Protecting the Country and Preventing Calamities: The Pure Land Practice of Hwadzan Pure Land Society in the Physical and Virtual Realm

Stefan Kukowka

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5078-2077

Abstract

*This case study explores the influence of a global health crisis on contemporary Taiwanese Buddhism. As prevention and control measures of COVID-19 enforced by the Taiwanese government constitute challenges and opportunities for religious actors and practice, the article examines how Hwadzan Pure Land Society (*Huázàng jìng zōng xuéhuì 華藏淨宗學會*) has responded to the pandemic by skilfully utilising digital technology to relocate "communal cultivation" (*gòngxiū 共修*) and rituals from the physical into the virtual realm. Compared to on-site participation in ritual, live streaming enables the practitioner to tune in simultaneously from every part of the world and even after the event has concluded since all videos are uploaded to YouTube. Whereas on-site participants recite and chant sūtras, bow and prostrate in front of Buddha statues, and make offerings, thus being temporally, spatially, and bodily integrated into each part of a ritual, off-site participants are detached from it in all three aspects. The communal practice viewed on the screen essentially becomes an individual practice in a secular environment far away from the sacralised space and time during the ritual. It is therefore the aim of the article to examine how religious practice and rituals in on-site and off-site settings differ in terms of religious experience.*

Keywords: Taiwanese Buddhism, Pure Land Tradition, Digital Religion, COVID-19

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Introduction

As of early 2022, despite vaccine booster shoots being offered to people in various countries, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is still affecting and holding parts of the world in seemingly non-ending lockdowns. Public health measures adopted to contain the spread of the disease and public responses to the virus "have far-reaching social implications" (Baker et al. 2020: 358). Since the beginning of the pandemic in early 2020, global lockdowns and the need for social distancing have been impacting religious institutions, communities, practices, beliefs, and identities, particularly due to the importance of communal gatherings associated with basically all religious traditions and practices. Joseph Baker et al. further noticed that under "normal" circumstances, death and mourning would increase communal gatherings and religious rituals, but considering the current circumstances and call for social distancing, religious groups must adapt their interactions to these new constraints, thus "the pandemic is triggering an increased need for religious traditions while at the same time significantly altering the expressions of those traditions" (ibid.).

It follows that "the 'demand' for religious ritual, comfort, and support is presumably increased by the pandemic, while simultaneously the 'available supply' of religion [...] is drastically decreased" (Baker et al. 2020: 358). In this regard, the religious landscape of Taiwan presents an interesting case as the Taiwanese government and public have successfully been controlling the spread of the virus, reporting only 1,160 confirmed cases on May 5, 2021 (Taiwan Centers for Disease Control 2021).[1] Under these relatively stable conditions and constant reminders to wear face masks and to wash hands, small gatherings and even large events with around 20,000 participants" were possible, such as the "When Buddha Meets the Gods" (*shìjiè shénmíng liányì huì* 世界神明聯誼會) celebrations held at the Fo Guang Shan Buddha Museum on December 25, 2020.

Reading these numbers might seem that life goes on as usual in Taiwan, nevertheless one can observe an increasing trend in the Taiwanese Buddhist field to utilise all sorts of digital media to disseminate Dharma teachings, organise Dharma ceremonies, and host various international conferences online. The social implications and the need for religious rituals are also reflected in the increase of rituals to stop the virus via metaphysical methods, such as the "Amitābha Triple Contemplation Service" (*sānshí xìniàn* 三時繫念) or "Protecting the Country and Preventing Calamities" (*hùguó xīzāi* 護國息災) rituals performed by Taiwanese Pure Land Societies (*jìngzōng xuéhuì* 淨宗學會), the Buddhist Association of the Republic of China (*Zhōngguó fójiàohuì* 中國佛教會), and other groups.

As the reported numbers of COVID-19 cases in India rapidly increased in May 2021, Master Wùdào 悟道 (b. 1951)—the leading monastic of Hwadzan Pure

[1] Since then, the numbers of COVID-19 cases have increased drastically.

Land Society (*Huázàng jìngzōng xuéhuì* 華藏淨宗學會; henceforth Hwadzan)[2]—told me during an informal conversation that they need to conduct a two-day "Protecting the Country and Preventing Calamities" ritual to help mitigate the extreme increase of numbers. This ritual was specifically organised for India and live-streamed on YouTube to connect with "our Indian friends." Before the national epidemic alert was raised to level 3 by the Centre for Disease Control starting from May 15 until July 26, 2021, thus suspending all religious gatherings and activities temporarily, Hwadzan continued to hold physical small-scale activities. Yet, the overall emphasis was put on the online dissemination of content regarding the current pandemic, as exemplified by Wùdào's daily "Online Dharma Talks on Protecting the Country and Preventing Calamities" (*hùguó xīzāi wǎnglù jiǎngzuò* 護國息災網路講座), the "Simultaneous Global Buddha-recitation to Protect the World from Disasters" (*quánqiú tóngxiū tóngbù niànfó hùshì xīzāi* 全球同修同步念佛護世息災), and the frequently held "Amitābha Triple Contemplation Service" (*sānshí xìniàn fǎhuì* 三時繫念法會). Considering the increasing COVID-19 cases in Taiwan since mid-May 2021, the "Amitābha Triple Contemplation Service" was subsequently transformed from a collective physical and individual virtual ritual (before May 15) into an exclusive individual virtual ritual that practitioners should watch at home (after May 15). Until August 8, different recordings of the ritual were rerun daily on several YouTube channels and Facebook. Compared to on-site participation in these ceremonies, live streaming enables the practitioner to tune in simultaneously from every part of the world—be it at home, at work, or on public transport—and even after the event has concluded since all videos are uploaded on YouTube.

Following Baker et al.'s (2020) and Piotr Siuda's (2021) call for more qualitative and quantitative research for studying religion under these special circumstances, this article will discuss how this Taiwanese Buddhist group utilises a hybrid on-site/off-site method of social and ritual interaction on a local and global scale. I will approach this from the perspective of digital religion and examine how Hwadzan has responded to the pandemic by utilising digital technology to relocate collective practice and rituals from the physical to the virtual realm.

[2] Pure Land Societies are predominantly Buddhist lay associations except for two monastic Pure Land Societies in Taipei and Táinán, Taiwan. Each association is a formally independent entity, yet some are part of an informal network and can be found in various cities in Taiwan and around the globe. While all share "Pure Land Society" or *jìngzōng xuéhuì* as their group's name and identity marker, most of them add the city name to denote geographical location (Yílán Pure Land Society) or an important ideal (Illustrious Virtue Pure Land Society). In this study I focus on the monastic Pure Land Society in Taipei. The English translation of *Huázàng jìngzōng xuéhuì* as "Hwadzan Pure Land Association" follows the group's translation. The term *xuéhuì* can also be translated as "Learning Association" or "Learning College." For example, the latter is used for the Pure Land Learning College in Toowoomba, Australia. For reasons of consistency, I will use "Hwadzan Pure Land Association" when referring to the group in Taipei and "Pure Land Societies" for general observations.

For this purpose, I have conducted participant observation and took part in various rituals and communal practices (*gòngxiū* 共修) at Hwadzan's branch temple in Sānchóng (*sānchóng biéyuàn* 三重別院), Taipei, and at the Língyán Mountain Temple (*Língyán shānsì* 靈巖山寺), New Taipei City, in April and May 2021. As I have been working with this group for a few years, rapport was established quickly. During my visits to each of these venues, I had many informal conversations with lay devotees, monastics, and Master Wùdào with whom I conducted one semi-structured qualitative interview on May 9, 2021. The interview was recorded with consent and divided into four topics: healing effects of Buddha-recitation; online and offline Dharma rituals; the pandemic; and digital media and the dissemination of Buddhism. Additionally, I have conducted an online survey with 181 respondents that was open from May when Taiwan was put under lockdown to August when restrictions started being lifted. It was disseminated in various Line groups (the instant-messaging app used most in Taiwan) with the help of Master Wùdào. The survey was also divided into four topics: background information; online participation in Dharma rituals; on-site participation in Dharma rituals; and experiences of learning Buddhism. The survey was structured into a series of multiple-choice questions that allowed respondents to choose one or more answers depending on the questions; a multiple-choice grid to survey the degree of participation in online rituals (see Table 1); Likert scales with scores from one to five to understand how strongly respondents agreed or disagreed on statements such as "Buddha-recitation has healing effects"; and various open-ended questions that allowed respondents to describe their experience of on- and off-site participation in rituals. Because not all respondents have participated in online rituals, the number of answers to some questions is lower than the total number of respondents.

The aim of the interview and the survey was to understand how digital technologies are integrated into spreading the Dharma, how ritual practices and sites of worship have changed due to the pandemic, and how lay followers have adapted to these circumstances. The current situation provides an opportunity to examine how religious organisations deal with the urgency of having to react, adapt, recreate, and rationalise the transformation of their religious practice under these special conditions—thus, inviting us to pay attention to the persons behind the screen and reflect on the important question of what it means to "do" religion and even "be" religious in a wired world.

Religious Practice in a Digitalised World

A General Context

Digital media and technology are developing at an increasingly fast pace and are accessible through a variety of devices. Consequently, religious content on the internet is expanding, changing, and reinventing itself year after year, especially in times of social distancing and global lockdowns when sermons, communal practices, and rituals cannot be conducted physically. Religious groups and practices are not static monoliths but rather creative fluid communities, adapting to changes in their environment. As a result, different forms of overlapping and constantly evolving digital media formats have emerged over the last decades.

Digital media allows us to go beyond geopolitical borders and explore how religious ideas and practices are brought into new contexts, thereby providing the opportunity to study the "translocative" (Tweed 2011) dimension of religious practices as they move across (virtual) space. Hence, scholars working on the intersecting field of religion and digital media have proposed various approaches to examine how religious agents utilise and interact with digital media and technology. Studies ranging from descriptive and conceptual reflections, such as Christopher Helland's influential yet dated classification of *religion-online* and *online-religion* (2000; 2005) to theoretical frameworks and methods for analysing how offline religious communities adapt to and negotiate with new media—including Heidi Campbell's concept of "networked religion" (2012a) which is based on the idea that a computer-networked society transforms how we communicate and interact, or Stewart Hoover and Nabil Echchaibi's idea of "third spaces" which extends the "mediation of meaning" theory (Hoover 2006) as it explores religious and spiritual forms that are emerging in the in-between-ness of socially created digital spaces (Hoover and Echchaibi 2014)—have helped us consider the intermingling and blurring of religion and digital media through different lenses.

A recent article by Siuda (2021: 9) proposed a conceptual framework based on Helland's aforementioned classification to overcome the outdated *religion-online* and *online-religion* dichotomy, trying to introduce "a more dynamic framework" by adding a distinction between *traditional* and *innovative* religion to *religion-online* and *online-religion*. Whereas traditional religion refers to "long-existing, established, institutional traditions (Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, etc.)," innovative religion takes into account "new religious movements, cults, self-proclaimed prophets, or gurus" (ibid.: 3). Although Siuda emphasises that these four types should be considered Weberian ideal types and that they can intermingle with each other, it seems that long-established "traditional" religions can only be in the two left quadrants of his quadrant chart, designated as religion-online/traditional and online-religion/traditional. Considering the diversity of contemporary Chinese Bud-

dhism, for example, the Robot-Monk Xián'èr (*xián'èr jīqìsēng* 賢二機器僧) of Lóngquán Temple (*Lóngquán sì* 龍泉寺) in Běijīng who can interact with visitors to the temple and discuss Buddhist doctrines and matters of life (Travagnin 2020), or the charismatic Chinese monk Dàoxīn 道心 (b. 1982) whose proficient usage of Chinese social media platforms (WeChat and Weibo) reaches hundreds of thousands of followers in China (Tarocco 2017; Pacey 2017), or my discussion of hybrid Buddhist rituals in Taiwan in the second part of this article, Siuda's four-quadrant chart appears to be over-generalised to classify Xián'èr or Dàoxīn, as both reflect rather innovative ways of Chinese Buddhism to connect and interact with their followers.

Therefore, I will not frame my discussion in terms of *religion-online* and *online-religion* or *traditional* and *innovative* religion, but rather ask how religious actors employ and shape the internet to achieve spiritually motivated goals. In one of her earlier works, Campbell (2005: 14–20) identified four narratives that might help answer this question: spiritual networks; worship space; missionary tools; and religious identity. Spiritual networks describe the internet as a connection point for religious users to interact over space and time in their individual and communal search for spiritual cultivation and experience. As Campbell's study only focuses on the three Abrahamic religions, her data reflects a tendency to consider the internet as a spiritual medium that has been designed by God for specific purposes or infused with the divine providing spiritual encounters. From a Buddhist perspective, the internet is a convenient tool that can be utilised to spread teachings. Put in Buddhist terminology, it is an expedient means (*fāngbiàn* 方便; Skt. *upāya*) to form karmic affinities (*jiéyuán* 結緣) with countless sentient beings to benefit them on their path towards ending suffering (*kǔ* 苦) and achieving awakening (*juéwù* 覺悟). Second, the internet is also a place of worship that can be utilised as a sacramental space or forum for conducting religious rituals or activities in times of lockdowns and lesser social interaction, as will be discussed in the next section. Third, since its inception, the internet has been used as a tool for promoting and disseminating religion—it is a missionary tool (Campbell 2010: 22–26). For online proselytising, the internet has become a dynamic, easily accessible resource for religious groups. A YouTube channel and Facebook page are created in less than a few minutes and enable its users to reach millions of interested individuals, create a virtual community, and expand one's group. It is therefore a powerful resource for extending "real life" practice into the virtual realm. Lastly, together with the above three narratives, the internet also creates a religious identity that stretches across the physical and virtual world. It affirms and reinforces a certain religious lifestyle with a set of values or convictions as it connects members of a particular religious background and tradition. Their shared religious identity is lived out in online/offline communities and through ritual.

These four narratives illustrate the various motivations for religious use of the internet and bring us to an important aspect: the religious community. Campbell (2010: 19) notes that "the boundaries of a particular religious community are estab-

lished by agreed-upon standards of interpretation based on a particular group's understanding of the role a text plays in the community and what authorities have the right and responsibility to guide these interpretations." It is, therefore, not only important to examine the textual tradition but also its interpretation and lived practice when set against the backdrop of digital media and technology.

Following this argument to examine the specific lived practice might deepen our understanding if we consider the formation and continuation of a religious community that utilises digital media for ritual practice and dissemination of content from the perspective of an imagined community. Originally developed to analyse the rise of nationalism, Benedict Anderson's concept of imagined communities (2006) has been applied to a variety of disciplines to explain the material and social contexts for cultural imagination. Anderson (2006: 7) demonstrates that material underpinnings of imagination, such as books, newspapers, census, museums, maps, etc. create an imagined "horizontal comradeship" among fellow citizens. Considering the increasing integration of digital media into our lives, we could add the internet as a "virtual underpinning" that creates bonds and communities between people that could be on different sites around the globe. Particularly live-streamed online events—such as rituals—where one sees the on-site performers and participants as well as the number and comments of off-site participants on the screen, creates this feeling of "horizontal comradeship."

Extending Anderson's argument, Arjun Appadurai's (1996: 33) theory of "five dimensions of global cultural flows," including ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes, and ideoscapes, highlights the fluid character and the perspectival construction of our global society by various kinds of actors. These land*scapes* shape multiple ways of imagining the world, thus creating culturally, historically, and linguistically conditioned individual and collective "imagined worlds" (ibid.). The rapid development of mechanical and digital technologies (technoscapes) allowed information to be produced and distributed around the globe in split seconds. Newspapers, television, audio tapes, the internet, etc. (mediascapes) disseminate "image-centered [and] narrative-based accounts of strips of reality" (ibid.: 35) that organise the imagination into social practices. For example, Hwadzan and other Pure Land Societies are not well-integrated and hierarchically organised as other Taiwanese Buddhist groups, such as Fóguāngshān 佛光山, Fǎgǔshān 法鼓山, or Cíjì 慈濟. They constitute a network of relatively independent religious communities spread across the globe that are connected because of their common affiliation with Jìngkōng's 淨空 (b. 1927)[3] Pure Land thought and practice and because of the interaction of Jìngkōng's monastic disciples with these various communities. Particularly because Jìngkōng and his lay followers have been skilfully utilising

[3] For biographical information on Jingkong and his activities in Mainland China and Taiwan, see Sun Yanfei 2017; Ji Zhe 2018; and Kukowka 2020.

different sorts of media, including audio tapes, video tapes, and TV broadcasts since the 1980s as well as websites, applications, and social media channels since around 2000 to disseminate his lectures, most of Jìngkōng's followers have actually never seen him except through various media channels. These media channels establish the master's charismatic power by creating a direct virtual connection with each of his individual practitioners. Therefore, the name "Pure Land Society" serves as an umbrella term under which all individual communities come together. It is the imagined community that exists in the real and virtual world and unites practitioners in times of social distancing when communal (offline) practice is not possible.

Buddhism and Digital Media

During the last two decades, thorough attention has been devoted to the Abrahamic religions (Casey 2006; Miczek 2008; Ward 2016; Grant et al. 2019), but recent studies on Chinese popular religion (Clart 2012) and Chinese Buddhism have also broadened our understanding of the interaction of religion and media in the Sinophone world (McGuire 2017; Laliberté 2017; Tarocco 2017; 2019). Stefania Travagnin's recent studies have explored different topics in the intersecting field of religion and media in China and Taiwan, including a general overview of the evolution of the religious mediascape in post-1945 Taiwan (2017a), a study discussing hagiographical contents and historical (re-)constructions in the creation of Buddhist cartoons in Taiwan (2017b), and two studies on the relationship between religious practice, authority, and the Chinese state. In one of these studies, Travagnin analyses and reflects on the integration of robotics into the dissemination of the Buddhist Dharma at the Lóngquán Temple in Běijīng, noting that the Robot-Monk Xián'èr "reflects and embeds […] Dharma teachings, and thus has become an exemplary Buddhist product in this new media and high-tech age" (2020: 143). The other study (2019) discusses online ritual practice and digital worship of online Buddha halls (*zàixiàn fótáng* 在線佛堂) and Online Memorial Worship Sites (*wǎng shàng jìsì* 網上祭祀) of Nánpǔtuó Temple (*Nánpǔtuó sì* 南普陀寺) and asks how the internet changes modes of ritual performances and impacts ritual authenticity and efficacy—a question that will be examined in the second part of this article as well. Yet, possibly due to the website's structure and the ritual services offered by Nánpǔtuó Temple, Travagnin's study is set against the dualistic framework of offline/online and online-religion/religion-online. As I will show below, rituals are not necessarily performed either online or offline, either individually in front of a screen or collectively in the temple. Buddhist rituals have become hybrid online and offline events for cultivation, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Focusing on the increasing number of Buddhist apps, particularly in the American market, Rachel Wagner and Christopher Accardo raise an important general question that is also echoed in this paper: "As Buddhist teachings and

practices are transformed into digitized, structured programs experienced largely individually, [...] they are increasingly experienced alone rather than in community. Therefore, some of the most compelling questions about Dharma delivery via apps [and the internet] have to do with the individual versus the communal nature of Dharma practice" (Wagner and Accardo 2015: 134). Although their study focuses mainly on Chan meditation in North America and how smartphone apps may help the practitioner deepen their cultivation, similar observations can be made in Taiwan as well, for example, online Dharma talks, live broadcastings of Dharma ceremonies and communal practice, and the possibility to watch a video later or rewatch it transforms the Dharma into a "stream running alongside multiple other streams [... that can be] processed in the same physical way that we consume music, hear the news, or send our email" (ibid.: 134–35). According to the results of my online survey on participation in online communal practice and rituals of Hwadzan, most of the 126 respondents reported that they watch and participate from home (119) and/or work (25), but some answered that they would tune in "on their way" or when being "outside" (27). Most of them would either use a smartphone (104) or laptop (62), while some respondents used tablets (37) and TVs (36)—depending on the situation and where they were. It is understandable, therefore, why 100 respondents stated that they did not watch the whole ritual or communal practice. Only twenty-six people stayed until the end. A different environment and a different medium change the length and presumably also the quality of cultivation.

Omnipresent digital media and technology are a double-edged sword for religious practice. On the one hand, with access to the internet Buddhism can reach corners all around the world, especially in places where there is no Buddhist community. It also connects the individual practitioner to the larger virtual and real community of his or her chosen community and enables one to select the most relevant content. During our interview, Master Wùdào noted:

> Through the possibility of the Internet nowadays, people with whom we have karmic affinities (*yǒuyuán* 有緣) will be able to connect with us on the Internet. Sometimes we only meet online but not in person. That is the reason why we offer the convenience [of online practice]. If the right causes and conditions (*yīnyuán* 因緣) align, of course, he or she will want to come and see our temple (Shì Wùdào 2021).

On the other hand, the over-saturation of the religious market empowers the undecided individual to pick and choose between different religious groups. Without a local community or under special conditions (like the COVID-19 pandemic), online dissemination of content and individual practice at home seem to foster an individualism (or individualistic practice) that can become an impediment to progress on the Buddhist path. The third jewel of Buddhism, apart from the Buddha and the Dharma, is the *sangha*—the community. Buddhist precepts and vinaya regulations are fundamentally concerned with how to live harmoniously in a community of monks

and nuns but also how to live a harmonious social life. The monastic and lay community and society at large is the "training ground" to put Dharma instructions and cultivation into practice.

Smartphones and computers are personal devices. Their users determine how and when to go online and tune in for cultivational purposes—not the monastic community that normally sets the dates for communal practice, ceremonies, and rituals unless it is a live broadcast and the devotee chooses to engage. The inherent individual nature of these devices raises a fundamental question that goes back to the inception of Buddhism, that is, should Buddhism be practised individually or communally? For Mahāyāna Buddhists the ideal of the bodhisattva who compassionately chose to postpone complete awakening to save all sentient beings has been used to denounce the idea of the individual Arhat who strives for awakening on his or her own. The story of Shakyamuni's awakening itself reflects an individual quest to reach liberation. In theory, individual practice is therefore not necessarily obstructive to cultivation, but wrong views and an individualistic understanding of an immutable self is. Regardless of whether the individual practises in the community or alone at home, if one does not realise one's impermanent and ephemeral nature, no amount of effort will yield any results. As Beverly McGuire (2019: 242–244) in her study on digital media and global Buddhism noted, digital devices can strengthen craving, a feeling of self, and subvert a mindful approach to using digital media. Respondents of my online survey stated that online participation "does not feel real," "is less engaging," and "is much inferior to on-site participation, but is the best arrangement available at the moment, better than nothing." While others mention that "it is like attending an on-site Dharma ceremony" and even that a "solitary environment [at home], undisturbed, allows for a calmer mind."[4] These answers demonstrate that while some practitioners seem to make no difference between on- and off-site participation, others consider receiving Dharma instructions or watching rituals performed online as inferior to actual on-site participation. Thus, whether apps and online content foster an individualistic understanding of the Dharma or not must be further discussed and be part of a broader analysis of digital Buddhism, as Wagner and Accardo note (2015: 139–140).

Hwadzan's Cyber Presence

Aiming at developing a new typology of religion in cyberspace, Louise Connelly attempts to categorise Buddhist cyberspace to illustrate its complexity and interconnectedness, advancing our understanding of Asian religions on the internet. Her study provides a frame of reference for analysing religious groups present on the

[4] The Chinese responses: 不太真實。較無參與感。 逊色於現場法會很多, 但這已經是當前最好的安排了, 好過没有。 如同現場參加法會。獨自一人的環境, 不受干擾, 心靈才能較平靜。

internet and proposes a cluster mapping typology that is divided into four categories: virtual worlds and games (VWG), mobile applications (MA), websites (W), and social media (SM) (Connelly 2015: 58–59).

This framework is beneficial for discussing the potential impact the digital medium is having on Buddhism in terms of authority, ritual, identity, and communities. Mapping the Buddhist cyberspace provides us therefore with a greater awareness of how Buddhist groups or individuals construct their specific environment and how religion (in general) is negotiated both online and offline. Digital media has become an essential part of our daily lives. As online communication, dissemination of ideas, the search for information on the internet, etc. increases, religion has not been static but has become a part of the cybercultural network. Religious practice is no longer restricted to the physical world but extends into the virtual world: Buddhist centres in Second Life, meditation applications, countless YouTube channels and Facebook pages are prime examples. If we are to understand religion in today's world, it is necessary to integrate the cyber-presence of religion into our research.

So far Hwadzan has not yet created virtual worlds and games with which believers can interact, feel immersed, and gather for communal practice, such as in Second Life (Connelly 2012). There are, however, at least five applications available for download in the iTunes store related to Jìngkōng's different Pure Land Societies, including Hwadzan, the Temple of Utmost Bliss (*Jílè sì* 極樂寺) in Táinán, and the Hong Kong Buddhist Education Foundation (*Xiānggǎng fótuó jiàoyù xiéhuì* 香港佛陀教育協會).

The first belongs to the Hwadzan World Education Foundation (*Huázàng shìjiè jiàoyù* 華藏世界教育基金會) which lay devotee Chén Cǎiqióng 陳彩瓊 established in 2003 after Jìngkōng entrusted her with the digitalisation of the former Hwadzan Buddhist Audio-Visual Library (*Huázàng fojiao shiting tushuguan* 華藏佛教視聽圖書館) at Jingmei, Taipei (Kukowka 2020: 41–46). Chén's application, Hwadzan Satellite TV (*Huázàng wèixīng diànshìtái* 華藏衛星電視台), provides the latest news about activities at various Buddha-halls (*fótáng* 佛堂) and broadcasts Jìngkōng's and Chén's videos non-stop. It is a non-interactive religious application that only allows for passive consumption of its contents.

The application released by the Hong Kong Buddhist Education Foundation has a relatively sophisticated modern design with four functions: news, Dharma treasures (*fǎbǎo* 法寶), multimedia, and personal settings. News include anything related to Jìngkōng, Chinese culture, or new book releases. The section on Dharma treasures contains endless lists of digitalised books of Jìngkōng and Yìnguāng as well as sūtras, morality books (*shàn shū* 善書), and scriptures on filial piety. The multimedia function enables the user to watch and listen to Jìngkōng's recorded Dharma lectures and to play six different soundtracks that repeatedly chant the name of Amitābha, allowing the user to practise Buddha-recitation with this app at any time and place. In the last section, personal settings, one has the option to set and record

morning and evening sermons (*zǎowǎnkè* 早晚課) in a calendar in order to remind oneself to daily practise.[5] While the morning sermon includes the sixth fascicle *Make the Great Vow* (*Fādà shìyuàn* 發大誓願) of the *Longer Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra* (*Wúliàng shòujīng* 無量壽經) and the *Amitābha Sūtra* (*Āmítuó jīng* 阿彌陀經), the evening sermon contains fascicles 32 to 37 of the *Longer Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra* and *Amitābha Sūtra*. It should be noted that the *Longer Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra* in this context refers to a compilation of the five translations of this sūtra edited by the lay Buddhist Xià Liánjū 夏蓮居 (1884–1965) which is used by Jìngkōng and his Pure Land Societies (Kukowka 2020: 121–127).

The third application launched by the Temple of Utmost Bliss in Táinán has similar functions to the one described above by the Hong Kong Buddhist Education Foundation, but without the option to individualise one's personal daily morning and evening practice. The last two applications have been developed by Hwadzan. One specifically designed for reading the Digitalised Dharma Treasures of Hwadzan (*Huázàng shùwèi fǎbǎo* 華藏數位法寶), and one designed as a live broadcast application for Dharma ceremonies, lectures, and communal Buddha-recitation practice, the Hwadzan Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism Online Radio Station (*Huázàng rúshìdào wǎnglù diàntái* 華藏儒釋道網路電台) which also contains uncountable hours of video material of Jìngkōng and Wùdào. Compared to the applications released by other Pure Land Societies, this last app can be integrated into any Dharma ceremony, such as the Amitābha Triple Contemplation Service, enabling the practitioner to tune in the live broadcast from home, work, or anywhere else, thus, altering the nature of participation in such rituals (to which I will return below). Integrated into traditional non-digital forms of worship, applications provide accessibility and convenience as one does not have to transport a physical text or other liturgical materials. Everything is in one application on one's mobile device. Despite their digital nature, the recitation and chanting functions of these apps are considered religiously efficacious, as are their mechanical counterparts—the Buddha-recitation devices (*niànfó jī* 念佛機) (Heller 2014).

Websites are the third category of Connelly's cluster mapping typology and provide information about the religios group, its ideals, values, and activities. Within Jìngkōng's network of Pure Land Societies, almost every individual group has a website, only differing in terms of sophistication as well as depth and breadth of content. Jonathon Frost and Norman Youngblood (2014) termed this difference in sophistication as the "digital divide" between groups with more financial and personal resources and smaller groups. This digital divide reinforces certain interpretations and discourses of larger groups on the internet. For example, while the website of the German Pure Land Society provides basic information about the latest activities and

[5] Wagner and Accardo (2015) have pointed to similar functions of meditation applications on the American iTunes market.

a short introduction to its founding in Chinese—the German website seems more like a blog that has not been updated since 2019 (Amitābha Pure Land Society Germany E.V. 2021)—Hwadzan's website is extremely sophisticated with numerous articles, news, videos (in Chinese, Minnan, English, German, and Japanese), a digital library that contains speeches of Jìngkōng dating back to the late 1970s, a Dharma treasury section for downloading digitalised books and sūtras, and an integrated online TV station that broadcasts Jìngkōng's and Wùdào's lectures continuously (Hwadzan Pure Land Association 2021a). According to the website, the importance of propagating the Dharma via technology is its substance (*kējì hóngfǎ zhòng zài shízhì* 科技弘法重在實質) and that Wùdào shall follow Jìngkōng's instructions to make offerings to the ten directions (*shífāng gòngyǎng* 十方供養) and not to use donations to build temples, but to print and distribute books and CDs. After the death of curator Hányīng 韓鏔 (1921–1997), an important lay benefactor of Jìngkōng during his early years in Taipei (Kukowka 2020: 39–41), Hwadzan's main activities focused on distributing Dharma treasures. With the spread of the internet, Hwadzan began editing Jìngkōng's talks and lectures into videos and established an Amitābha College—or, more literally translated, an "Online College of Buddhist Education" (*Fótuó jiàoyù wǎng lù xuéyuàn* 佛陀教育網路學院)—in 2003. The Amitābha College was founded to spread the Dharma into every corner of the world to purify the minds of sentient beings. It is an online community where everyone can enrol free of charge. After enrolment, depending on one's level of cultivation, one is assigned to basic subjects (*jīchǔ xuékē* 基礎學科), undergraduate subjects (*běnkē xuékē* 本科學科), or subjects of specialisation (*zhuānxiū xuékē* 專修學科). These courses are designed according to Jìngkōng's Five Great Subjects (*wǔdà kēmù* 五大科目) (ibid.: 104–115) and can take up to nine years in total. For each course, one receives videos and reading materials and has to write reflection papers, merit ledgers (*gōngguò gé* 功過格), and fill out a Daily Self-examination Rating Scale of Pure Land Practitioners (*jìngzōng xíngrén měirì zìwǒ jiǎnyàn píngliánbiǎo* 淨宗行人每日自我檢驗評量表) which are reviewed by three teachers: Jìngkōng, Wùdào, and Chéngdé 成德 (formerly Teacher Cài Lǐxù 蔡禮旭) (Amitābha College 2021). Most of these assignments are reviewed by the director of the Pure Land Society in Taoyuan and volunteers of Hwadzan—all of them are lay practitioners. This interactive online community—one may even call it a digital sangha—with its exchange forums, Line and WeChat conference calls, videos, reading materials, assignments, merit ledgers, etc. skilfully binds the user to it and periodically reminds the user to submit reflection papers. This, again, reflects Hwadzan's proficient utilisation of modern technology and the transfer of Chinese Buddhism into the digital age.

Among the category of social media, although Hwadzan has multiple Youku, Telegram, Instagram, and Twitter accounts, the most important accounts that reach millions of viewers are on YouTube and Facebook. Among the most popular YouTube channels are the Venerable Jìngkōng's Special Collection (*Jìngkōng lǎo-*

fǎshī zhuānjí wǎng 淨空老法師專集網) (Shì Jìngkōng 2021), Hwadzan.com (*Huázàng jìngzōng hónghuàwǎng* 華藏淨宗弘化網) (Hwadzan Pure Land Association 2021a), and the Buddha's Education Society (*Fótuó jiàoyù tóng xuéhuì* 佛陀教育同學會) (Buddha's Education Society 2021). Hwadzan's channel is used for live streaming Wùdào's "Online Dharma Talks on Protecting the Country and Preventing Calamities," daily morning exhortations, lectures at the Morality Preaching Hall (*Dàodé jiǎngtáng* 道德講堂), Dharma ceremonies such as the Amitābha Triple Contemplation Service, and communal cultivation rituals such as seven-day retreats of intensive recitation of Buddha's name (*fóqī* 佛七). Apart from streaming these activities simultaneously on Hwadzan's Facebook page (Hwadzan Pure Land Association 2021b), Facebook fulfils other functions as well. It not only allows for direct interaction with devotees through comments, likes, and shares but also creates a certain image of a "down-to-earth" amiable monastic who seems to be no different from lay devotees, as there are pictures of Wùdào praying, presiding over rituals, visiting temples, doing sightseeing, taking pictures, etc. Hwadzan also posts daily short uplifting and inspiring quotes from the Analects (*Lúnyǔ* 論語) to which Wùdào writes short explanations. In a similar study on monastics' engagement with social media in Mainland China, Francesca Tarocco (2017: 165) notes that "monks and nuns want to record a spiritual journey and their self-cultivation practices (*xiūxíng* 修行) in order to *share them* within translocal digital social networks. In doing so, a conversation takes place, one that clerics control." But that is not always the case, and we need to ask who oversees the online presence and presentation of the group? In Tarocco's study, it is the monastics that manage their social media accounts personally, whereas Hwadzan's Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube page are organised by a team of lay devotees. Thus, it is not the clerics that control the conversation; it is the laity that controls the discourse and image of their leader, therefore demonstrating empowerment of the laity and its centrality for Hwadzan's online engagements. A few monastics, however, have a personal Facebook page to document daily rituals, activities, and conversations with the master. Although social media allows for a two-way interaction between religious specialists and their followers, most of the interaction between Hwadzan's followers and Hwadzan's social media channels remain at the level of likes, shares, and comments, such as "Homage to Amitābha Buddha" (*námó āmítuófó* 南無阿彌陀佛).

Although separated by two screens and possibly thousands of kilometres away from each other, social media is a powerful tool for religious organisations to share, create information, and interact with their users. When one is subscribed to the beliefs of a certain (religious) group, social media has the power to create and reinforce a feeling of belonging to a larger virtual and imagined community through daily notifications, as it brings one in direct contact with religious specialists and other members of a group, regardless of time and space—something that was not possible before the invention of the internet and social media. From the comfort of one's own

home, without ever leaving it, one can participate in rituals, communal practice, and learn about the latest news of their master and community. This raises an important question: what does it mean to "do" religion and even "be" religious in a wired world? Religious experience, expression, expertise, and practice are certainly no longer restricted to the physical world but extend into a virtual one that fosters religious innovation and change.

The following figure provides a snapshot of Hwadzan's integration into websites, social media, and mobile apps and demonstrates that this group's online activities are highly integrated not only into the dissemination of the Dharma but also significantly into the religious practice of its lay followers. It should be kept in mind that Hwadzan is embedded into and only represents a fraction of Buddhist cyberspace.

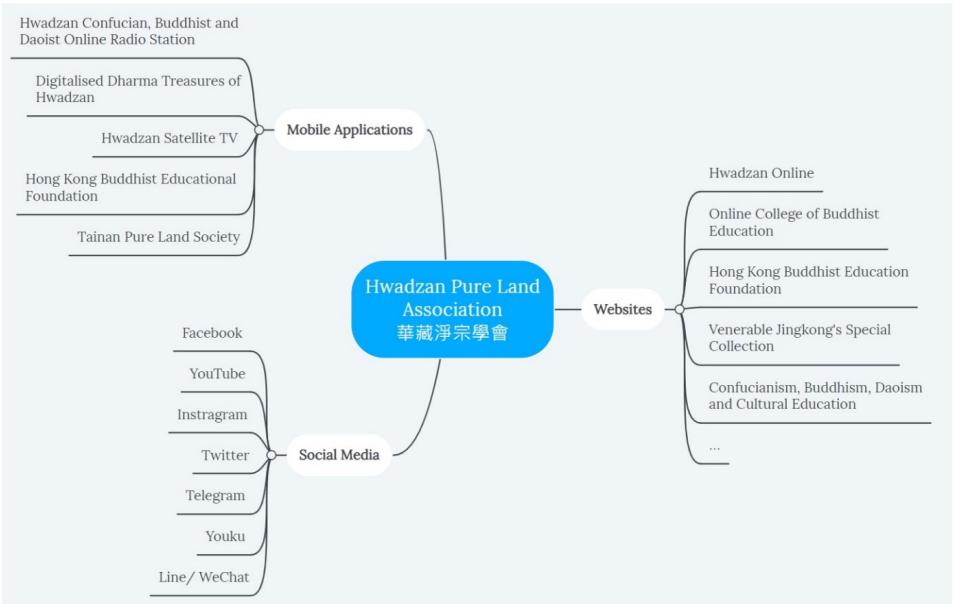


Figure 3: Hwadzan's Online Cluster Map (created by the author).

The Dharma Goes Digital: Off-line and On-line Practice at the Hwadzan Pure Land Association

The following section focuses on two aspects that are key factors of Hwadzan's method to spread the Buddha's and Jìngkōng's teachings: online lectures and online communal practice/rituals. Considering that the COVID-19 pandemic reduced and sometimes did not allow the gathering of believers due to health concerns, having the technological equipment for streaming lectures and rituals and the necessary skills to

operate them helped Hwadzan first to adopt a dual way of continuing its operation, i.e., on- and off-site practice, and when Taiwan's national epidemic alert was raised to level 3 by the Centre for Disease Control starting from May 15 and lasting until July 26, 2021, effectively suspending all religious gatherings and activities temporarily, it secured its online continuation on YouTube, Facebook, and Hwadzan.com.

A major reason why Hwadzan was not so much affected by this global pandemic, lies in its past. After Jìngkōng left the Táizhōng Lotus Society (*Táizhōng lián shè* 臺中蓮社) and his lay teacher Lǐ Bǐngnán 李炳南 (1891–1986) in 1966, and before he founded the Hwadzan Buddhist library in early 1979, he was an itinerant monastic educator lecturing sūtras at varying venues throughout Taiwan. He never became a member of any temple or monastic order because he rejected to conduct sūtra recitation, penitential offerings, and ritual feeding of hungry ghosts which were a major income for temples at that time compared to preaching and lecturing (Lǐ Shùháo 2012: 147–152). With his increasing popularity in the 1980s and 1990s, Jìngkōng began travelling abroad, mainly to the US, Hong Kong, and Singapore. In the early 1980s, lay devotees in New York donated a camera and audiotapes, hoping that Jìngkōng would record his lectures and send them across the ocean. This was the beginning of sending first audio and then video recordings all around the globe and, later on, with the emergence of the internet, developed into a virtual community of countless platforms where one could always watch Jìngkōng's and his disciple's lectures and study sūtras everywhere. Until this day, Jìngkōng has not established a monastery or temple but chooses to record lectures in recording studios.

As the title of Master Wùdào's Dharma lecture series implies, "Online Dharma Talks on Protecting the Country and Preventing Calamities" (*hùguó xīzāi wǎng lù jiǎngzuò* 護國息災網路講座), it reflects the wish to participate in and contain the suffering caused by COVID-19 through lectures that explain the cause and deeper meaning behind its emergence. Similarly, the "Protecting the Country and Preventing Calamities" ritual and the "Amitābha Triple Contemplation Service" (*sānshí xìniàn* 三時繫念) are conducted to combat the virus on a metaphysical ritual level. It shows that people do not passively surrender to this exposure and the potential suffering that comes with it, but try to participate in and contain these powers through ritual practice because it reduces stress and exerts control over their environment (Legare 2021). Religious rituals, thus, offer a vast archive of how people have dealt and still deal with suffering and illness, irrespective of the cause being a god that punishes moral misbehaviour (Meyer 2020: 148–150) or the karmic consequences of one's own actions. The sections below will therefore examine the content of these rituals and lectures and how they are aimed at alleviating the suffering caused by COVID-19.

Dharma Lectures

Since the beginning of 2021, Master Wùdào has lectured almost daily for his "Online Dharma Talks on Protecting the Country and Preventing Calamities," interrupting it only for the Amitābha Triple Contemplation Services and the seven-day Amitābha chanting retreats (*fóqī* 佛七). Until May 2021, his lectures concentrated on explaining four scriptures: *The Profound Meaning of the Sūtra of Dìzàng Bodhisattva's Fundamental Vows* (*Dìzàng jīng xuán yì* 地藏經玄義), *Essentials of the Lecture Notes on the Diamond Sūtra* (*Jīngāng jīng jiǎngyì jié yào* 金剛經講義節要), *Longer Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra* (*Wúliàng shòujīng* 無量壽經), and the *Compendium of Ānshì* (*Ānshì quánshū* 安士全書). In mid-June 2021, three scriptures were added to the lecture schedule: *Code of Practice for Practitioners of Pure Land Societies* (*Jìngzōng tóngxué xiūshǒuzé* 淨宗同學修守則), *General Contents of the Scripture for Humane Kings* (*Rénwáng hùguójīng dàyì* 仁王護國經大意), and *Introduction to Exalted Acts of Buddhist Monks* (*Zīmén chóngxíng lù qiǎnshù* 緇門崇行錄淺述). Whereas these lectures are the educational component of Buddhist practice that helps practitioners to become familiar with the doctrines and interpretation, the Amitābha Triple Contemplation Services are the ritual enactments of these doctrines and beliefs. As an examination of all seven scriptures would go beyond the scope of this article, and because my field research and interview with Wùdào only focused on the lecture contents until May 2021, the other three scriptures will not be included in the following analysis.

The Profound Meaning of the Sūtra of Dìzàng Bodhisattva's Fundamental Vows

In contemporary Chinese Buddhism, one of the best-known sūtras is *The Sūtra of Dìzàng Bodhisattva's Fundamental Vows* (*Dìzàng púsà běnyuànjīng* 地藏菩薩本願經) which takes a central place in Wùdào's lecture series. Its contents and commentaries are being explained as having beneficial effects for protecting the country and easing calamities such as COVID-19. The reasons for this take us back to the utilisation of the scripture in the Ming period (1368–1644) and its elaborations on filial piety and karma. Embedded into narrative structures of classical Indian Buddhist literature, i.e., *avadâna* or *jâtaka* narratives and the related genre on past vows (*běnyuàn* 本願), the thirteen chapters of the *Scripture on the Past Vows* describe Dìzàng bodhisattva's religious career, his filial practices, and the profound vows he made during past lives. The scripture also draws on the concept of cause and effect (karma) to explain the consequences that one faces after death. In this narrative framework, Dìzàng's heroic past follows the classic paradigm of bodhisattva cultivation: giving rise to *bodhicitta*, the pronouncement of bodhisattva vows before a Buddha, prediction of future Buddhahood, and countless lives of cultivation. In one of these past-life stories, Dìzàng is born as a young Brahman woman who descends into hell to save her suffering

mother, vowing to liberate all sentient beings that suffer for their wicked deeds.[6] Apart from declaring Dìzàng as the saviour of this world until Maitreya, the future Buddha, descends from the Tushita Heaven, the sūtra portrays Dìzàng's religious career and integrates his story into the Chinese notion of filial piety.[7]

Apart from exemplifying filial piety, Dìzàng is also associated with ritual techniques for subduing malicious entities, clairvoyance, extending the life span of practitioners, and healing diseases. Some of these techniques have been indicated as esoteric teachings (*mìjiào* 密教). The Buddhist scholar and nun Shi Zhiru (2007: 209) writes that "Dizang is integrally linked to a cluster of religious concerns and thaumaturgic techniques that adhered themselves to and grew up around *dhâranî* techniques" with miraculous healing effects and spiritual protection to eliminate afflictions.

During the Qīng Dynasty (1644–1911), several commentaries were written concerning the textual structure and content of this sūtra. One of these commentaries, the *Source and Origin of the Scripture of Dìzàng Bodhisattva's Fundamental Vows* (*Dìzàng púsà běnyuàn jīng lúnguàn* 地藏菩薩本願經綸貫)[8] written by the Qing monk Qīnglián 青蓮 (d.u.) in 1683, is the foundation of Wùdào's first lecture series. It is not the contents of the sūtra itself that Wùdào elaborates on but only the commentary. Qīnglián's preface to his commentary might provide some information on this issue, as he writes:

> Now, I will detail the reasons [for writing this commentary] to explain its truth. Originally, the essential meaning of the sūtra is divided into four chapters: (1) Illuminate the master who can change his appearance, who has the power to reproduce himself ad infinitum and [teach] in all hells. By *exemplifying filial behaviour*, he causes beings to be born in the realm of humans and heaven. (2) Explaining the intention of changing appearance, that is *not being filial to one's parents and the three gems lead to creating negative karma and falling into hell*. (3) Clarify the conditions for liberation, which are causing humans to *study the sūtra of filial piety* [*Dìzàng jīng*] and provide them with an example of filial piety so that they can achieve liberation. (4) Expound the cause for Buddhahood, which encourages them to *recite the name of the Buddha*, [cultivate] giving [dana] to receive rewards, and accomplish awakening.[9]

In his preface to *Lecture Notes on the Dìzàng Sūtra* (*Dìzàngjīng jiǎngjì* 地藏經講記), Jìngkōng writes that the *Sūtra on the Fundamental Vows* is the foundation of Mahāyāna practice without which no cultivation can be fruitful. He also notes that Buddhism is caught in a general state of decline due to neglecting filial piety. Any

[6] T13, no. 0412, p. 0778b01-779a.
[7] T13, no. 0412, p. 0779b27-p0779c01.
[8] X211, no. 0383. The other two are: *Textual Organisation of the Sūtra of Dìzàng Bodhisattva' Fundamental Vows* (*dìzàng běnyuàn jīng kēwén* 地藏本願經科文, B35, no. 0194, p. 0497a11) and *Outline to the Sūtra of Dìzàng Bodhisattva's Fundamental Vows* (*dìzàng běnyuàn jīng kēzhù* 地藏本願經科註, X0382).
[9] X21, no. 0383, p. 0638c17-p0638c23 (emphasis added).

cultivation that does not includes filial piety will only lead to flawed retribution (*yǒulòu fúbào* 有漏福報) and not to rebirth into the Pure Land or Buddhahood (Shì Jìngkōng 1998: 1–2). Since Dìzàng bodhisattva represents filial piety, this sūtra serves a complementary function to the *Longer Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra* to teach filial piety as Wùdào emphasised (Shì Wùdào 2021).

As can be seen, this scripture serves two aspects. First, it teaches correct moral behaviour. Considering Jìngkōng's general emphasis on Confucian family ethics being the basis of Buddhist cultivation, declaring it as the mundane Dharma (*shìjiān fǎ* 世間法) (Kukowka 2021), the *Sūtra on the Past Vows* and its commentary fit perfectly into his advocated path of cultivation. Second, as noted above, Dìzàng worship is also associated with healing rituals and, as Qīnglián highlights, encourages its readers to practise Buddha-recitation which according to Yìnguāng (Chén 2015), Jìngkōng (Shì Jìngkōng 2019a), and Wùdào eliminates negative karma that can be the source of diseases in the form of karmic retribution. Thus, the contents of this sūtra and commentary are beneficial for easing the calamities that COVID-19 caused.

Essentials of the Lecture Notes on the Diamond Sūtra

The second lecture series is the *Essentials of the Lecture Notes on the Diamond Sūtra* that Jìngkōng edited based on Jiāng Wèinóng's 江味農 (1872–1938) *Lecture Notes on the Diamond Sūtra* (*Jīngāng jīng jiǎngyì* 金剛經講義). Jiāng Wèinóng, the director of the Shànghǎi Shěngxīn Lotus Society (*Shěngxīn liánshè* 省心蓮社), was a lay Buddhist during the Republican Era (1911–1949) who collaborated with Xú Wèirú 徐蔚如 (1878–1937), Méi Guāngxī 梅光羲 (1880–1947), and other lay Buddhists to establish the Běijīng Scriptural Press (*Běijīng kèjīngchù* 北京刻經處) (Scott 2016: 75).

Being part of the Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras, the Diamond Sūtra teaches emptiness (*kōng* 空). Insight into emptiness is the perfection of wisdom and thus constitutes awakening and Buddhahood. The sūtra is famous for its protective power and numerous miracle stories, reporting the efficacy of reciting the Diamond sūtra when facing danger (Gjertson 1981; Huang 2018; Yü 1988). The Diamond Sūtra teaches that beings and things are without an intrinsic self and are dependent on causes and conditions. Phenomena are conventionally real but understanding their empty nature means understanding the ultimate truth (Yü 2020: 30–31).

Similar to the Commentary of the *Sūtra on the Fundamental Vows*, Jìngkōng's *Essentials of the Lecture Notes on the Diamond Sūtra* is used to explain and preach Xià Liánjū's compilation of the *Longer Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra*. All other scriptures are used to further illustrate the meaning of this Pure Land scripture. During our interview, Wùdào emphasised:

> The Diamond Sūtra is about the ultimate truth, but before we can understand this truth, we must learn what cause and effect [karma] mean. This is the true education of *prajñā* wisdom [*bōrě zhìhuì* 般若智慧]. Only with this *prajñā* wisdom can cause and effect be really understood, without it, we cannot reach perfection [*yuánmăn* 圓滿]. That is the reason why I chose this sūtra as a theoretical foundation for this lecture series on "Protecting the Country and Preventing Calamities" (Shì Wùdào 2021).

According to Wùdào, Jìngkōng chose Jiāng Wèinóng's *Lecture Notes on the Diamond Sūtra* because it teaches people "to see through [things] and be able to let go [of things]" (*kàndépò fàngdéxià* 看得破放得下), realising the true nature of reality, i.e., emptiness (Shì Wùdào 2020c). Analogous to the previous sūtra but viewed from the perspective of the Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras, to choose this scripture means to highlight correct moral behaviour based on elaborations of cause and effect (karma) and that if we come to realise the true nature of existence everything is inherently empty and only the result of an un-awakened mind—including calamities.

Longer Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra

The *Record of Śākyamuni's Teachings Compiled during the Kaiyuan Period* (*Kāiyuán shìjiào lù* 開元釋教錄),[10] edited by Zhìshēng 智昇 (d.u.) in 730, lists eleven of twelve[11] titles of translations of the *Longer Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra*. Of those, five are still existent today, starting from the Sòng Dynasty (960–1279) until the Republican Era, and have been edited into four compilations (*huìjíběn* 會集本). As noted earlier, Jìngkōng and all Pure Land Societies use the lay Buddhist Xià Liánjū's 夏蓮居 (1884–1965) compilation, titled *Buddha's Sermon on the Infinite Life Adornment Purity Impartiality and Awakenment Sūtra* (*Fóshuō dàshèng wúliàngshòu zhuāngyán qīngjìng píngděng jué jīng* 佛說大乘無量壽莊嚴清淨平等覺經).

For this lecture series, however, Wùdào does not elaborate on the whole sūtra but only to fascicles 33 to 37 because these parts specifically explain the reason why sentient beings accumulate negative karma and endlessly transmigrate through the six realms of existence (*liùdào* 六道)—but also encourages its readers to abandon evil and cultivate good, as well as practise Buddha-recitation (Hwadzan Pure Land Association 2013: 112–138), echoing the same themes identified above. Wùdào summarises the importance of these chapters as follows:

> This Sūtra is about the reality of our lives. [Learning it] helps us understand why things are the way they are. Some people do not know how to be filial to their parents or do not get along with

[10] T55, no. 2154.
[11] The twelfth translation (T12, no. 0363) is not included because it had been translated a few hundred years later during the Sòng Dynasty.

> their brothers, this is not right. What is most important now is to have harmonious relationships with our families, relatives, friends, the community, and society (Shì Wùdào 2021).

This sūtra is central to this group's self-understanding and Buddhist practice. All other scriptures are to be considered as further explanations of this sūtra. As I have pointed out elsewhere (Kukowka 2021), the cultivation of filial piety (*xiào* 孝) is a central concept within Jìngkōng's network of Pure Land Societies. For both monastics and lay followers, it is placed at the very beginning of all cultivational practices, because understanding the meaning of life begins with

> being filial towards one's parents, and respectful to one's teachers. This is the foundation of the Buddhist teachings [and it is in accordance with] the first sentence of the three meritorious acts to purify karma [*jìngyè sānfú* 淨業三福]: "be filial and care for your parents, be respectful and attend to your teachers and elders" [of the Contemplation Sūtra *Guān wúliàng shòu jīng* 觀無量壽經]. Filial piety and respect are the deciding factors for one's success in cultivation (Shì Jìngkōng 2019b: 5).

In the twenty-fifth chapter of the Longer Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra, "Direct Causes for Rebirth" (*wǎngshēng zhèng yīn* 往生正因), it is written that those who are not able to become monastics should—among other conditions—"be filial, faithful, and honest" to be reborn into the Pure Land at the end of their lives (Hwadzan Pure Land Association 2013: 88). The thirty-fifth chapter, "The Bitterness of the Defiled World" (*zhuóshì èkǔ* 濁世惡苦), states that those who are rich, powerful, wise, and talented are so because they have cultivated compassion and filial piety in past lives (ibid.: 122). Other examples in this chapter similarly illustrate how (un)wholesome actions affect the conditions of one's life. Originally being part of the Textbook for Morning and Evening Sermons (*Jìngzōng zhāomù kèběn* 淨宗朝暮課本), these five chapters have now become an essential part of Wùdào's lectures on protecting the country and easing calamities.

Compendium of Anshi

The last scripture of Wùdào's Protecting the Country and Preventing Calamities online lecture was written by the Qing scholar Zhōu Mèngyán 周夢顏 (1656–1739) and is one of the many morality books that Yìnguāng promoted for the moral and spiritual improvement of humanity (Kiely 2017: 34). In the preface for the *Compendium of Anshi*, Yìnguāng writes:

> Mr Anshi respectfully presents the exhortations of the Buddha who compassionately speaks the Dharma. […] The facts he provides show in detail the workings of cause and effect. I wish that people stop committing bad deeds and follow [instead] all sorts of good deeds.
>
> I congratulate those who have read this book. You have been in the sea of evil karma for a long time but now have suddenly come across a boat of compassion (Shì Yìnguāng 2010a: 602, 605).

Zhōu Mèngyán's Compendium is a collection of various morality texts to encourage people not to engage in taking life and commit sexual misconduct. Additionally, he wrote texts explaining the way of respect and sincerity of the ancient sages and kings and how to achieve liberation from *samsara*, such as *Essentials of the Hidden Good Deeds of Emperor Wenchang* (*Wénchāng dìjūn yīnlùwén guǎngyì jiélù* 文昌帝君陰騭文廣義節錄) and *Directions for Returning to the West* (*Xīguī zhízhǐ* 西歸直指). These texts mainly discuss karma and exhort their readers to perform wholesome actions.

One reason Yìnguāng and Jìngkōng promote Anshi's works is that Anshi wrote from the perspective of a Qing scholar who tried to respond to and rectify the criticism of Song-Ming Neo-Confucian scholars that described Buddhism as heretical teaching. His elaborations on reincarnation, filial piety, and cultivation reflect a positive stance towards the harmonic combination of Confucian and Buddhist concepts—a theme that runs through Jìngkōng's entire interpretation of the Buddhist Dharma. It is therefore easily integrated into Wùdào's lecture series about cause and effect and easing calamities.

Dharma Rituals and Worship

The utilisation of technology to broadcast sermons and ceremonies is nothing new, especially on Television (Wolff 1999; Zito 2008), compared with the integration of live-streaming services into rituals, allowing them to be conducted on- and off-site. Complementing the lecture series, this section examines the Protecting the Country and Preventing Calamities ritual and the Amitābha Triple Contemplation Service and how they relate to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Amitābha Triple Contemplation Service—literally, "Apprehending the Thought [of Amitābha] within the Three Divisions of the Day"—is a liturgical service integrating sūtra recitation, the chanting of Amitābha's name, and a repentance ritual. Each part of the triple contemplation service begins with a recitation of the Amitābha Sūtra and is carried out in the morning, afternoon, and evening—the three divisions of the day. Its origin is attributed to the monk Zhōngfēng Míngběn 中峰明本 (1263–1323) in the Yuán Dynasty (1271–1368) who wrote *Prayers and Worship of the Amitābha Triple Contemplation Service* (*Sānshí xìniàn fóshì* 三時繫念佛事) and *Ceremonial Rites of the Amitābha Triple Contemplation Service* (*Sānshí xìniàn yífàn* 三時繫念儀範). Both works combine Buddha recitation, seeking rebirth into the Pure Land of Amitābha, and the performance of rituals for the deceased to guide them to the Pure Land.

Buddha-recitation is the fundamental element of the ritual. As un-awakened beings have committed incalculable evil deeds during their past and present lives, repentance aims at becoming aware of one's misdeeds and correcting one's behaviour

according to the Buddhist path of cultivation. Liberation from the cycle of life and death means to let go of the notion of an enduring, inherent self, which is the basis for the activity of all the afflictive hindrances. Only then one may escape suffering and attain happiness. The Amitābha Triple Contemplation Service aims therefore at both liberating the deceased from suffering and exhorting the on-site practitioner to seek rebirth into the Pure Land and diligently practise Buddha-recitation (Shī Yīzī 施伊姿 2004: 23).



Figure 4: Sixth Cycle of the Amitābha Triple Contemplation Service (photo taken by the author).

Since 2008, Jìngkōng and Pure Land Societies have been eager to conduct and popularise this ritual around the world. During a video lecture, he mentions that a spirit medium told him that a disaster was about to happen in Sichuan. To prevent it or at least alleviate it, 100 cycles of seven-day Amitābha Triple Contemplation Service were necessary. Jìngkōng recalls: "I approached the abbot Master Mǎnchéng 滿成 and told him about the matter and asked for his advice. He agreed and conducted the ritual in the monastery. I then asked Master Wùdào, to conduct this ceremony for seven cycles of seven hundred days. This is how the 700-day Amitābha Triple Contemplation Service came about" (Shì Jìngkōng 2013). Wùdào followed the instructions of his Master and started the first cycle of 700 days on January 29, 2010. At the time of writing, six cycles have been completed and the seventh cycle began on November 28, 2021 (see Figure 2).

At the beginning of the ritual on December 6, 2020, Wùdào explained that unwholesome bodily actions, speech, and thought were the causes of the many calamities humanity currently faces. The global COVID-19 pandemic is only one of

them as we are in a time of disaster and turmoil and a manifestation of collective karmic recompense (*gòngyè* 共業) (Shì Wùdào 2020a). During our conversation, Wùdào emphasised that "from the perspective of the sūtras and karma, the main cause [of this pandemic] is the killing of sentient beings (*shāshēng* 殺生), […] which is why we as Buddhists advocate and encourage a vegetarian diet and to refrain from killing (*bù shāshēng* 不殺生)." The ritual, thus, aims at mitigating disasters in Taiwan and the world through collective power, vows, repentance, and Buddha-recitation.

At the beginning of the same ritual earlier the same year, on July 26, 2020, Wùdào explained that Buddha-recitation was not only beneficial for seeking rebirth in the Pure Land but also affected calamities. At that point in time, Taiwan had not greatly been affected by the COVID-19 health crisis—it had only reported a few cases. He considered this to be the result of the quick and thorough crisis management of the government and "the power of easing calamities because of a vegetarian diet, Buddha-recitation, and wholesome actions" (Shì Wùdào 2020b).

This understanding of the Protecting the Country and Preventing Calamities rituals goes back to Yìnguāng, who presided over a seven-day ritual in Shànghǎi in 1937. Fortunately, Yìnguāng's speeches throughout this ritual were recorded; on the first day, he said:

> The purpose of this Dharma service is to protect the nation from disasters, but how can this be achieved? I believe that the fundamental method lies in the recitation of the Buddha's name because killing and all disasters are the results of the evil karma of all sentient beings. If all people can chant the Buddha's name, then this karma will be transformed. If a small number of people can recite the Buddha's teachings, then it can also be alleviated. Although the Buddha's teachings are designed for seeking rebirth in the Pure Land and liberation from the cycle of life and death, their power to remove karmic obstacles is substantial. A true Buddhist who chants the name must first abstain from committing evil deeds and start keeping a sincere mind, be responsible and abide by one's duties, and practise good deeds. One must understand cause and effect and transform sentient beings through [correct moral] teachings. […] Only by transforming them through [moral] education, we can change their evil ways to return to their good [nature]. […] The reason why Chinese society is in such disorder today is that there is no education. But education must begin at an early age. […] Therefore, those who recite the Buddha's teachings teach their children to be good people, to have good intentions, to speak well and do good deeds. If they can do this, then disasters will disappear on their own and the country will be at peace for a long time (Shì Yìnguāng 2010b: 1062–1063).

Yìnguāng's speech echoes the same elements as Wùdào's lecture series: unwholesome actions leading to negative karma, the efficacy of Buddha-recitation to transform negative karma, an exhortation to practise good deeds, the reason why society is in disorder, and how to alleviate calamities. Yìnguāng and Wùdào point out that although Buddha-recitation is a practice for seeking rebirth into the Pure Land of Amitābha, it also helps to protect the country and ease calamities because it transforms one's evil karma accrued during countless past lives and the present life. The only condition of this is to abstain from committing further evil deeds and doing good deeds.

This is achieved only through a transformation through education (*jiàohuà* 教化) that guides evildoers to return to good ways. During his life, Yìnguāng has eagerly promoted early Confucian classics and various morality books that were in circulation during his times, such as the *Four Instructions of Yuan Liaofan* (*Yuánliǎo fán sìxùn* 袁了凡四訓), *Treatise of the Most High on Action and Retribution* (*Tàishàng gǎnyìng piān* 太上感應篇), and the *Compendium by Anshi*. His "transformation through education" agenda aims at family education, values, and morals—a central idea that Jìngkōng and Pure Land Societies continue to promote. It is important to note that, according to Yìnguāng's reasoning, correct moral education is the foundation of efficacious Buddha-recitation and therefore essential for protecting the country and easing calamities. On another level, correct moral behaviour is also central to curing various diseases, including physical and mental illnesses, illnesses caused by karmic debtors (*yuānqīn zhàizhǔ* 冤親債主), and illnesses caused by past karma (*súyè* 俗業).

This is the context for understanding why around 100 practitioners came together to conduct a two-day Protecting the Country and Preventing Calamities ritual amidst the pandemic at the Língyán Mountain Temple on May 1–2, 2021. Being aware that this could lead to a super-spreading event, Hwadzan shifted its focus on off-site virtual participation, thereby raising an important question: is individual practice as efficacious as collective?

Religion lives among the people. It connects people providing social support, emotional catharsis, and (perceived) physical and spiritual healing. This is particularly the case for Buddhist rituals for which the clergy and laity enter an interdependent relationship based on a mutual understanding of each role's responsibilities and expectations. While the clergy provides the religious environment and professionalism—rendering the participation and cultivation of the laity religiously efficacious—by their very participation the laity confirms the epistemological, ontological, and theological positions of the clergy and provides the economic means for the existence of the Buddhist sangha. Large Dharma ceremonies, such as the Protecting the Country and Preventing Calamities ceremony or the most meritorious annual Water and Land Dharma Ceremony (*shuǐlù fǎhuì* 水陸法會), can only function and be conducted when both groups (clergy and laity) act and work in unison spatially, temporally, and bodily to create the invisible Buddhist currency—merit.

Since the on-site laity cannot be taken out of the equation, off-site participation can be added to the equation to decrease the number of on-site participants and increase that of off-site participants globally. The two-day Protecting the Country and Preventing Calamities ritual on May 1–2, 2021, was streamed on YouTube and reached more than 10,000 online participants. The small mountain temple could never have accommodated this number of participants. Those who have participated via virtual means—not necessarily in this ritual but in general—state in the online survey that convenience (96/145, 66%), distance from the temple (57/145, 40%), time considerations (on-site participation requires at least one day; 46/145,

32%), and the pandemic (43/145, 30%) are the reasons for tuning in virtually. Contrarily, those who participated on-site before Taiwan went into lockdown on May 15, 2021, believed that by wearing masks, washing hands, and keeping social distance rituals can still be conducted (77/122, 62%). More importantly, however, they believed that only by participating on-site virtuous achievements come to their successful conclusion (*gōngdé yuánmǎn* 功德圓滿) (50/122, 40%), the quality of the practice is better (40/122, 32%), and that off-site participation lacks engagement and interaction (38/122, 31%). The last three answers reflect that not only the efficacy of the ritual but also the religious experience might be compromised if one is not on-site. In a subsection to this question, some respondents wrote: "I can concentrate better when participating on-site," but also "Buddhism is more about substance than formalities; only when circumstances do not allow [on-site participation] I chose to participate in online live-streams."[12] Pondering my question regarding the integration of digital technology into the dissemination of the Buddhist Dharma, Wùdào similarly remarked that "[the efficacy of] Buddha-recitation depends on your mind. Coming together to cultivate, is only a formality." Yet for some people who are distracted in their everyday life "the [temple] environment helps to focus the mind and chant the Buddha's name, that is the function of a temple."

In section three of the online survey, On-site Dharma Ceremonies, nearly all respondents (159/162, 98%) answered that the Amitābha Triple Contemplation Ceremonies and Buddha-recitation help to alleviate the disasters of the current pandemic. Similarly, almost all (150/162, 93%) agreed with the statement that Buddha-recitation can prevent, alleviate,[13] and even cure diseases.[14] In addition to being careful, the majority (148/162, 91%) also believed that Buddha-recitation can prevent contracting COVID-19. The reasoning behind these answers is that sincere Buddha-recitation has the power to eliminate negative karma and disperse the causes and conditions (*yīnyuán* 因緣) that might lead to a contamination. The ritual is, therefore, not only directed at

[12] The Chinese answers read: 現場參加能較專注; 佛法重實質而不重形式, 在環境不允許時, 還是會選擇參與網路直播。

[13] One respondent claimed that listening to sūtras, chanting, worshiping, and circumambulating Buddha statues improved his/her physical and mental conditions significantly. S/he wrote: "I have been taking medication for over ten years and have gradually reduced it to the point where I can stop taking it. The doctor even said I was a model patient." His/her Chinese response reads: 自己長時間聽經, 念佛, 拜佛, 繞佛, 身心狀況已經大幅度改善, 吃藥十多年也漸漸減藥到快可以停藥了, 醫生還說我是模範生。

[14] See the manifold cases of healing through Buddha-recitation in "Records of Sympathetic Resonance" (*Gǎnyìnglù* 感應錄), such as Lín Kànzhì's 林看治 (1907–1992) "Records of Seen and Heard Sympathetic Responses Caused by Buddha Recitation" (*Niànfó gǎnyìng jiànwén jì* 念佛感應見聞記) (Lin 2015) or "Records of Sympathetic Response of Guanyin" (*Guānshìyīn púsà gǎnyìng lù* 觀世音菩薩感應錄) (Hwadzan 2012). While both are published and distributed by Hwadzan today, Lín Kànzhì—a student of the lay Buddhist Lǐ Bīngnán—collected numerous *gǎnyìng*-stories in the 1960s and 1970s. They were first printed by the Taizhong Lotus Society in 1975.

liberating the deceased and guiding them into the Pure Land but also at protecting the country and each individual practitioner. In conversations with lay devotees and monastics during the breaks, I would always hear that this ritual is therefore beneficial for both the dark realms and our world (*míngyáng liǎnglì* 冥陽兩利) because, at an abstract doctrinal level, if one realises the empty nature of existence, then one understands that the virus is only a manifestation of past karma.

In terms of how respondents experienced the streamed online ritual, although some reported that there is no difference between on- and off-site participation, even that it felt "extraordinary" (*shūshèng* 殊勝), "tranquil" (*píngjìng* 平靜), "adorned" (*zhuāngyán* 莊嚴), or "joyful" (*huānxǐ* 歡喜), the majority commented that the convenience comes at a price: "the atmosphere is much worse"; "I get distracted easily and can hardly focus"; and "I am not easily moved online."[15] As one might expect, collectively engaging in an on-site ritual where group dynamics and expectations are at play brings about a whole set of religious experiences. Forty-six persons reported having smelled a special fragrance during the ritual, including sandalwood, agarwood, and floral fragrances. Among them, one respondent described rather precisely that s/he smelled "an indescribable fragrance, just like a comforting feeling of fresh air, similar to the relaxing smell of a mountain stream."[16]

The group-setting and the ritual also elicit other kinds of bodily experiences, such as "chills and goosebumps" and tears. Three respondents wrote that: "[s/he] feels tranquil and serene, sometimes [is] moved to tears"; "chanting the Buddha's name *together* really moves me, [and helps] me to concentrate my mind"; and that "when I prostrate and confess my sins to the Buddha, occasionally I start crying without noticing it." Others noted that they can better focus on the Dharma ceremony or let go of the trivialities of life when being with fellow devotees. The group not only provides a religious identity; it is also the source that renders the ritual efficacious. Echoing the notion of successfully concluding the on-site ritual, one participant believed "it [feels] like really having transferred the merit (*gōngdé* 功德) to my parents, ancestors, and karmic debtors." As the ritual concluded, a large part of the respondents (101/135, 75%) had some kind of special revelation or insight; two of them commented the following: "It was like entering a different kind of world where you can feel the presence of Buddha and Bodhisattvas around you" and "I had a sense of repentance and redemption."[17]

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[15] The Chinese answers read: 很方便但磁場差很多; 比較容易受外界干擾, 容易不專心; 網路不容易產生感動。

[16] The Chinese answer read: 說不出的香氣, 一種清新空氣的舒適感, 類似山林溪高山那股味道令人放鬆自在。

[17] The Chinese answers read: 感覺寒毛直豎; 寧靜安祥, 有時會感受到流淚; 大家一起念佛, 很感動, 也很攝心; 若在禮佛懺悔時, 偶爾會不自覺得落淚; 像有真實的功德迴向給父母祖先冤親債主一樣; 好像進入另外一種世界, 能感覺到佛菩薩就在身邊; 有懺悔並得到救贖的感覺。

The comments of those who watched a live-stream or recording of a Dharma ceremony demonstrate an important point, i.e., the integration of streaming services into Dharma ceremonies and consumption of religious online services leads to an "asynchronous communication" between religious professionals and their laity. In a study on in-church and televised worship, Richard Wolff (1999) has found similar results. Even when joining in with the hymns and prayers, people still had a feeling of disconnectedness and disassociation compared to the in-church experience of worship. Baker et al. also point out that "while not all emotion is removed, an important shift has taken place that removes groups' abilities to generate shared rhythm and mood (on the positive side of generating group cohesion), and severely reduces or removes groups' abilities to police participation and norms (on the negative side of the social dynamics that create group cohesion)" (Baker et al. 2020: 364). This inability to "generate shared rhythm and mood" is not only reflected in the above-noted statements, but also in the bodily, spatial, and temporal integration of participants. Online participation displays different levels of ritual engagement. Whereas most of the respondents reported they would follow the on-site assembly in terms of Buddha-recitation (119/145) and sūtra chanting (94/134), when it comes to prostrations (41/113), offering incense (14/104), and wearing black chanting robes (14/106) the numbers indicate a clear break with important parts of the ritual procedures (see Table 1).

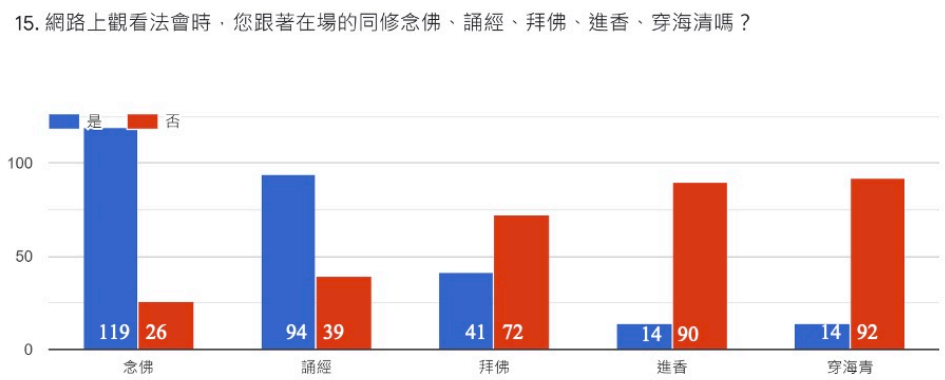


Table 1: Multiple-choice grid, question 15: "Did you chant the Buddha's name, chant sūtras, prostrate, offer incense, and wear chanting robes when you watched the Dharma ceremony on the internet?" Possible answers: "Yes" or "No."

Table 1 also shows a declining degree of ritual integration when physical movements are required, such as bowing, prostrating, or offering incense. In addition to separating the online participants from the on-site ritual, the screen effectively reduces the overall engagement to mainly Buddha-recitation and chanting. On-site

participation in the Amitābha Triple Contemplation Services requires all lay participants to wear black chanting robes. It renders all lay participants visually equal and marks a change of identity from religiously indistinguishable everyday clothing to a public statement of one's religious affiliation. As Table 1 shows, only fourteen people would wear the chanting robes while watching the Dharma ceremony on a screen. Seven of them are from Taiwan, six from Singapore, and one from Australia. Those from Singapore are lay followers of the International Association for the Promotion of Multiculturalism (*Guójì duōyuán wénhuà cùjìn huì* 國際多元文化促進會), a lay organisation linked to Master Wùxíng 悟行 (another disciple of Jìngkōng) that promotes Jìngkōng's ideals of religious dialogue and exchange because there are multiple posts and pictures of the group's place of practice on the official Facebook page of the Língyán Mountain Temple. These pictures and videos show how large screens are placed behind altars, streaming the Dharma ceremony taking place at the Língyán Mountain Temple. Lay followers are seen wearing black chanting robes, offering incense, prostrating, and chanting as if they were with the monks at the temple in Taiwan (Língyán Mountain Temple 2022). Along with reaching thousands of individual online practitioners at home, the online streaming also establishes a direct virtual connection between two physical spaces, allowing for the simultaneous performance of the ritual in different parts of the world. Yet, apart from Wùdào's greetings before the ritual starts, there is no interaction between on-site fellow devotees and monastics and the anonymous virtual spectators.

When collective interactions are reduced to individual online consumption—the Singaporean case seems to be an exception—the bodily, spatial, and temporal separation from the on-site performance weakens the stimulation of the human sensorium. On May 1, 2021, while the main lay benefactors (*gōngdé zhǔ* 功德主) were prostrating and the others were chanting long repentance verses and Amitābha Buddha (*Āmítuófó* 南無阿彌陀佛) alternately, I noticed a woman in her sixties or seventies almost like dancing with her liturgy book in her hands to the rhythms of the drums, bells, and other instruments. Contrarily, online participation elicits "profoundly different religious experience[s]" (Brasher 2001: 4) than on-site participation, as the above statements and this example show.

As I write these lines in early 2022, religious groups in Taiwan are slowly reopening their temples, churches, community centres, etc. for small scale activities. During recent field trips to Pure Land Societies in Keelung, Yilan, Hualian, and Taidong in October and November 2021, all of them registered a decline in the numbers of regular participants in activities compared to pre-COVID-19 times. The director of a Pure Land Society in Yilan told me that most of them still prefer to stay at home and listen to or watch Jìngkōng's and Wùdào's videos. The pandemic certainly increased the importance of digital technology for integrating the Dharma into the daily lives of practitioners. One cannot only watch rituals in the comfort of

one's home but can also participate in these rituals as an anonymous spectator on YouTube.

Conclusion

As internet technology becomes more and more integrated into our daily lives, the way people "do" religion and "are" religious in a wired world changes. Rituals are a perfect example of this, as they are no longer only performed in geographically fixed places but also in virtual environments that transcend the limitations of space and time. In the early days of the internet, online ritual activity was nothing more than a text-based interaction on bulletin boards and list-serves, showing minimal forms of engagement. Since then, more than thirty years have passed and virtual pilgrimages, meditation sessions, prayer sermons, discussion groups, Dharma lectures, offerings, etc. have become part of religious online activity.

Christopher Helland (2012) points out that these developments present challenges to traditional (offline) religious structures since each individual has the freedom to explore the religious online supply and might even develop their interpretations of sacred texts, thus, challenging religious authority. Heidi Campbell (2010) has similarly argued that digital technology may alter religious practice, rituals, scriptures, and authority structures and roles. However, the results of this study show that the integration of digital technology does not challenge authority structures and roles while altering practice and rituals. Despite being virtual, the central character of Dharma lectures has not changed, i.e., the monastic unilaterally elaborates a subject for a given time and ends the lecture with three bows. Offline and online lectures do not include a Q&A section or other parts that might foster interaction and exchange. The role of authority is very much unimpaired: the monastic lectures, the audience listens. What has changed is the ritualistic embeddedness of the laity into the Dharma lecture. While on-site Dharma lectures at Hwadzan include prostrations, Buddha-recitations, an Opening Chant of the Sūtra (*kāijīngjì* 開經偈), recitation of the scripture with joined hands, and a Verse of Dedication of Merit (*huíxiàngjì* 迴向偈), on-line lectures begin and end only with a common Buddhist greeting, "Homage to Amitābha Buddha," and shortly display the Verse of Dedication of Merit.

In the case of online rituals, practitioners can either follow each step of live-streamed rituals of the actual on-site ritual or watch a recording of the ritual later. In any case, according to the results of the online survey, however, online participation displays different levels of ritual engagement. Whereas on-site participants recite and chant sūtras, bow and prostrate in front of Buddha statues, and make offerings, they are temporally, spatially, and bodily integrated into each part of a ritual, off-site participants are detached from it in all three aspects. The communal practice viewed on the screen essentially becomes an individual practice in a secular environment far

away from the sacralised space and time during the ritual. Thus, the body is no longer object of the ritual and a subject of the action. The ritual does not create what Catherine Bell (1992: 98) termed a "ritualised body" and cannot "temporally structure a space-time environment through a series of physical movements […] thereby producing an arena which, by its molding of the actors, both validates and extends the schemes they are internalizing" (ibid.: 110). Had all of them participated in on-site rituals, they would have engaged in all the above parts. Online participation, thus, alters bodily engagement in ritual and creates new forms of ritual practice.

This study extends recent scholarship (Campbell 2010; 2012b; Grieve and Veidlinger 2015; Helland 2000; 2005; 2012; Miczek 2008; Travagnin 2019) that distinguishes between online and offline rituals. Today, rituals and ceremonies are not necessarily conducted either online or offline but rather in an integrative dual mode. My fieldwork has shown that even years before COVID-19 hit the world (but now because of lockdowns with more enthusiasm), Hwadzan has broadcast live and recorded rituals, Dharma ceremonies, and lectures all day long. These rituals were conducted on-site with monastics and lay practitioners and simultaneously streamed online for all those practitioners that could not participate due to health concerns, long travel distances, no free time, or simply because watching the ritual from home is more convenient than going there. The rituals constitute an interesting integration of on- and off-site participation and manifest a transfer from physical to virtual practice. Thus, there is no question regarding the legitimacy of the online space as a ritual space since the ritual is not conducted virtually like Second Life pilgrimages or meditation retreats; rather, it is performed offline and simultaneously streamed online for an unknown viewership. Nevertheless, it remains true that the broadcast turns the virtual space into sacred space and time and may either strengthen religious affiliation (I only listen to one Master/or watch his videos) or possibly alienate or create a group of "flexible online consumers" of religious services.[18]

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