To What End do Online and Offline Buddhist Communities Engage with Visual Practice in China?

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Abstract. The purpose of this article is to discuss the popularity and recognition of Buddhism in China, as well as its characteristics and visual practices, both offline and online. Initially, the essay provides an overview of Buddhism's characteristics to share a brief introduction to the overall features of Chinese Buddhism. Furthermore, the article will demonstrate how popular Chinese Buddhism is to illustrate the recognition of Buddhism in China. Moreover, learning about the various visual techniques that are used in Buddhism can directly help our understanding of the relationship that exists between visual representations, religious traditions, and cultural norms. It is possible to gain an understanding of the purpose of Buddhist communities that engage in visual practices by studying Buddhism in both offline and online Buddhist communities. We also understand the significance of these visual representations for the propagation of Buddhism, as well as how individuals interact and communicate with one another in both physical space and cyberspace. The focus on these issues will enable us to make some progress toward understanding the relationship between expressiveness, religious practice, and cultural norms. The study will take an interdisciplinary approach, drawing from concepts and strategies derived from visual anthropology, religious studies, as well as the field of visual culture studies.

Keywords: Online Buddhism, Offline Buddhism, Chinese Buddhism, Visual Practice, Visual Anthropology, Religious Studies, Cultural Norms

1   Introduction

In today's highly networked age, religious life has become more accessible, with virtual churches, temples, and more online teachings. These are all manifestations of the networked nature of religious life. In this 'information era' will more people choose to participate in online religious activities and fewer in more traditional offline religious activities? Will this be a future trend? In China, the emergence of the new epidemic, COVID-19, has made offline religious activities more restricted, so there is a widespread move to online activities. In particular, I want to zoom into Buddhism, which is the most widely attended religion in China. Today, COVID-19 has brought challenges to the promotion and dissemination of Buddhism. Buddhists have to rethink the way

they promote Buddhism in the future, with more possibilities for online display of visual practices and fewer chances to gather offline. Only by making corresponding changes to the way we promote Buddhism can we achieve mutual exchanges and interaction.

Buddhism is one of the three major world religions of today, having emerged in ancient India between the 6th and 5th centuries BC, founded by Chodhamma Siddhartha of the Sakya tribe in the ancient Indian kingdom of Kabylia (present-day southern Nepal). Buddhism was introduced to China from India long before the Gregorian calendar and developed over a long period into Chinese Buddhism with Chinese characteristics. After the Chinese dynasties of Wei, Jin, and North and South Dynasties, as well as the Tang, Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, Chinese Buddhism underwent democratic reforms and embarked on a path of adaptation to socialist society.[1]

In contemporary society, virtual Buddhism has many advantages. The use of network technology to produce Buddhist presentations with logical reasoning can be fascinating and thought-provoking, according to Buddhist activities online, which offer participants the chance to express their opinions and share their experiences about hot topics of Buddhism post-Epidemic. It can also make use of the latest technology and visualize many assemblies. This allows Buddhist believers to fully exchange and share their feelings, highlighting the concept of Buddhist integration.

Virtual Buddhism, however, also has a negative side. In China, anonymity, discreteness, fragmentation, and convenience of the Internet are easily related to the irrational characteristics of Internet users. In particular, the "three more" characteristics of China's Internet user structure - more students, more young adults, and more tourists, may lead to an online Buddhist cyberspace filled with deconstruction, spoofing, and resentment. There may be a phenomenon that the Internet has become a place for vulnerable Buddhists to show their wounds and keep each other warm, and it has often become a "dustbin" for negative emotions such as dissatisfaction with pagans.

Consequently, this kind of opinion climate will lead new Buddhists to question their beliefs or to "group polarization" of Buddhism under the combined influence of public opinion and stereotypes, so cyberspace is inundated with prejudice against Buddhism as a whole.

The purpose of this article is to discuss the popularity and recognition of Buddhism in China, as well as its characteristics and visual practices, both offline and online. Initially, the essay provides an overview of Buddhism's characteristics to share a brief introduction to the overall features of Chinese Buddhism. Furthermore, the article will demonstrate how popular Chinese Buddhism is to illustrate the recognition of Buddhism in China. Moreover, learning about the various visual techniques that are used in Buddhism can directly help our understanding of the relationship that exists between visual representations, religious traditions, and cultural norms. It is possible to gain an understanding of the purpose of Buddhist communities that engage in visual practices by studying Buddhism in both offline and online Buddhist communities. We also understand the significance of these visual representations for the propagation of Buddhism, as well as how individuals interact and communicate with one another in both physical space and cyberspace. The focus on these issues will enable us to make some

progress toward understanding the relationship between expressiveness, religious practice, and cultural norms.

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2   Chinese Buddhism In The Contemporary World

Chinese Buddhism refers to Buddhism that has been handed down and developed in China for more than 2000 years. The initial introduction of Buddhism to China is known with uncertainty but is generally considered to be around the time of the two Han dynasties. Before the Common Era, there were Buddhists in India who brought Buddhism from India to China as traders along the trade routes, and there were many Buddhists along the way who came to join them. This was the original state of Chinese Buddhism. As Chinese Buddhism continued to develop in-depth, it has become an important source of ideas for Chinese culture. However, as globalization continued, modern China had to embark on a process of modernization in all aspects, from its social system to its ideology and culture, and its way of life. This modernization has led to an overall questioning and criticism of traditional Chinese culture, which was formed in the context of agricultural civilization. Therefore, Buddhism has also been denigrated. However, Chinese Buddhism has also evolved to respond to the times. From Master Tai Xu's 'Humanistic Buddhism' to the reform and opening up of China after 1949, Chinese Buddhism has taken a transformative path, giving contemporary connotations to simple Buddhist activities such as praying for world peace and protesting against invasion.

Over time, the number of Buddhists in China has grown. According to the data, there are over 350 million religious people (over 18 years old) in China, and of these, a staggering 185-250 million are Buddhists. This indicates that the vast majority of religious believers in China are Buddhists, but why? [2]

Firstly, it must have something to do with China's huge population base, and secondly, the six core concepts of Buddhism can provide an ideological resource for solving some social problems such as lack of beliefs, loss of humanistic care, and serious environmental pollution. Concepts that aim to solve those social problems can resonate with the public. And the last point is the development and spread of Buddhism on the Internet. Cyberspace, according to William Gibson's novel Neuromancer, refers to a navigable, digital space of networked computers accessible from computer consoles; a visual, colorful, electronic, Cartesian data scape known as 'The Matrix 'where companies and individuals interact with, and trade in, information.[3] And it is now described as "a myriad of rapidly expanding cyberspaces, not one homogeneous space" by Martin Dodge and Rob Kitchin in their book "Mapping Cyberspace". [4]

Since mankind entered the 21st century, with the constant advancement of technology, cyberspace has become part of people's lives. It allows people to exchange information, communicate in their daily lives, etc. Although physical space is an irreplaceable form of space because people live in it, with the development of Covid-19, online

communication seems to be indispensable because there is no way to exchange information in physical space. But cyberspace can be used as a medium of transit for information, allowing us to exchange information. But the basis for the existence of cyberspace is physical space because physical space provides the carrier for cyberspace to survive. Returning to the topic of Buddhism, it is not only practiced offline in China, it is simultaneously practiced online in various forms such as online Buddha halls and so on.

3   Offline & Online Buddhism Communities in China

In China, there are generally two different kinds of Buddhist groups, offline and online. Both offline and online Buddhist groups are generally led by the Buddhist Association of China. This is a patriotic group and organization of Buddhists from various ethnic groups in China. This organization will guide and support the work of local Buddhist associations and monastic groups; supervise monasteries to improve their self-management, enforce precepts and regulations, and carry out activities for the benefit of the Dharma; and guide monks in their righteous beliefs. In offline Buddhist organizations, activities typically take place in local temples or Buddhist colleges. According to data from the Buddhist Association of China, as of 2012, there were more than 33,000 Buddhist activity sites in China, with about 240,000 monks and nuns, including more than 28,000 Han Buddhist monasteries with more than 100,000 monks and nuns; more than 3,000 Tibetan Buddhist monasteries with more than 130,000 monks and nuns; and more than 1,600 Southern Theravada Buddhist monasteries with nearly 10,000 monks (including more than 2,000 bhikkhus). [2]

However, for online Buddhism, things get more intriguing than I previously thought. An online Buddhist community is referred to as a sangha or a cybersangha and this may include communities found on websites, blogs, micro-blogs (for example, Twitter), virtual worlds (for example, Second Life), and online forums. To be more specific, Online Buddhism is the networking of offline Buddhism, that is to say, the networking of offline religious activities as well as existing religious texts. Chinese Buddhism has developed in recent years, in which more and more temples, palaces, churches, and clergy have established online religious media such as WeChat, Weibo, websites, and so on. [5]

4   Buddhism's Visual Practices within China

Before we dive into the topic of Buddhism's visual practices in the region of China, we have to identify the term "visual practice" in order to eliminate the ambiguity of different interpretations. In his book Local Knowledge: Further Essays In Interpretive Anthropology, Clifford Geertz argues for the visual arts as a genus that is rooted in cultural systems. In short, it is an interpretation of local culture.[6] So, we can consider Visual practice a process of a visual practitioner translating thoughts into images. In summary, the visual practice has primarily been recognized as a means of displaying one's inner philosophy. As shown by the above definition, some Buddhist objects can be excellent

examples of visual practices, which include everything from Buddha sculptures to the Vajra, a ritual weapon that symbolizes indestructibility and irresistibility. In this case, the objects can convey a specified should analyze how visual information is produced, communicated, and constructed in everyday life by Buddhists, and how this process is repeated in cyberspace. In this case, the objects convey a specific message from the producer that represents its underlying philosophy. [7] Visual practices we need to analyze are created offline and disseminated online. However, what is the role of visual practices in a traditional civilization that relies heavily on words to give meaning? Human beings have recorded, preserved, expressed, and transmitted information through images, and what is the importance of it?

There are several unique expressions of Chinese Buddhist art, such as cave temples, stupas, paintings of Buddhist subjects, and other ritual objects, and I will give one example - cave temples.

Usually carved between the cliffs of a river, a cave temple is a Buddhist temple. It is a petrified form of a terrestrial Buddhist temple, which serves the same function as a terrestrial Buddhist temple and is more conducive to long-term preservation. Buddhists worshipped images of Buddha, Bodhisattvas, Lohans, kings of heaven, rishis, etc., as well as Buddhist stories or stories of Buddha's life. These images were either sculpted or painted in the grottoes so that they became a dojo to promote Buddhist teaching and for people to practice and worship. These buildings, sculptures, and paintings are known as grotto art. Cave temples are an extremely significant part of China's cultural heritage, and the introduction of Buddhism has had a profound impact on traditional Chinese culture and social history. China's cave temples are mainly found in the Xinjiang region, the northern regions of the Central Plains, the southern regions, and Tibet. These cave temples combine a variety of art forms such as architecture, sculpture, and mural painting. [7]

The Chineseisation of cave temples is a tangible manifestation of the Chineseisation of Buddhism. From this, the origins of Chinese culture, its flow, and the process of its construction and development can be seen. This is why we have chosen it as an example.[8]

In general, therefore, the cave temples serve as a vehicle for a very wide range of functional uses while at the same time displaying the spiritual core of Buddhism. From the point of view of visual practice, the art forms recorded in the cave temples, such as murals and statues, are intended not only to record and carry out religious forms of activity but from a visual anthropological point of view, these visual art forms are used as works of art for visual presentation, for 'cultural expression', i.e., for the expression of the spiritual core of Buddhism. This is the core of Buddhist spirituality. The Kizil Thousand-Buddha Grottoes, for example, are the second largest grottoes, just smaller than the Dunhuang Grottoes. As a product of the art of lower Buddhism, its paintings incorporate the fundamental character of lower Buddhism, namely: "paying supreme tribute to the Buddha while rejecting all the ten-direction Buddhas." So as a form of visual expression, it narratives the kernel of Hinayana Buddhism by employing etching or painting.

In cyberspace, on the other hand, the artwork no longer appears as a physical artwork, but as a virtual state - an image or a film. When researchers document Buddhist

artifacts as images or films, the focus is on cultural memory and identity construction in today's culture. Through the ideas presented by Terence Turner in 'Representation, Politics, and Cultural Imagination in Indigenous Video: General Points and Kayapo Examples "In the view presented in 'Representation, Politics, and Cultural Imagination in Indigenous Video: General Points and Kayapo Examples', Buddhists were presented to the 'other' through the lens of the 'other', embodying a reflexive view of identity when they film and post their recordings in cyberspace. The use of multiple media tools to express one's actions, to present the local interpretations attached to them, and to perceive the richness of the 'other' experience more flexibly, helps both to pass on national culture and art and to understand the other. [9]At the same time, we can reflect on the inadequacies of our structures in comparison.

Considering the emergence of these visual phenomena within the larger context of Chinese Buddhism as a whole allows us to bring our vision from the seemingly superficial and ineffable visual culture into close contact with life.

5   Conclusion

In conclusion, Buddhism, as an invaluable cultural heritage of all human civilization, has created the basis for human civilization in both intellectual and material terms, and has enriched Chinese culture at all levels, in art, literature, and so on. For people, culture is a complex thing that requires certain tools to understand and dissect its core. Visual anthropology is a research method that can be used as such a tool. Visual anthropology is an emerging discipline that allows us to interpret the phenomena that occur in images in an integrated way. In this paper, we analyze the example of cave temples to illustrate the role of visual practices in this context. This is not only for preservation, documentation, and transmission but also for the embodiment of the religious core.

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