple fair on this day. Went to the fair with my mum and little brother. There was a huge crowd of people, a lot of food, drinks, and shows, almost everything. How prosperous and bustling!

@user2: Today is Buddha's birthday, also the birthday of the ancestor of local people. The town holds Donglin temple fair every year on this day, attracting a lot of votaries from tens of miles away. Certainly many people come for the opera which usually lasts for several days and nights. Uncles, aunties, grannies and grandpas are very fond of the opera, and today they occupied the whole bus to come to watch it.

These flourishing "temple-less temple fairs" (Cohen 2005, p. 92) combine the secular and the religious. The economic, cultural, political and social dimensions of urban and rural life are evident in one occasion which proliferates a variety of socio-cultural practices and thereby re-establishes the multifunctional totality of this traditional fair that provides a common fertile ground for the paradoxical process of secularisation and revitalisation of popular religious practices and symbols (Cooper 2012).

To conclude, the commercial and secular facet of Buddhism on Weibo has unveiled a much larger picture of the religion's revival and development in contemporary China. To consider the temple economy from the standpoint of inheriting and 'improvising' the ancient religious practices may contribute to a better understanding of how the modern practices relate to a broader, complex social, economic, and cultural landscape of Chinese contemporary society. On one hand, the temple economy can be well deemed as one driving force for economic development in some parts of the country such as the south-eastern China. On the other, by tempering the capitalist drive for accumulation of wealth, the popular religiosity and kinship ethics of generosity in giving away wealth plays an important role in preserving the local identities and autonomy. Therefore, the temple economy provides the groundwork for the construction of an indigenous civil society in which religious rituals and festivals serve as one way to generate capital for the public good, such as improving community welfare and facilities (M. M-h. Yang 2007).

6. A wrestle between Christianity and the state

Despite the remarkable revitalization of all kind of religions in post-reform China, the Chinese government has never given up the effort to confine religious activities to its threshold of tolerance. As stated at the beginning of this paper, the Chinese Constitution enshrines the freedom of religion and normal religious activities. Nevertheless, in practice, the government has the full discretion to define the standards for the so-called “normal” religious activities. Adding to this ambiguity of policy, what has been long criticized is the institutional setting of the official religions as state-supported bodies rather than independent organizations. The Chinese government is the sole authority for appointing or recognizing religious leaders, including the Tibetan incarnated lamas and Chinese Catholic bishops, and it rejects any other shadow clergies appointed outside China’s borders by exiled Dalai or the Vatican. Unsanctioned religious activities such as underground or house churches are still perceived as a potential threat to political stability and social order that should be treated with caution (DuBois 2011).

Even so, Buddhism has enjoyed more privilege than ever before because of its long-standing affiliation with Chinese culture. The new Chinese leadership has realized that China is undergoing a moral crisis, and therefore, the government should be more tolerant of traditional cultures or faiths such as Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism, which may help to curb the increasing social problems (Lim & Blanchard 2013). Due to this policy relaxation, local governments have been vigorously building Buddhist statues and pagodas, and commercializing them by selling tickets and religious items, soliciting donations and even listing temples on the stock market to obtain large incomes (China Daily 2009), despite SARA’s occasional efforts to crackdown on religious profiteering (Associated Press 2012).

However, the situation is less than ideal for Christianity. As a foreign teaching, Christianity still has a negative image in China and Christians are, from time to time, subject to persecution from the government. Christianity’s doctrine is fundamentally in conflict with the CPC’s one-party rule, and historically, there was precedent for Christians in the world to serve as sources of national opposition to communist rule, such as the Polish Catholic Church and the East German Lutheran Church (Froese & Pfaff 2009; Kong 2010; Siegele-Wenschkewitz 1986). Adding to this, many outcast activists of the watershed Tiananmen movement in 1989 became Christians who are believed by the authorities to work with Christian activists within the border. Not surprisingly the Chinese government maintains keen vigilance against Christians, who increasingly outnumber Party members, while tactically leaning toward Buddhism and other indigenous folk religions in the name of realising the renaissance of Chinese culture.

In early 2014, local governments in several cities of Zhejiang Province demolished hundreds of crosses or churches, including Wenzhou’s Sanjiang Church, known as “the Jerusalem of the East”, in a campaign against “illegal structures”. Protesters including pastors and believers were arrested or detained (Phillips 2014a). The official action targeted not only

the house churches but also the government-sanctioned churches, marking a new wave of anti-Christian campaign underway in contemporary China.

Due to news censorship, scarce coverage could be found about the demolishing incidents in the local or national media. On Sina Weibo, the issue of church demolition did not appear in the Christian topical network. Yet, we can still learn some facts through a few Weibo posts released by Christians or other citizens. For instance, one popular post released by certified user “user3” on 29 May, 2014, accurately profiled the authority’s ambivalent image regarding the religious issue:

Modern as you may describe it, it demolishes crosses and churches;
Conservative as it appears, it bulldozes graves and coffins; Strong as it seems, it is paranoid; weak as it may be, it is domineering. It is the heartbreaking contemporary China.

User4 condemned the pervasive silence of the media on this issue:

We learn that a series of incidents occurred in Xinjiang but don’t know anything about the massive church demolition in Zhejiang. Religious reform is certainly not empty talk but freedom of religion has the direct bearing on human rights. Although I don’t believe in any religion but I respect those religious people. Belief is a big thing and I expect somebody can stand out and speak for them. (3 August, 2014)

From their profiles and the content of their other posts, it appears that these two users are not categorized as Christians; they are common citizens sympathetic to the Christians’ mishap in church demolition incidents. Most Christians involved responded to the official actions in a more religious, restrained way. For example, on 4 April, 2014, one day after the local government delivered ultimatums to a dozen local churches, User5 posted Wenzhou congregation’s announcement on Weibo:

#Sanjiang Church# [Wenzhou Congregation’s decision regarding the demolition of crosses] 1. All congregations shall organise group praying; 2. Don’t demolish the crosses voluntarily; 3. Help each other regardless of sects; 4. Declare the wisdom of crosses to demolishers; 5. Use prayer and peaceful talk rather than force.

The post also attached a long weibo in the form of an image to explain the above-mentioned five principles in detail, with a Christian concluding remark: “May God give us peace, Immanuel!” (In Hebrew, the symbolic name “Immanuel” means “God is with us”). Even though they were discontent with the government and even gathered to protest in front of the churches, their online public still remained comparatively quiet and restrained. As User6 said: “Do not hate but love everybody, including those who demolished churches. Like Jesus said, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do (Luke 23:34)”.

The government’s demolitions actually gained many citizens’ support because those churches’ buildings were illegally beyond the limits stipulated in city planning and should have been rectified to protect other citizens and organizations’ land-use rights. As User7 stated in a post, he supported the government because “it is a complete joke if you can break the law freely just because you believe in God” (21 April, 2014). Similar supportive posts are listed here as illustrative examples:

@user8: All illegal structures should be demolished no matter it is church or residential building. The government should be consistent in execution and treat religious issue equally with other issues; otherwise the government will lose its credibility (7 April, 2014).

@user9: Why people just condemn the government for demolishing the churches without mentioning most of the churches are of illegal land tenure? Is religion above the law? Christianity is a religion imported to China with the invasion of foreign powers for just hundreds of years. Don’t forget that our ancestors believed in Daoism. Don’t be too affected by God (8 April, 2014).

There is still a long way to go before Christianity is ideologically accepted both by the Chinese government and the common public. However, the current official oppression and public hostility does not stop the number of Christian believers increasing year by year. Instead, China is believed to be on course to become the world’s most Christian country in 15 years, with a predicted number of 160 million believers by 2025 and 247 million by 2030 (Phillips 2014b). These figures may appear too optimistic, but such an increasing religious force would undoubtedly change the landscape of the social structure of Chinese society in the near future. As a result, this would also change the power relation between the state and the religion.

7. Discussion and conclusion

Changing attitudes towards the Party's atheist ideology and the liberalization of religious policies during the 1980s have led to a dramatic growth in religiosity. A new thirst for spirituality has found solutions in religion, and the number of believers of different faiths has surged in recent decades. Buddhism, Christianity, Daoism, and various kinds of folk religions have immensely catered to the spiritual needs of many of today's Chinese people.

Drawing on Campbell's RSST approach (2010), this paper provides a comparative perspective on Buddhism and Christianity's online publics in Sina Weibo through investigation of religious topical networks, history and beliefs, and the interrelationship between religion, community and the state. Buddhism advocates equality of all beings because everybody has the Buddha-nature inherent in him or in her—though temporarily obscured by delusions, and is thus capable of attaining Buddhahood (King 1989). Christianity, particularly evangelical Christianity, advocates a moral doctrine of egalitarianism in which all people are created equally before God but are called to a life of obedience, to hearken to a higher authority, trust, submit and surrender to God and obey his Word (Montemaggi 2017). Following RSST, this can explain some of the differences identified in this paper between the Buddhist and Christian topical networks. In Buddhist networks, the interaction dynamically involves a wider public that is inclusive of both believers and laities, whereas the Christian network is also technically accessible to all but theologically oriented to only those devoted and obedient to God.

The success of the synergy between religion and state is based on complementary rather than substitutable inputs, trust, freedom of choice and incentives of parties to cooperate. However, when it comes to politics, religious communities are inclined to stand at the margin (Coleman 2003) and may even be restrained in their freedom. This is particularly true in a secular society with a mainstream atheist ideology like China. When examining the role of religion in contemporary Chinese civil society, the dialectical relationship between the state, religion and market has always come into play. Against the backdrop of a market economy in an increasingly globalized world, the Chinese government has had to adjust its containment policy towards religion, and instead has begun to moderately ease the repressive tactics by practising 'co-option and control'. On one hand, the Chinese leadership has strategically utilized religion to curb the perceived pervasive moral crisis across society, and with this official approval, many religions in China have witnessed a burgeoning 'faith industry', such as religious tourism and the 'temple economy', which has in return created social and economic capital, and become an indispensable social force in the third sector. On the other hand, the authorities warily constrain religion's potential as a rallying point for opposition to its one-party rule, as in its continuing persecution of Christianity which it believes to embody Western values and culture.

Under such circumstances, religion in China stays socially active in two main ways: as faith systems for people to worship, and as an emerging charitable force of civil society to serve local communities. However, most religious groups in China consciously refrain from participating in the discussion and administration of political affairs. The newly developed social media platforms have provided an alternative way to expand traditional religious practices and enable open, free religious online publics. Yet the new technology comes into the dialectical process in a way that the ethos and identity of a religious group dictates expectations regarding members' engagement with the new media through their choices regarding what aspects of the technology they can accept, need to reject and to what extent its use or design needs to be innovated in order for it to fit into the moral economy of the community (Campbell 2010).

This paper responds to Cheong's work on microblogging rituals (2012, 2014) and her call for more study of digital religion in non-liberal political settings, by attempting to fill the gap in the still nascent study of digital religion in China. It has mainly investigated the religious public on China's most popular social media platform, Sina Weibo, with particular importance attached to a deep understanding of the new landscape of digital religion through meaningful observations of the public discourses related to Buddhism and Christianity on Weibo. While religion still remains an open question in both Chinese religious study and new media study, subsequent research may find it intriguing to explore what other digital platforms religion has adopted to expand its living and discourse spaces, how other religions such as Islam respond to new technologies and what profound social changes may be incubated in the dynamics continuously occurring in these online religious publics.

Weibo is still evolving in China with many social fields either having not yet undergone the changes ushered in by the new technology, or currently in the process of doing so. Therefore, it is too early to draw any solid conclusions about the even newer trend currently occurring in religious areas. Furthermore, the conundrum for religion's social activism vis-à-vis its political quietism still lasts. It is still too soon to tell what impact it will have on the realization of its ultimate aim of facilitating political participation and promoting democracy as envisioned by Putnam (1995).

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