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Solid Identity and Spiritual Practice in Fluid Digital Social Media Space:

The Ethnography Embraces the Changing Lifestyle of Tibetan Buddhist Monks in Southwest China

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À ma mère Qian Junjie et à mon père Fan Yuxu,
qui m'ont toujours soutenu sans condition.
À mes amis moines tibétains,
qui m'ont appris à réfléchir à la vie sous un autre angle.

Abstract

In contemporary society, digital technology and social media have become integral to our daily practices. Through these digital tools, individuals could shape their digital identities, cultivate relationships, participate in online commerce, express their political perspectives, and even explore digitized religious/spiritual practices. In the milieu of an ever-evolving societal landscape, both individual identity and interpersonal relationships are confronting numerous challenges. More and more, individuals turn to digital platforms and material consumption to shape and understand their own identities, resulting in a never-ending journey of self-discovery that rarely reaches a definitive state. Such a constant state of flux holds significant implications for one's self-perception and the manner in which we interact with others and integrate within the broader society.

Overall, this study draws upon Zygmunt Bauman's theory of *Liquid Modernity*. Employing ethnographic research methods, it analyzes the fluidity of digital spiritual practice among Tibetan Buddhist monks in the southwestern region of China, as well as the transformation of monastic life in this area. Centering on the impact of digital technology on the daily and spiritual practices of Tibetan Buddhist monks, the study further delves into how they construct and understand their monastic identities from offline to online. Concurrently, the research explores the building of emotional trust between monks and devotees in digital social media, the authenticity of digital spiritual practices, and spiritual consumption.

Résumer

Dans la société contemporaine, la technologie numérique et les médias sociaux sont devenus essentiels à nos pratiques quotidiennes. Grâce à ces outils numériques, les individus peuvent façonner leurs identités numériques, cultiver des relations, participer au commerce en ligne, exprimer leurs points de vue politiques et même explorer des pratiques religieuses/spirituelles numérisées. Dans le contexte d'un paysage sociétal en constante évolution, tant l'identité individuelle que les relations interpersonnelles sont confrontées à de nombreux défis. De plus en plus, les individus se tournent vers les plateformes numériques et la consommation matérielle pour façonner et comprendre leur propre identité, résultant en un voyage sans fin de découverte de soi qui atteint rarement un état définitif. Un tel état constant de flux a des implications significatives pour la perception de soi et la manière dont nous interagissons avec les autres et nous intégrons dans la société plus large.

Dans l'ensemble, cette étude s'appuie sur la théorie de la *Modernité Liquide* de Zygmunt Bauman. En utilisant des méthodes de recherche ethnographique, elle analyse la fluidité de la pratique spirituelle numérique parmi les moines bouddhistes tibétains dans la région sud-ouest de la Chine, ainsi que la transformation de la vie monastique dans cette région. Se centrant sur l'impact de la technologie numérique sur les pratiques quotidiennes et spirituelles des moines bouddhistes tibétains, l'étude approfondit également la manière dont ils construisent et comprennent leurs identités monastiques du hors ligne vers le en ligne. Parallèlement, la recherche explore la construction de la confiance émotionnelle entre les moines et les dévots sur les médias sociaux numériques, l'authenticité des pratiques spirituelles numériques et la consommation spirituelle.

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For me, this has been a long and profound research journey. In May 2014, I first set foot in Shangri_la. Over nearly a decade, I traveled back and forth to this region, witnessing the subtle and significant transformations of this region. The completion of this doctoral thesis would not have been possible without the assistance of everyone who helped me during both the fieldwork and the writing processes. Here, I wish to express my heartfelt gratitude to all of them.

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"L'insignifiance, mon ami, c'est l'essence de l'existence. Elle est avec nous partout et toujours. Elle est présente même là où personne ne veut la voir: dans les horreurs, dans les luttes sanglantes, dans les pires malheurs. Cela exige souvent du courage pour la reconnaître dans des conditions aussi dramatiques et pour l'appeler par son nom. Mais il ne s'agit pas seulement de la reconnaître, il faut l'aimer, l'insigificance, il faut apprendre à l'aimer"

(Milan Kundera, La fête de l'insignifiance, 2014, p.139).

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1

Introduction

1.1 Reasons for choosing the topic of research

During my master's thesis research from 2013 to 2016, I conceived the initial idea for this research. My master's thesis concentrated on the process of social reconstruction and cultural conflict that occurred after the fire disaster in an ancient town, in Shangri_la City, Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan Province of China. During my fieldwork, I had the opportunity to get to know many Tibetan Buddhist monks who live in the Ganden Sumtseling monastery[1]. During that time, I observed the daily lives of Tibetan Buddhist monks and Tibetan villagers to gain an understanding of their social cultures. I have a great enthusiasm for the Tibetan culture in this place. After achieving my master's degree, I frequently traveled to Shangri_la city between 2016 and 2019. Through

[1] The Ganden Sumtseling monastery is a crucial location in my fieldwork, and I will provide detailed information about it in the following sections.

the most popular social media application WeChat[2], I maintain constant contact with Tibetan Buddhist monks. In 2017, I played video games[3] with them through my smartphone, even though I did not physically embody presence in the field. I am particularly attracted to Buddhist monastic discipline and Buddhist monks' identity, as Buddhist monks are forbidden from killing living beings in the real world. However, is it possible for them to do so in the virtual world ? It can be argued that this perception is heavily influenced by preconceived mystery monks' images and stereotypes.

In addition to these online video games, they increasingly use digital social media to engage with the outside world, such as WeChat, TikTok[4], Kuaishou[5], or Weibo[6]. Logically speaking, Buddhist monks lead a quiet and secluded life, withdrawn from the hustle and bustle of the secular world. They adhere to strict Buddhist disciplines such as a regular schedule, chanting, memorizing the Buddhist scriptures, and engaging in "spiritual practices" (M. C. Goldstein & Tsarong, 1985; Heubner & Garrod, 1993). However, I have observed that young Tibetan Buddhist monks lead a similar lifestyle with laypeople. They are obsessed with smartphones and social networks, and they enjoy discussing the various brands

[2]WeChat is the most popular social media in China. People can stay in touch with friends and families through video calls, voice messages, share pictures, play games, share via Moments, and text messages by this application. The mobile application plays an essential role in my study, and I will give the details introduced in the following pages.

[3]The mobile video game named "Player Unknown's Battlegrounds was published by Chinese Tencent Games. To play, users must link their WeChat accounts to the game interface and then play with their WeChat friends. It is a battle-royal video game, in which 100 players struggle for survival. However, the game failed to get regulatory approval due to its violent and bloody content, which is illegal in China. As a result, the version of "Player Unknown's Battlegrounds" was shut down and re-released under the name "Game for peace" in 2019. The resource from: https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-48200065
According to my observations through WeChat, I have noticed that many Tibetan Buddhist monks play another mobile video game called "Honor of Kings" , which is also published by Tencent Games, that is the most popular mobile video game in China. It is a mobile multiplayer online battle arena. Both of these battles' games are extremely popular in contemporary China.

[4]TikTok is a Chinese video-sharing social networking application developed by ByteDance in 2016.

[5]Kuaishou is a Chinese video-sharing application developed by Beijing Kuaishou Technology Co.,Ltd in 2014.

[6]Weibo is a Chinese micro-blogging, which launched by Sina Corporation on 14 August 2009.

and features of smartphones. They are interested in the latest car and technological products. Additionally, they like to spend time at cafes in town, visit nearby spas to take a bath, play billiards at the billiard hall, and so on. The involvement of monks in external pursuits and consumption may affect their reputation to varying degrees. Such material activities could potentially raise moral concerns among observers about the monks and provoke questions about their way of monastic life. Local people usually hold a view that the change in monastic life is due to the development of the external world rather than an internal issue.

Over the past few decades, the region's rapid economic development and incorporation into the Chinese market have been primarily attributed to government-supported ethnic tourism, which capitalizes on the mysterious and extraordinary atmosphere associated with Tibetan Buddhist culture (Kolas, 2007; Klepeis, Brumann, & Litzinger, 2020). Every year, the Ganden Sumtseling Monastery, accessible as a "scenic area", attracts many tourists worldwide. The reconfiguration of the local economy and the process of tourism development have accelerated population movement and transformed the social structure of the region. An increasing number of non-locals are now engaging in tourism-related enterprises in Shangri_la, while locals who worked in other provinces are returning to their hometowns for employment opportunities. These transformations have directly or indirectly affected the relationship between monks and laypeople.

Moreover, Tibetan culture and monks' spiritual lives were affected by new technology and the "scientific method" in Shangri_la (Kolas & Thowsen, 2011). In recent years, many Tibetan villagers change their ways of spiritual practices, primarily through WeChat. The monastery and the communities have created several online spiritual practice groups to provide religious service. This shift in spiritual practice indicates a move from traditional "physical body presence" to a more modern "virtual media presence".

Villagers traditionally go to the monastery to pray or invite monks and pick

them up to perform Buddhist rites at home. For some villagers who live in villages far away from the monastery, need several days on the road. Furthermore, they need to work on the farm for livelihood. As a result of financial and transport reasons, it is infrequently for most families to hold Buddhist rites at home, apart from some essential activities, such as building a house, important religious festivals, unexpected events, or funerals. Nowadays, the widespread use of social media has made it convenient for villagers to seek monks' blessings through their smartphones. To a certain extent, the convenience of digital media has reduced the geographical distance between villagers and monks and shifted spatial dimensions between social interaction and spiritual practice.

In addition, the increasing economic well-being of villagers' families has contributed to the frequency of religious rituals at home. Monks increasingly spend their time traveling between the monastery and the community, rather than always doing spiritual practice in monastic spaces. Furthermore, many monks now rely on new technological mediums and social networks for their spiritual practice, such as using iPads for chanting, participating in Buddhist group forums, and offering chanting or religious services through social media. In this way, monks have been given a new platform to engage with the external world, making connecting with people beyond their nearest local community easier.

As a result, their religious interactions are no longer limited to local believers but now encompass a wider audience of faithful individuals. I have noticed that digital social media is gradually becoming a new way for monks to support their living. For instance, Buddhists use digital social media to facilitate their consumption of spiritual practices. They pay these monks for various spiritual practices through digital devices such as chanting scriptures, offering butter lamps, or presenting sacred water before the Buddha, which thanks monks for their prayers. In a sense, spiritual practices and processes facilitated through technology are closely intertwined with consumer spirituality. My attention is to be raised by

these phenomena.

The relationship between consumers and spirituality is undergoing significant change with the increasing impact of technology. It is undeniable that economic and technological developments have brought about changes in the form of religious and spiritual practices. However, as local economies undergo restructuring and technological transformation, how has the advent of new forms of spiritual practice through digital social media impacted the relationship between monks and laypeople? How do they use digital social media access or consume spiritual practice? For monks living in monastic spaces, how do they perceive the changes in social media in their daily lives and ways of spiritual practice? How do they think about their identity in daily life and digital social media? Nevertheless, it is not only a personal interest in this topic, but also valuable to human science research in contemporary society.

Firstly, Buddhist monks who enjoy digital technology medium are not a single example of the Ganden Sumtseling monastery, but that is a global phenomenon. For example, many Buddhist monks grasp video games in Thailand and give a nuanced answer to these behaviors[7]. Youth Buddhist monks indicate that playing video games is not a big deal with Buddhist discipline. Simultaneously, a team of novice Buddhist monks from Thailand got victorious at a video gaming competition in 2019. However, their academic advisor was disagreed with them playing video games[8]. He proposes that video games will disturb their Buddhist Classic program. In Japan, Buddhist monks seem like a career choice. For instance, there is a rock band composed of pastors and Buddhist monks performing secular music. They intend to do some musical evangelism[9]. Another example of Japanese monks that

[7]Rath, R. (2018). In Thailand, Buddhist Monks Grapple with the Meaning of Video Games. Retrieved 5 February 2018.
See https://www.vice.com/en/article/7xegk4/thailand-buddhist-monks-video-games

[8]Whitaker, J. (2019). Novice Buddhist Monks Win Electronic Sports Tournament in Thailand|Buddhistdoor. Retrieved 27 August 2019.
See https://www.buddhistdoor.net/news/novice-buddhist-monks-win-electronic-sports-tournament-in-thailand

[9]OZAWA, H. (2016). Religious duel in Japan: Pastor rock vs. Buddhist monk blues. Retrieved 25

attracts my attention is a Buddhist monk who runs a bar and proffers drinking alcohol. The Buddhist monk boss suggests this unique bar is a place where provides a new way of meditation to let people feel relaxed and transmit Buddhist teachings[10]. Although Buddhist monks play video games, play rock music, use digital social media, be online influencers, or be a businessman, it is not illegal or has broken the Buddhist precepts. It also conflicts with monastic life in Tibetan Buddhist tradition. Therefore, this study will draw upon the above information to examine monastics' identities and spiritual lives in contemporary digital media globalization.

Secondly, in the past decades, many social anthropological studies (Dawson & Cowan, 2004; Hoover & Park, 2005; Servais, Douyere, & Catellani, 2020) have been paid to the relationship between religious and the Internet. As the Internet has become an important social place, online religious practice has spread like other human activities in the process (Servais, 2012). In the last few years, a new term of "digital religion" (H. A. Campbell, 2012a) has emerged to describe online religious practice. Campbell (2005b) divided her framework into four discourses. First, through digital as a medium, spiritual users can encounter opportunities for "spiritual networking" or metaphysical experiences with God, the divine, or other spirituality seekers. Second, the digital space is created and regarded as a sacred place, serving as an "online worship space" where individuals can practice traditional and contemporary religious rituals. Third, digital platforms as a missionary tool to promote spiritual activities. The platforms constructed through digital provide dynamic resources for spiritual practices, where organizing various spiritual activities or faith events will become a new way for multiple religions to attract new converts. Finally, she indicated that the digital serves as a form of

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March 2016.
See https://finance.yahoo.com/news/religious-duel-japan-pastor-rock-vs-buddhist-monk-043519332.html

[10]Masangkay, M. (2017). Monk-run Tokyo bar proffers drinks even as it teaches Buddhism. Retrieved 22 April 2017.
See https://www.japantimes.co.jp/life/2017/04/22/food/monk-run-tokyo-bar-proffers-drinks-even-teaches-buddhism/

technology to affirm religious life and spiritual identity. It provides a resource for building a communal identity that is closely linked to spiritual practices. Such research on religion and the Internet focus on how people engage with online religious practice and how digital technology and space are shaping and being shaped by spiritual practice.

Moreover, more recent studies have observed that the growing significance of technology and digital in consumers' search for meaning and transcendence (Husemann & Eckhardt, 2019b, 2019a; Belk, 2014; Kamarulzaman, Veeck, Mumuni, Luqmani, & Quraeshi, 2016). For example, Karmarulzaman *et al.* (2016) through a netnographic study of the search for halal food in the United States, explored that how social media facilitates the mediation and linkage between religious communities and markets. They concluded that social media platforms are valuable aids in overcoming hurdles related to discovering and validating halal food sources, such as physical limitations, credibility, and superiority. Razi Casidy and Denni Arli (2018) concluded an introduction that demonstrated the role of religion in consumption and future study opportunities. They indicated the impact of digital content on faith and consumers' perceptions. Tom van Laer and Elif Izberk-Bilgin (2019), employed pilgrimage studies and narrativity theory in consumer research to explore how consumers communicate their spiritual and material experiences. They achieved this by analyzing 833 consumer reviews on TripAdvisor of the most revered pilgrimage sites of the world's top five faith groups. Jannsen Santana and Giana Eckhardt (2022) supported the perspective that consumers' pursuit of *"meaningful encounters with one's inner self or a higher external power"* (Husemann & Eckhardt, 2019b, p. 391) is inherently linked to the digital realm. They extended deeper into how technology can facilitate consumer spirituality by serving as a crucial medium to access the spiritual realm. They introduced the concept of "digital consumer spirituality", which they describe as *"the interrelated practices and processes consumers engage in when consuming*

digital market offerings (products, services, spaces) that yield spiritual utility" (Husemann & Eckhardt, 2019b, p. 393).

Together, these research works recognize the role of technology in facilitating consumer spirituality. The digital realm has emerged as a powerful means of "channel of delivery for spiritual goods" (Kale, 2004), and seekers are employing digital devices to connect with like-minded individuals in virtual communities to exchange spiritual knowledge, engage in spiritual practices, or consumer spirituality (H. Campbell, 2005b; H. A. Campbell, 2012a; van Laer & Izberk-Bilgin, 2019). Consequently, this research will draw on the framework of "digital spirituality" (H. Campbell, 2005b) and "digital consumer spirituality" (Husemann & Eckhardt, 2019b, 2019a; Santana et al., 2022) to shed light on identity research at the crossing of spiritual and digital consumption.

Instead of analyzing the phenomenon of Tibetan Buddhist monks using technology or digital social media to intervene in their monastic practices, the study will examine how their spiritual practices and identity are affected by the digital consumption era. In brief, it will be concerned with two aspects: one is analyzing the identity meaning of Buddhist monks from the offline real world to the online digital social media world. Another is around the changing way of spiritual practice between the Tibetan Buddhist monks and devotees in digital social media and what it carries out the transformation of social interactions.

1.2 Research Background:"Fluidity" and Digital Consumption Age

Since the 1980s, with the emergence of the Internet, globalization has been progressing quickly. Human communication has become more frequent and convenient. The fluidity of information gradually makes the big world seem to become a small world. With the convenience of digital technologies, people can now easily access and explore a broader range of ideas and perspectives, creating

a cultural environment that is more diverse and dynamic. This has exposed people to various viewpoints and experiences that significantly impact human lifestyle. The present state of our society can be described as liquid, dynamic, or mobile due to various factors such as the movement of information, migration, flow of capital, public transportation, express delivery services, network connectivity, and technological advancements (Castells, 2011; Pica & Kakihara, 2003; Sassen, 2004). All of these clearly indicate the mobile, the fluid, or the liquid is a common phenomenon in our contemporary society.

The title of my thesis, "solid identity and spiritual practice in fluid digital social media space" is drawn upon the sociological term of "liquid modernity" proposed by Bauman (2013b), who states that

"'liquid modern' is a society in which the condition under which its members act change faster to takes the ways of acting to consolidate into habits and routines. Liquidity of life and that of society feed and reinvigorate each other. Liquid life, just like liquid modern society, cannot keep its shape or stay on course for long" (Bauman, 2013a, p. 1).

He critically asserts that technological advancement and economic globalization accelerate social instability and global liquidity. In the modern period, transient relationships are increasingly displacing the enduring and stable human relationship bonds that were a hallmark of pre-modern societies. This shift is primarily attributed to the mobility characteristics of contemporary social frameworks, in which individuals commonly form quick connections based on shared interests and preferences. Such conjunctions often shape a close-knit group, marked by similar motivations, tastes, perceptions, and behaviors, termed "cloakroom communities" (Bauman, 2013b). More specifically, Bauman considers the tendency of individuals in contemporary society to form relationships within specific public arenas such as cinemas, theaters, shopping malls, or concerts. The metaphor of "cloakroom community" revolves around communities designed

as theatres. In these settings, participants symbolically leave their coats—and include by extension, their identities—in a cloakroom before partaking in the communal experience. Upon the performance's conclusion, each individual retrieves their coat, and reclaims the identity that had been temporarily set aside before entering the theatre. Within this framework, social interactions are characterized by a focus on individualization and self-presentation, wherein participants in public settings assemble without necessarily engaging in substantive interpersonal interactions. Globalization further heightens this trend, engendering a single-purpose, ambiguous society marked by individualism, self-interest, and a concentration on self-maintenance and self-relation.

Castells (2011) posits that the advent of the network information age is transforming our social structures and modes of interaction. He argues that both space and time are being reconfigured due to the pervasive impact of information technology on human life. In the network society, Castells asserts, time has become increasingly fluid, space has been generated indeterminate, and human interactions occur within an ever-changing realm of mobility. To elucidate these characteristics, he introduces the term "space of flows", declaring that it has replaced traditional spatial configurations as the dominant form of social power. This concept illustrates that information technology has disrupted traditional patterns of human behavior, shifting interactions from fixed, spatial locales to this more dynamic "space of flows". Castells divides the "space of flows" into three layers :

"The first layer, the material support of the space of flows, is actually constituted by a circuit of electronic impulses (microelectronics, telecommunications, computer processing···also based on information technologies); The second layer the space of flows is constituted by its nodes and hubs; The third important layer of the space of flows refers to the spatial organization of the dominant, managerial elites that exercise the directional

functions around which such space is articulated" (Castells, 2011, p. 442 - 445).

Castells conceptualizes "the space of flows" as a multi-layered construct rooted in the conditions of networked space. This network links tangible, physical locations and creates a virtual society with significant cultural influence and social functions. In traditional social configurations, social behaviors and practices are naturally tied to an individual's specific location within the societal structure. This spatial positioning, generated by both the social environment and interpersonal interactions, serves as a reflection and consequence of social class. Such socially spatial delineation remains a crucial foundation for understanding social behavior. Nonetheless, traditional social segments such as identity, class, occupation, and power, which are well-defined in physical spaces, become ambiguous in networked spaces due to the fluidity of information that blurs social boundaries. Despite this, the objectives of online interactions remain both informational and relational. In the network society, new identity configurations have emerged as online participants construct a social order based on community engagement and interaction (R. Kozinets, 2009). Such online gatherings not only share collective information but also foster a strong sense of community.

My research primarily concentrates on digital spiritual practices in fluid digital space, serving as a foundation for examining transformations and expressions of identity and human interaction in both digital and real quotidian spaces. I conceptualize these digital spiritual practices as forms of "liquid religiosity" (Possamai & Turner, 2012) or "fluid spirituality". In this context, "fluid" refers to the adaptability of one's spiritual practices rather than a modification of one's core identity or fundamental religious beliefs. The advent of digital spiritual practices has empowered Tibetan Buddhist monks and local villagers to engage in religious rituals with increased flexibility, unconstrained by traditional limitations of time and place. To a certain extent, religious engagement with this technological advancement may encourage preserving the area's social relationships and cultural

identity.

Moreover, it may contribute to developing novel social practices in the local socio-political arena of Diqing. As a result, it is plausible to hypothesize that digital spirituality could expedite the dissemination and fulfillment of Tibetan Buddhism's spiritual needs in contemporary society. This viewpoint suggests that the fluid nature of digital spiritual practices may evolve analogous to social mobility in modernity. However, what implications do these fluid spiritual practices hold for identity, especially for monks residing within traditional monastic institutions? For them, can we categorize this type of fluid space as a transient "cloakroom community" ? In line with Bauman's perspective (2013b), individuals in modern society attempt to extricate themselves from institutional limitations and traditional norms, positioning personal freedom as both an aspirational life goal and a survival tactic.

However, they frequently become disoriented in the pursuit of this uncertain freedom. The locus of "liquidity" has transitioned from the institutional to the social realm, migrated from political systems to life politics (Giddens, 1991), and, more specifically, has shifted focus from a macroscopic framework to a microscopic, individual-centric dimension. Informed by this theoretical perspective, my research focuses on the traditional monastic systems in contemporary digital society. It examines how monks —who operate under the institutional constraints of religious regulations and Buddhist precepts —interpret their self-identity and pursuit of life within these disciplined living environments. Do they renounce their sense of monastic identity within the ever-changing digital landscape ?

1.3 Research Questions

The above information prompted me to focus on the fluidity of digital spiritual practice and the transformation of monastic life surrounding Tibetan Buddhist

monks, which will examine from various perspectives in the following chapters. I will primarily pay attention to the related research questions follow :

1. How do Tibetan Buddhist monks construct their identity offline ?
2. How do digital social media (social media applications as the primary example) change the daily lives of Tibetan Buddhist monks ? How do they construct their identities in digital social media ?
3. How does digital consumer spirituality affect the monks' identity and the social interaction between Tibetan Buddhist monks and laypeople ?
4. Does the identity of the Tibetan Buddhist monks still have a certain degree of religious authority and social dominance in digital social media ? How do they establish emotional trust through digital consumer spirituality ?

These primary questions orient my analysis around the Tibetan Buddhist monks' identity, digital spiritual practice, and the authenticity of digital consumer spirituality between the monastery and the devotee community.

1.4 Research Objectives

This thesis aims to observe the relationship between digital social media and digital spiritual practices in modern society and hopes to contribute to a more profound comprehension of how the transformation of religious activities and spiritual practices is affected by contemporary digital communication media. As a disciplined study among the holism of human sciences, anthropology includes everything about human beings in society. My research will demonstrate that ethnographic exploration is critical in academic discussions about digital social media and spiritual practice behavior. Specifically, the study will examine how monastic individuals engage in spiritual practices via digital social media while fostering dependable social connections with their devotees. Additionally, their

affiliations serve as a means to contemplate and reassess the gravity of spiritual practices and religious authority within contemporary digital media societies.

Contemporary Tibetan monks have garnered widespread public attention in the current era in light of their modern lifestyle. This phenomenon has recently resulted in a decreasing population of Tibetan monks, which is one reason many monks renounce their monastic life and return to the secular world (Wangmo, 2016). Concurrently, a significant number of dissenting opinions have emerged, interrogating the manner in which traditional monastic lifestyles engage with contemporary modes of living. However, I contend that the shift in culture and the transformation of spiritual practice result from technological and economic advancements, leading to a novel cultural framework. An analysis of spiritual practice in the digital milieu offers a refreshing approach to addressing religious embodiment, authority mobility, individual and collective spiritual experiences, virtual social structure, and trust in the digital realm.

1.5 Research Methods

In fact, a considerable number of famous Tibetan Buddhist monasteries exist with China. In these monasteries, the engagement of Tibetan Buddhist monks in digital social media platforms is a widespread phenomenon. Consequently, this enables the theoretical possibility of conducting research at any Tibetan Buddhist monastery. I have selected the Tibetan Buddhist monastery in Shangri_la, Yunnan province, for my research field, primarily because it is located in a multi-ethnic region. In their daily lives, people predominantly communicate in Mandarin (my native language and the official language of China) and the Yunnan dialect (which I fully understand), enabling me to engage in barrier-free communication with a larger number of monks. Furthermore, as the largest Tibetan Buddhist monastery in Yunnan province, the development of tourism has significantly enhanced its urban transportation system, allowing me to conveniently reach my field site using public

transport. Additionally, based on my master's research experience, I have already established a network of local contacts and earned their trust, laying a foundational basis for my subsequent entry into the field and the expansion of my research.

My research methodology primarily encompasses both offline and online participant observation, supplemented by a modest amount of questionnaire surveys as an extension of participant observation and empirical studies (See Chapter 2). Initially, I volunteered at a hostel located two kilometers from the monastery in the ancient town, utilizing this opportunity to observe and survey local residents and tourists about their impressions of the monks. Moreover, during the research period for my master's thesis, I had already met some monks through friends and maintained amicable relations with them. Consequently, through one of these monks, with whom I have a good relationship, I was able to enter the monastery smoothly. This monk is fluent in Mandarin and works in the store operated by the monastery. Invited by him, I was able to visit this store daily and got acquainted with several of the monastery's stewards.

At first, the monastery stewards regarded me as an out-of-town friend of the monk. They were friendly and polite, engaging in simple greetings. However, as I frequented the monastery daily, they gradually grew interested in me. If I missed a day, they would inquire why I hadn't visited. Gradually, they began to ask about my reasons for being there. I candidly told them that I am a student studying in Belgium and was there to complete my thesis. Since the monks were unfamiliar with the concept of a thesis, I often explained it to them as a school assignment.

The monks were curious about why my assignment needed to be completed in the monastery. I explained to them that my project was to study the daily lives of monks and how their lives have changed. Usually, upon hearing this, the monks would laugh and remark, "What's there to study about our lives ?" However, my status as a doctoral student greatly facilitated my fieldwork. The monks viewed me as an educated individual, a student eager to learn, making them more willing

to share their stories with me.

To better understand the monks' discourse and way of life, I began learning Tibetan language under the guidance of a monastery steward. Each afternoon, as the number of visitors to the monastery lessened, I would make my way to the monastery store to study Tibetan. Since I didn't need to master the written form of Tibetan, my focus was primarily on the local spoken Tibetan dialect. This means that the Tibetan language I learned is specific to the Shangri_la region and may not be applicable in other Tibetan areas.

When I began to gradually converse with the monks in Tibetan, they appeared very pleased. Although they communicated with me in Mandarin, their conversations among themselves were in Tibetan. Chinese was not their native language. We established an unspoken agreement of mutual learning: they taught me Tibetan, and I taught them Chinese. Thus, as I learned more Tibetan, they became more willing to engage with me, translating and explaining the contents of their discussions. I often carried a small notebook, which contained my Tibetan language notes as well as my field notes. During interviews with the monks, I would record our conversations. In this thesis, I have translated these field interview dialogues into English.

Older monks, noticing me taking out my notebook to jot down notes, would often express curiosity and ask what I was recording. Due to the sensitivity associated with their Tibetan monk identity, they harbored concerns that I might document information detrimental to them. I explained to them that my note-taking was a requirement for my thesis and did not involve politically sensitive issues, nor would it expose their identity. As our interactions became more frequent, they grew less concerned about my note-taking. Sometimes, interviews would be lengthy, and I would ask the interviewee's permission to record beforehand. With their consent, I would use a recording device to capture the conversation, which I would later transcribe into detailed notes.

Additionally, during my fieldwork, I employed semi-structured questionnaire surveys as a complement to empirical research. While the questionnaire data did not constitute the primary analysis data in the final thesis due to limited data, this method helped me to connect with a broader range of subjects. Most questionnaires were filled out during breaks in large-scale religious ceremonies at the monastery. Through introductions by other monk friends, I met additional monks. Completing the questionnaires served as a gateway to open channels of communication; during the process, they would often initiate conversations with me, playing a significant role in facilitating subsequent interviews.

Finally, online participant observation and WeChat ethnography are among the most crucial research methods in this thesis. Digital participant observation offered me a novel perspective to understand the daily lives and identity construction of the monks. With the assistance of my monk friends, I had the opportunity to meet more monks in the monastery and consequently add them as contacts on WeChat. On such social media platforms, I could interact more conveniently with the monks and ensure in advance if they were available for interviews. Particularly after the outbreak of the pandemic in 2020, I was still able to supplement my field materials through online participant observation and interviews.

In summary, I employed a combination of traditional and digital ethnography, providing me with a more holistic perspective. Moreover, the Ganden Sumtseling Monastery, situated at the heart of a developing tourist area, vividly illustrates the challenges of change in the monks' daily and spiritual lives amidst the contradictions and integration between traditional and modern lifestyles.

1.6 Relevant Theoretical Frameworks

1.6.1 Anthropology of Digital

My research emerges from recent anthropological engagement with the study of digital culture and related themes. A large and growing body of literature has investigated this field. For instance, scholars have examined identity, online self-identity, and the construction of private life in the age of the Internet (Turkle, 2011; Donath et al., 1999), the classification and interaction of online communities (Rheingold, 1993; Baym, 2000), the reflection of body through life online (Markham, 1998), technology and online self-expression (McKenna & Seidman, 2005), feminism and sexual minorities (Madge & O'connor, 2006; J. E. Campbell, 2014), race identity and democratic politics (A. Campbell, 2006), and reflections of ethnography approach through the fieldwork of virtual game (Boellstorff, 2015; Servais, 2012). These studies reflect technology and the Internet that bring a new lifestyle and materials into our society and contribute to creating a new public space (Rheingold, 1993). As MacLuhan notes that technology and "electric media" would "retribalize" human society into clusters of affiliations (McLuhan & McLuhan, 2015).

As academics explore the realms of the Internet, digital technology, and virtual communities, they employ a diverse array of terminology, theoretical frameworks, and ethnographic contexts. Consequently, the field of digital anthropology remains multifaceted, innovative, and yet to be comprehensively theorized (R. Kozinets, 2009). For example, the term "digital anthropology" etymologically from neologisms such as "cyberspace" , "cyberculture" , "cybercity" , "virtual community" , "virtual ethnography" , "digital ethnography" , "netnography" , scholars producing the various descriptions of evaluations follow their idiosyncratic approaches. However, what do we know about the concept of the standard of evaluation ? How do we choose the appropriate approach of

anthropology to define digital ? I will navigate the literature review and theoretical framework regarding digital with an embedded ethnographic approach that builds a digital concept first.

Firstly, we shall clarify and inquiry about the cyberculture of the anthropological field. Nevertheless, it is necessary to mention the notion of cyberspace before the cyberculture, which is a term originally from a science fiction novel by Gibson (1984). He describes a virtual world shaped by computer-facilitated communications, which also intersects with aspects of human relationships, ideology, authority, and artificial intelligence. In academic circles, the term cyberculture was first time mentioned and summarized in the anthropology by Escobar in 1994. He states that the emergence of cyberculture, such as new information technologies and biotechnology, shifted the social structure and society's significance :

"As a new domain of anthropological practice, the study of cyberculture is particularly concerned with the cultural constructions and reconstructions on which the new technologies are based and which they in turn help to shape" (Escobar et al., 1994, p. 211).

Predictably, technology evokes the production of cyberculture, such as the studies that focus attentions on the "cyberspace" (Rheingold, 1991), "cybercity" (Carter, 2004; Markham, 1998), "cyberpunk" (Cavallaro, 2000; De Mul, 2010). Moreover, there is no doubt that the concept of cyberculture is abstract. As Jakub Macek classified the concept of cyberculture into four categories: respectively, utopian, informational, anthropological, epistemological (Macek, 2004). The large notion cyberculture provides a viewpoint of futurism and constructs the social culture through the computer system or the symbolic code. Consequently, these collective studies offer valuable insights into the anthropology of cyberculture. This field focuses on the interplay between technologies and socio-cultural systems, examining how they are constructed, practiced, and integrated into

various domains of human life. It will be instrumental in understanding the deconstruction of cultural significance and the interpretive frameworks surrounding symbolic computer systems.

Secondly, anthropologists generally study what happens in the human world and comprehend the meaning of culture in a small-scale community. Cyberspace and the rapid advancement of new technologies provide a new "place" for anthropologists. Rheingold (1993) created the term "virtual community" inspired by the term cyberspace, which means *"social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace"* (Rheingold, 1993, p. xx). Kozinets (2009) has given a detailed exploration that follows Rheingold's definition of the virtual community. He suggests that "discussions" also mean "communications" in the virtual community.

Likewise thirdly, digital anthropologists have focused their analyses on the relation of digital media and communication (Garcia, Standlee, Bechkoff, & Cui, 2009; S. M. Wilson & Peterson, 2002), mediation (Mazzarella, 2004), communication and language (Cherny et al., 1999), questions of social organization (Schroeder, 2012), as well as questions of methodology (Hine, 2005; Baym & Markham, 2009; Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012). These scholarships provide valuable insights regarding the relationship between digital technology and social culture. It can helpfully comprehend the communication plays a role as an essential element of human society, which is the exchange of meaningful symbols. Considering all these evidences, it seems that information technology and sharing make human communication digitized and symbolized.

The foundation of anthropology holds a perspective that culture is constructed between interaction and communication. As anthropologist Clifford Geertz suggested that *"Believing with Max Weber, man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun"* (Geertz, 2008a, p. 4-5), he took cultures to

be these webs, and affirmed comprehending the significance of culture from the meaning of symbols. Digital anthropology is a research approach that focuses not on digital technology itself, but rather on all material culture related to the digital domain (Boellstorff, 2012). Using these empirical approaches, I define "digital" as a medium symbol comprising interactive and communicative that connect social relationships and thus express the self-express of social membership and solid relationships in the acquaintance society. My theoretical framework attention will focus on the interpretation of practice symbolic in human communication. I ground the narrative framework in the practices of mobile device sharing (Horst & Miller, 2020) and social space of mobile communication in the context of physical separation (Chayko, 2008; Hjorth, 2008). Simultaneously, I prefer to emphasize my study revealed in the digital space rather than cyberspace. As I previously mentioned, cyberspace is an abstract universe, originating from science fiction, in which both spatial and social boundaries become increasingly ambiguous. If we examine human life totally realized in a futurism virtual world or the specific cultural phenomena produced in the computer-mediated, then the term cyberspace is more reasonable.

Relatively, my research engages with social interaction and spiritual practice in digital social media of mobile devices. Such social practices and communication as ontologies closely connect with real-life rather than virtual reality in cyberspace. The term digital etymology usefully indicates the digit or number, which refers to the concept of technology. Daniel Miller (2018) wrote on the website of *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Anthropology* that the term "digital anthropology" can be used to concern with the issue of the development of digital technologies for particular populations, the technology of anthropological methodology, or the study of digital technologies. Miller and Horst (2012) adopt the elementary concept, which defines "digital" as binary, consisting of bits made up of 0s and 1s. In this regard, digital technology and the construction of digital culture between

virtual and actual by binary code is the most crucial point in the anthropology of digital. Even though many scholars question the notion of digital, I agree that digital is composed of binary code. As computer systems operate on a binary code consisting only of 0s and 1s, this simplicity empowers the binary system to streamline both information and communication. This fundamental simplicity, in turn, creating new opportunities for the realm of digital technology (D. Miller & Horst, 2012). In other words, the limitation of computer systems to binary code is not an obstacle but rather an enabler that makes information and communication more efficient.

In addition to defining "digital" as a symbolic medium and a binary code, I will also adopt the concept of "digital indexicality" as defined by anthropologist Boellstorff (2012). Similarly, he traced the notion of digital back to its original meaning of digits on a hand. He also defined digital as a methodological approach, distinguishing it from the more nebulous notion that the term merely refers to anything electric or online. He then outlined the index of the digital framework,

"drawing from the etymology of index as 'forefinger,' is a whole set of theoretical resources for understanding the indexical relationships that constantly co-constitute both the virtual and actual" (Boellstorff, 2012, p. 45).

I will highlight how digital indexicality theory fosters the development of social relationships among members within digital social media platforms, as well as the distinctions in spiritual practices between online and offline environments. The indexical framework and social interaction are dynamic (Hanks, 1992), particularly in digital space. This theory will demonstrate how spiritual practices and social relationships are no longer limited to spatially and temporally specific physical body presence. To a certain extent, members of online communities share and index the same languages and systems of cultural practice. Therefore, although various definitions of digital anthropology have been proposed, this dissertation will approach the term "digital" from two layers: first, as a symbolic medium, and

second, as an indexical methodology.

1.6.2 Digital Religious Practice or Digital Spirituality?

At the beginning of my research, the studies about digital and religious practices gave me a lot of inspirations. In the recent decades, digital anthropologists have increasingly focused attention on the digital/Internet and religious, and their researches concentrate on the relationship between online and offline religious practices and faiths (H. A. Campbell & Vitullo, 2016; Lövheim, 2011), religious practice engaged with the virtual community (Helland, 2004; Dawson & Cowan, 2004; H. Campbell, 2005a), how religious institutions and religious practices are affected by the transformation of digital media (O'Leary, 1996; A. Campbell, 2006), religious of modernity (Houtman & Aupers, 2010), evangelism and sacredness embedded in technology (Dawson & Hennebry, 1999; H. A. Campbell & La Pastina, 2010; Ames, Rosner, & Erickson, 2015), and the virtual religion in online games (Servais, 2013).

Scholarships about religion have engaged with the Internet or online community since the late 1980s. In the early investigations, scholars paid attention to static religious practices, such as the special phenomena of spiritual practice that emerge in online forums (Rheingold, 1985; Bauwens, 1996), religious organizations sharing religious information, and establishing religious websites (Schwartz, 1995). In the mid-90s, scholars called the online religious practice as "cyber-religion" (Bauwens, 1996; Zaleski, 1997), which means the religious practice established in cyberspace. And the concept of "cyber-religion" indicated that a new kind of religious community can link with the religious members and share religious information in cyberspace. As Dawson and Cowan (2004) assert, early investigations about online religion tended to focus on two aspects : one is encouraged to engage with religion in a new way, and another criticizes virtual life. The early investigation typically concentrates on the perspective of traditional

religious commitment.

In 2000, Christopher Helland proposed the distinction between religion on the Internet between the term “online religion” and “religion online”. He stated that “online religion” means people participate in religious practice through the Internet, for instance, online meditation, online prayer (G. Young, 2004), online religious ritual; In contrast, “religion online” suggested that religious institutions have set up online religious communities and commercial websites. Being able to understand online religious practice is made possible by the distinction, which plays a significant role in the study of religion and the Internet. However, whether Internet users engage in religious practice or religious groups spread their beliefs over the Internet, both terms refer to a single interaction. This distinction, in my opinion, is a more thorough elaboration than cyber religion.

In the last decade, a new term emerging to describe online religious practice, called “digital religion” . The term “digital religion” refers to various understandings of online and offline religions, one of which is provided by the social structure and cultural practices of living in a society immersed in technology and information (H. A. Campbell, 2012a; H. A. Campbell & Vitullo, 2016).

As a result of these extensive studies, it is not difficult to spot that academic circles realized the tendency towards the religious practice of digital has dramatically become a part of daily life. However, these studies predominantly focus on the evolution of religious practices and the concept of religion that emerged on the Internet, lacking the effect of digital religious practices on social interaction and individual spirituality cognition in the digital era. To close the gap, this study critically evaluates the Tibetan Buddhist monks’ digital spirituality and digital social practices.

The phenomenon of liquid modernity has significantly impacted social interactions in contemporary society (Bauman, 2013b), rendering them unrestricted by the constraints of time and place. Consequently, various

sacred time and space activities have emerged as part of this trend. Religious movements have become less physical and material in nature, as suggested by scholars (Shoji & Matsue, 2020) who have observed the loss of rural communities and authorities seems to be associated with urban religion and secularization. A similar process of dematerialization and deinstitutionalization is taking place due to digitalization and secularization. The sacralization of self and technological advancements have enabled individuals to convert religious behaviors into spirituality through digital technologies (Houtman & Aupers, 2010). Overall, digital spirituality encompasses a range of religious and spiritual practices that involve using digital technologies and cultural elements to satisfy spiritual needs with purpose. This represents a growing trend within contemporary society.

In the broad sense of the world, spirituality is the opposite of material existence and refers to spiritual life. The word "spirituality" derives from the Latin word spiritus, which means "the breath of life" (Kale, 2004). According to Kale (2004), spirituality is *"the engagement to explore - and deeply and meaningfully connect one's inner self - to the known world and Beyond"* (Kale, 2004, p. 93-94). In a review of the numerous discourses on spirituality, Kale (2004) conclude that a definition of spirituality needs into four primary aspects : a sense of inner self, a sense of meaning, a sense of interconnectedness, and a notion of the Beyond (or God).

In general, it might be difficult to clarify the distinction between spirituality and religion. Even though they are comparable and numerous religions emphasize the worth of the spirit, spirituality is certainly not dependent on any given form or guise of religion (Hinterkopf, 1994; Benjamin & Looby, 1998). In contrast to traditional religious forms of spirituality, which focus on a higher power or deity, spirituality concentrates on the belief that within one's deeper layers finds a true, authentic, and sacred kernel that is "unpolluted" by society and social structures (Aupers & Houtman, 2006). Spirituality is an essential part of each individual, just

like breathing air (Benjamin & Looby, 1998).

According to current thinking (Elkins, Hedstrom, Hughes, Leaf, & Saunders, 1988; Kale, 2004; Santana et al., 2022), there is a general view that religion serves as an instrument for numerous individuals to foster their spirituality through comprehension and expression. Despite residing within a monastery and conforming to collective religious customs, Tibetan Buddhist monks also partake in autonomous spiritual training that attempts to interpret the meaning of existence and interconnectedness with others. The monks' daily routine integrates both the practice of spirituality and religious customs. Additionally, some scholars have combined the notion of spirituality/religion due to the extensive overlap between these concepts in human experience (Moberg, 2005). Thus, the differentiation between religious and spiritual practice may hold a negligible significance for the monks. It is customary for a monk to regard their daily religious rituals as a spiritual practice, emphasizing the role of individual prayer and the benefits of all living creatures.

The perspective that religion serves as a road map for spiritual development will be adopted in this research. This road map posits that religious doctrines and symbols embody the accumulated knowledge of those who have trod the path before us (Kale, 2004). Therefore, spiritual practices are undertaken by religious adherents and monks as part of the framework of their religious beliefs. Collective religious practices, such as those performed during festivals and significant spiritual events in monasteries, will be referred to as religious practices throughout this study. However, the rituals carried out by monks in their dwellings and by devotees seeking monks' assistance in their daily prayers will be referred to as spiritual practices. The latter type of spiritual practice concentrates more on individual spiritual needs than communal worship. Overall, the study holds a view that there is no contradiction between engaging in religious practice and spiritual practice, as individuals embrace and acknowledge both through the prism of their

religious beliefs.

Furthermore, the advent and maturation of digital technology have facilitated the growth of individual and communal expressions of spirituality and religion. This is particularly noteworthy given the marked prevalence of digitization in our contemporary society, as individuals and groups have leveraged digital platforms as tools for self-expression. Notably, many of these expressions are characterized by a greater emphasis on individualized trends than institutional or communal dynamics (H. A. Campbell, 2012a). This trend is highlighted by the fact that many digital spirituality expressions are independent content creation and distribution, reflecting that digital media facilitates personalized roads of spiritual practice. Digital social media has amplified the individualized nature of spiritual practices, as is evident.

Inevitably, integrating a spiritual practice into digital technology and consumerism will provoke an inquiry into the role of Tibetan Buddhist monks in providing spiritual service. While some monks employ digital technologies to expand their reach and offer teachings to a broader audience, others may avoid these platforms in favor of more traditional modes of communication. Nevertheless, the digitalization of spirituality raises valid concerns about identity construction and reliance on commodified spiritual practices in a consumerist society. In fact, technological advancements have given birth to digital religion and have paved the way for a new business model. The burgeoning field of techno-religion may soon become a massive industry, capitalizing on the success of conventional religious institutions (Benedikter, 2020). The function of Tibetan Buddhist monks in the spiritual practice and service process entails the management of the interplay between traditional spiritual practices, economic maintenance, and the changes in digital consumption. It is therefore relevant to examine how digital platforms offering personalized spiritual experiences contribute to individualized spiritual consumption and identity. In light of the

above elements, this study will use the term digital spirituality in the following discussion.

2

Research Methods: From Physically Embodied Presence to Virtually Embodied Presence

Tibetan Buddhist monks' monastic lives and spiritual practices captivate not only anthropologists but also individuals from contemporary society. This interest often stems from both the perceived exoticism of Tibetan Buddhism and the monks' detachment from secular life. With the advent of digital technologies and social media platforms, Tibetan Buddhist monks' practices in the digital realm have further piqued public curiosity. Whenever I discuss my research with others, I find that people exhibit enthusiastic interest, particularly in the area of digital spiritual

practices among Tibetan Buddhist monks. Typically, they ask a series of questions related to Tibetan Buddhist monks, for example:

- How did you know these Tibetan Buddhist monks?
- In which way they use the digital social media, and how do they connect to outside?
- What is the regulation of Tibetan Buddhist monks in the monastery?
- For what reason the Buddhist monks want to be an online influencer or a businessman ?
- How do they spiritual practice in digital social media?

I almost understand why people ask all these questions, which is one of the reasons why it motivates me to begin this work. However, this research not only explores how digital social media influences the daily lives and spiritual practices of Tibetan Buddhist monks, but also examines how these monks adapt their lifestyles and reconsider their self-identities in response to the disruptions caused by digital social media. Taking all these questions, and I went to my fieldwork : the Ganden Sumtseling monastery in Shangri_la.

During my initial fieldwork in September 2018, I was inspired to investigate this subject while playing mobile games with Tibetan Buddhist monks, as previously mentioned. I'm curious whether these Tibetan Buddhist monks are "permitted" to engage in battle games. Does participating in violent actions within these online video games conflict with their precepts ? After three weeks of observations and in-depth interviews, I came to the conclusion that the focus of my research shouldn't primarily be on the monks' engagement with online video games. There are two key reasons for this. First, the monks play these games for the same reason that many of us do: for enjoyment. Second, and perhaps more importantly, they use platforms like WeChat not just to communicate outside the

monastery but also to connect with the broader, secular world. These interactions emphasize the central role of social engagement in their online activities.

Smartphones are pivotal in facilitating this engagement. According to my interviews with the monks, they began using smartphones between the years 2013 and 2021, an adoption timeline spanning roughly 5 to 8 years (see Chapter 2.2.2). With the growing popularity of WeChat (also see Chapter 2.2.2), it has become their primary channel for external communication, including with family, friends, and the public. It is therefore unsurprising that they use their WeChat accounts to access online video games. From these observations, it becomes clear that digital social media is an integral part of the monks' daily lives.

The second fieldwork was in December 2019, during the period of the most significant ritual ceremony in the Ganden Sumtseling monastery. I made an important discovery. Building on my initial understanding of how the digital social media platform WeChat is used, I also found evidence of digital spiritual practices shared between Tibetan Buddhist monks and Tibetan villagers. My key informant JC, a Tibetan Buddhist monk from the monastery, told me about some WeChat groups that were created by the monastery in 2019. These WeChat groups have different types and functions, for instance, some chat groups are only for publishing notices of the monastery, some chat groups are only for the monks do spiritual practices, some chat groups only for communicating with their disciples, some chat groups monks serve for Tibetan villagers to pray at the monastery, etc. Thanks to my friendship with JC, I got an invitation to join some chat groups and silently observe their online communication.

I have to say that was a huge step, helped me accomplish the following work : online observations (see Chapter 2.2.2), online interviews, online questionnaires (see Chapter 2.2.3), the praying process of digital spiritual practices, etc. Starting from then, I have decided to work on the direction of "digital spiritual practice", to see whether it will affect Tibetan Buddhist monks' spiritual lives and their

social interaction with villagers. Building on this experience, I was able to gather substantial information about spiritual practices conducted via digital social media. Additionally, I had the opportunity to meet local individuals and connect with them on WeChat, further enriching my understanding and expanding my network for future research.

During my third fieldwork in 2021, which spanned from March to October, I had the longest period of interaction with Tibetan Buddhist monks. Through participant observation, I uncovered subtle cultural nuances about their daily lives, particularly those not readily visible to outsiders. I realized that the monks' social interactions with Tibetan villagers played a significant role in their daily activities. Accordingly, I focused more on these day-to-day interactions with villagers and individuals from the outside world.

To obtain a more comprehensive understanding, I structured an outline centered on the monks' daily lives. Utilizing narrative interviews, I then sought insights from monks of varying ages (particularly those aged 18-20) about their life experiences both before and after entering monastic life. This included discussions about their routine and scholastic activities within the monastery. I also delved into the transformative impact of mobile phones and digital social media on their spiritual practices. Additionally, I explored how they perceive their monastic identity in this digital age, as well as their perspectives on engaging in spiritual practices via digital social media.

The narrative interview of qualitative research method has given the hidden details of Tibetan Buddhist monks' lives. According to Jovchelovitch and Bauer (2000), the core of narrative interview is the *"basic idea [...] to reconstruct social events from the prospective of informants as directly as possible [...] The underlying presupposition is that the perspective of the interviewee is best revealed in stories where the informant is using his or her own spontaneous language in the narration of events"* (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000, p. 58-59). Through their

narratives of individual experiences and memories, we can learn about the local people's perceptions of social events at different times, as well as gain a better understanding of their live histories.

Qualitative study is grounded in both the positivist tradition and interpretive phenomenology. Particularly for empirical anthropologists, data analysis is conducted within the interpretive tradition (Bernard, 2017). Fieldworkers require to draw the outline of the history and cultural structure, then reflect what the thought and social relations of those humans. This approach provides a better view of understanding the local customs, rules of conduct, local culture, and social structure. For anthropologists, the most critical work does not merely provide a description of the cultural phenomenon but also understands and interprets the significance behind different cultures. As Dick Hobbs and Richard Wright (2006) indicated the ethnographic:

"Whereas pure ethnography attempts to focus on representing all or most of such a "*culture*"*, much ethnographic research focuses instead on documenting and illuminating some culturally embedded social system"* (Hobbs & Wright, 2006, p. 4).

Therefore, this chapter will draw the fieldwork process, the data collection and analysis, and analysis methods. I will also introduce WeChat ethnography as a specific extension approach to digital ethnography. WeChat is a fluid digital contextualization space as other digital social media applications, requiring users to communicate and share information beyond the physical (Ma & Cai, 2023). Consequently, people will reconstruct self-identity and imagination in this digital social media space, where also provide a new research field for anthropologists.

2.1 Physically Embodied Presence: Research Methods Offline

2.1.1 Historical Documents Research And Comparative Related Research

According to Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan (2004), anthropology is an empirical social science that we should be incapable of debating arguments simply. We shall concentrate on the relationship between the arguments, the survey data, and the existent references. To understand the Tibetan Buddhist monks' spiritual lives, it is first necessary to understand the function of Tibetan Buddhism and the relationship between the monastery and the village. Therefore, I will follow an exhaustive review of the socio-histories in the gazetteer of Diqing (2003). This process contributes to understanding Tibetan Buddhist monks' spiritual lives and their interrelationships with Tibetan villagers in the past. I will mainly deal with historical documents (Y. Qi & Xiluo, 1990; Lezan, 2003; Yang, 1994) written in Chinese and draw on Western empirical studies in Yunnann Tibetan society (Kolås, 2004; Mortensen, 2016).

The existing Tibetan monastery studies mainly focus on several key themes, for example, the monastic function and cultural influences in local society (Li, 1994; Nietupski, 2011), cultural reconstruction and cultural identity in modernization (Kolas & Thowsen, 2011), the rebirth of religion in contemporary (M. C. Goldstein & Kapstein, 1999; Huber, 1999), understanding the socio-cultural reconfiguration through religious interaction in the daily life of Tibetans (Tan, 2017). Overall, these studies highlight the comprehension of the role of monasteries in Tibetan society. Taking into account all the evidence gathered, it becomes evident that there is a gap in academic literature focusing on the digital transformation of Tibetan Buddhist monks' monastic lives. Likewise, studies examining the role of digital platforms in facilitating spiritual practices between the monastery and the broader community are notably absent. This opens up

a critical space for new research that could deepen our understanding of how digitalization is influencing both religious practices and community interactions in Tibetan Buddhism.

2.1.2 Access to Fieldwork and Participant Observation

As I initially stated, I spent a considerable six months in Shangri_la between 2014 and 2015, becoming quite familiar with the local people. Although my master's research initially focused on how the Dukezong fire impacted cultural and social structures in the area, I had the opportunity to engage with the local community. This led me to discover the world of Tibetan Buddhist monks, specifically those residing in the Ganden Sumtseling monastery. Through one of my friends who is doing religious studies there, I met some local Tibetan Buddhist monks (aka the Master or Shifu in Chinese, the word shows respect to the Buddhist monks for locals). I was fortunate to interact with key figures like Living Buddha KS[1], who greatly aided my research. Naturally, this led to a series of questions I was eager to ask him, such as

"When were you certified as a Living Buddha?"

"Will the process of identifying a Living Buddha be much different from that of being a regular monk?"

"What kind of relationship do you have now with your family?"

He is very kind and patiently answered my curious questions even if it's our first meet. Before leaving, I asked him if I could "add" him as friend through WeChat that we can keep in touch later, and he agreed. When I returned to

[1] In Chinese word, living Buddha means huofo,also used to mean tülku. The institution of living Buddhas is an indispensable part of Tibetan Buddhism. Originating in Tibet, the institution of the tulku has expanded beyond the historical boundaries of Tibetan Buddhism to encompass regions such as Tibet, Mongolia, Buryatia, Kalmykia, Bhutan, India, and Nepal, as well as Western countries. Historically, the institution of tülku has been inherently religious, rather than secular. At the same time, this institution critical initiatives implemented by the central government for the governance of the Tibetan region and the administration of Tibetan Buddhist affairs. "The title of Tülku is given to reincarnate Lamas either on the grounds of their resembling enlightened beings or through their connection to certain qualities of enlightened beings" (Kuzmin, 2017).

Shangri_la in September 2018, our maintained friendship made it much easier for me to initiate my fieldwork. For example, I could easily get into the monastery like the other local Tibetans who will not be stopped by the gatekeeper and pay the ticket. I visited him this time and told him about my research project, he gave me a lot of encouragement and suggested me to focus on Tibetan Buddhist monks' spiritual lives, especially the younger monks. He said to me (12.09.2018):

"As society develops, it is becoming better for monks' lives. And also changed the way of spiritual practice, but still have traditional practice way today. For Buddhist monks, we need a quiet environment for spiritual practice, and personal retreat. We live in the Final Dharma Period [2]*, and many people are fickle, including the Buddhist monks. We have also seen many monks return to the laity, Tibetans even fewer and fewer will become Buddhist monks."*

It is no doubt that Tibetan Buddhist monks' spiritual lives should be a matter of concern in the age of fluid and particularly for older and more distinguished monks. During this period, thanks to his introduction, I was able to meet and conduct depth-interviewed with his disciples. This provided me with valuable insights into the monastic structure, rules, ceremony activities, and monks' educational experiences, etc. It was built the cornerstone of my third fieldwork in 2021.

In 2021, I segmented my fieldwork into three phases. In the first phase of March, I did volunteer works for one month in an inn, which helped me better access the field. During this period, I have a rare opportunity to spend many days on knowing the local Tibetans. For example, I have known some Tibetan inn holders, drivers, cleaners, tourist zone guards, tourist guiders, villagers committee, etc. I

[2]East Asian Buddhists devised a tripartite chronological framework to characterize the evolution of Buddhism, consisting of: (1) the True Dharma phase, immediately succeeding the Buddha's death, in which enlightenment remains achievable through diligent practice of his teachings; (2) the Semblance Dharma phase, where only a select few attain enlightenment as the majority engage merely in ritualistic practices; and (3) the Final Dharma phase, or "mofa," marked by a pervasive decline in spiritual efficacy and human spiritual capacity (Nattier, 1991, p. 283). Within this framework, the concept of "mofa" represents the terminal stage, during which it was believed that the Three Treasures of Buddhism—comprising the Buddha, the Dharma Law, and the monastic community—would become extinct. This period elicited particular concern over the disappearance of scriptures, material representations of the Law, and the spiritual legacy of the Buddha (Shen, 2001, p. 267).

use random interviews to ask them some questions, such as “what is your belief ?” “How does express spiritual practice in daily life ?” “What do you think about Tibetan Buddhist monks ?” “How does contact with Tibetan Buddhist monks?” As Chinese anthropologist Fei (1992) stated, Chinese society is a relationship network (Guanxi 关系) society, which means that social networks contain no intense boundary lines, and people have a specific rational category, such as the large kinship networks. I have opened a new window thanks to these valuable connections. They introduced me to their families and friends, shared their means of livelihood, and they invited me to participate in their family religious rites.

In the second phase of May, therefore, I benefited from the extensive kinship network and got a chance to participate observation the monks’ lives in the monastery. My crucial informant once again, a Tibetan Buddhist monk JC, introduced me to stay with two scripture teachers in the monastery. These two scripture teachers and monk JC come from the same extended family. I stayed in a Tibetan-style house built on three floors, with a living room and kitchen on the first floor, four rooms and a bathroom on the second floor, two rooms for two young monks and two other rooms for guests, and a Buddhist hall and bedroom for another older monk on the third floor. Every day, I helped the two Masters cook, clean, drink tea, chat together, learn Tibetan with them, and when there were religious activities in the monastery or at home, they would tell me in advance. During this period, I observed the monks’ daily lives, diet patterns, living space, monastic system education, the time of regular religious ceremonies, etc., and gained more opportunities for interviews.

In the third phase of June, I moved out of the monastery. Monk JC is planning to start his own business with two younger relatives (also Tibetan Buddshit monks). He rented a store near the gate of the monastery’s scenic zone. This store faces the street, and there are many rooms for rent on the upper floor of the store. JC rented two rooms on the second floor of the store, one is for the kitchen, and one

is for the rest of them. To get more field information about them, with his help, I also rented a room on the second floor of the store. I helped them look after their shop occasionally when they were busy on the religious activities in the monastery. Their shop principally manage Buddhism goods and special local products, such as prayer beads, Tibetan incense, butter lamp, caterpillar fungus, matsutake etc. Many monks came to the store every day to drink tea and chat, therefore, I had more chances to meet more monks. Through these experiences in their shop, I could observe and have many depth interviews with other regional monks in the monastery. I have observed how these monks communicate with each other.

Even though a monk is supposed to cut off his link to secular life and focus on his own spiritual development, Mahayana Buddhism also teaches that it is selfish to pursue only one's own salvation. Monks are obligated to contribute to the well-being of others and should also extend their empathy to the numerous sentient beings who are not as spiritually developed and who are struggling in the material world (M. C. Goldstein & Tsarong, 1985). I gradually found that Tibetan Buddhist monks hold a new reflection of self-identities with social, economic development and the emergence of digital social media. They perceive their monastic lives as more freely than those of secular individuals. These findings contribute valuable insights to my research.

During this phase, I got many clues of digital spiritual practice in digital social media. Not only Tibetan villagers do spiritual practice in WeChat, but also many outsiders from the other provinces. SG, a Shandong (a north province in China) businessman, has some business cooperations with JC. His business is closely linked to Tibetan Buddhism. His studio draws and sale different Thangka styles [3], cooperate with different monasteries across the country KaiGuang [4], and then

[3]In classical Tibetan, "Thangka" means "thing that one unrolls". Thangka is a Tibetan Buddhist painting on cotton or silk with appliqués that usually depicts a Buddhist deity, scene, or mandala.

[4]"Kai"（开）means "open" , "Guang"（光）means "light." Generally used in Buddhism, it refers to a ceremony where newly constructed temples or statues are consecrated by senior monks before being used. Nowadays, people ask monks to help consecrate or bless a wide variety of personal articles, ranging from talismans, ornaments to cellphones, to seek good luck and protection from gods. Even

sell them through Taobao [5] live commerce. Besides Thangka business, he also run butter lamp offering in the monastery. He expressed (07.22.2021):

"Nowadays, people desire too much. They always push themselves hard to work, but they usually don't know what they want. That's why they want to seek personal spiritual peace through online. I am not consuming faith. I am doing good things when I provide the butter lamp offering and other spiritual practice services (see Chapter 6.2.1)."

I followed them to observe the entire process of butter lamp offerings and the consecration (KaiGuang) of Buddhist items. These practices, deeply rooted in Tibetan Buddhist culture, are conveyed as a means to achieve mental peace and joy. Subsequently, they extend these spiritual practices to digital social media platforms, offering services to individuals who are unable to visit the monastery for prayers physically. This interaction indicated a link between spiritual practices and digital material consumption. As a result, throughout the subsequent data collection, I focused on the significance of these spiritual practices. It's worth noting that SG provided valuable assistance throughout my active observation participation and in answering various questions. However, in his view, Buddhist monks are no different from ordinary laypeople. Despite his business involving religious affairs, he holds a nuanced view of Buddhism and its monks. It is precisely this curiosity that piqued his interest in the research paper I am currently working on. Overall, my fieldwork was greatly facilitated by these observations.

though people refer to all those scenarios as KaiGuang, the term is strictly reserved for Buddhist statues.

[5] Taobao is a Chinese online shopping platform, which is owned by Alibaba.

2.2 Virtually Embodied Presence: Research Methods Online

2.2.1 Digital Ethnography and Digital Participant Observation

In this section, I will explain the applied digital ethnography methodology and my experiences of virtually embodied fieldwork (see Chapter 2.2.2) through the digital social media WeChat.

Even though I use the term "virtually embodied" , which is used to represent the online research method. Nonetheless, the term is merely a descriptor for the lack of physical presence, not an indication of a virtual realm per se. To be more accurate, virtually embodied fieldwork employs digital social media as a conduit for observing and researching various environments. To distinguish it from the traditional way, it is considered as a new approach in modern life that transforms from the physical presence (offline) to physical absence (online). Ethnographers could verify and complement the physically embodied ethnography approach through the online fieldwork. Despite its various advantages, digitalization has its own disadvantages and complicated things in ethnographic research in many ways (Varis, 2016). In the sections that follow, I will elaborate on the specific nature of digital ethnography and explain why I have chosen it as my research methodology.

Nowadays, the world is changing rapidly. Complexity, fluidity, and dynamics are the critical factors behind this, which combine online and offline activities and cultural life (Blommaert, 2018). With the development of digital technologies, more and more digital products appear in our daily life. From the online forums, blogs from the 1980s to the social network and online video games in the 2000s, to the short videos, online concerns, etc. People have more experience and spend more time in the digital space than before. It becomes even more evident that it is a new way of human interaction. People spend more time in the digital space over offline interaction, and they even prefer online social relationships. It

somehow changes the traditional way of social activities, thus will affect human lifestyle, social practice, social relationships, and even the economy and politics. As Hoover (1997) states, the Internet plays a significant role in shaping our views, attitudes, and behavioral habits in contemporary society. Hundreds of millions of people are active on the Internet. The Internet is part of their daily lives for them (Haythornthwaite & Wellman, 2002). People attached to the Internet tend to establish their social image and relationships online (Matei & Ball-Rokeach, 2001).

All the offline activities are suddenly restricted or becoming impossible after the COVID-19 in early 2020. Most of human activities or social communications rely on the Internet. Especially, during the most challenging pandemic period where coronavirus is spreading rapidly all over the world, people are asked to work remotely, and requested to keep social distance while in public. Furthermore, the offline activity relies on digital products during this time. One requirement is that individuals are obliged to show their health certificate composed of digital code while centering public space. In addition, the majority of job sectors, encompassing students, educators, medical professionals, and clergy, have been pushed into adopting online methods of operation. It's fair to say that the pandemic has inadvertently boosted the widespread use of digital platforms and online materials.

Although research on digital ethnography has been conducted for nearly 20 years (R. V. Kozinets, 1999; Hine, 2000; Haythornthwaite & Wellman, 2002; Boellstorff, 2015), the fact remains that most researchers still focus on the "offline" lifeworld (Garcia et al., 2009). According to Gòralska (2020), anthropologists and other social scientists often hold a range of preconceived notions about digital fieldwork. She summarizes, one of these is the point that online fieldwork, lacking the element of physical presence, is not as rich or valuable as traditional, offline fieldwork. Another widespread misconception is that conducting fieldwork digitally is somehow easier than the offline fieldwork. Since we cannot predict how long the viral pandemic will last, the ethnographers must re-think their

ethnographic practice, as the traditional "being in the field" is no longer feasible during the crisis of pandemics. The digital ethnographic is becoming the better choice for many researchers at the time being. Still, it is no doubt that the combination of two will eventually be the choice in the future.

The core of anthropology is focused on the human discourse and cultural practice, which should not be limited to the environment of people's activities. Therefore, the experience of people's practice on the Internet also broadens the research field of ethnography. Ethnography as a specific qualitative approach, in any case, is methodologically flexible (Varis, 2016). Ethnographers gather information and provide "thick description (Geertz, 2008a)", they are not restricted to following particular methodologies; rather, they maintain openness in their fieldwork.

Naturally speaking, for anthropologists, the digitalisation environment provide a fresh ethnographic fieldwork where could participant observation and interpret the significance of culture. Recently years, many studies on digital ethnography (Boellstorff et al., 2012; D. Miller & Slater, 2020; Varis, 2016) and digital practices (Travagnin, 2016b; H. A. Campbell, 2012a; Hine, 2005) have been constantly emerged. These studies indicated that digital fieldworkers shall record and compare online information, and analyze how online communities affect social practices in daily life (Hine, 2000).

When talking about the anthropology of digital, we cannot avoid talking about its varied definitions and endless debates. Same for online ethnographic research, scholars labelled it as "digital ethnography" (D. Miller & Slater, 2020),"virtural ethnography" (Markham, 1998; Hine, 2000, 2005), "cyber ethnography" (Ward, 1999), "Internet ethnography" (Sade-Beck, 2004; Haverinen, 2015), "online ethnography" (Hart, 2017; Schrooten, 2012), "netethnography" (R. Kozinets, 2009). These studies showed the familiar point that they all collect and rely on online resources and online data through computer-mediated communications,

which focus on the social network sites, forums, games, websites, blogs etc., and then employ the ethnography method in the research. For example, Kozinets defined the online feildwork as netnography:

"Netnography is participant-observation research based in online fieldwork. It uses computer-mediated communications as a source of data to arrive at the ethnographic understanding and representation of a cultural or communal phenomenon" (R. Kozinets, 2009, p. 60).

Slightly different from Kozinets' definition, I would rather define my online fieldwork experiences as digital ethnography. As I mentioned earlier, this work is mainly focused on the impact of digital social media in our daily life, but not the online community and cyber space itself. Therefore, the definition of "net" is considered too broad for the scope of this work. As claimed by Miller and Slater (2020) in their pioneering work on how Trinidadians use the Internet, interactions online —both with the Internet itself and with each other —are shaped by social, cultural, and norms that exist "offline". In fact, there is not a simple dichotomy between to distinguish the physical and virtual spaces, which refer to a specific indexical relationship that constantly co-constitute both the online and offline (Boellstorff, 2012). He indicates,

"This results in a theory of the digital that is as imbricated with the human as it is with internet technology as such" (Boellstorff, 2012, p. 45).

It is important to emphasize that technology still remains as an essential objective contextual framework and a digitalized medium in our research process. Even though the data in modern life is fully digitalized and broadcast globally through digital infrastructure, ethnographers still benefit from the efficiency of the digital network. The technology should be still considered as a research tool for ethnographers rather than the object to analyze. In other words, digital ethnography is not focused on and not reduced to the techniques but is regarded as an approach to digital culture studies with specific epistemological claims.

Digital ethnography is an ethnographic approach that has its roots in "pre-digital" ethnography (Varis, 2016). In this morden context, ethnographic fieldworks is not confined by space and time. Digitalized data, such as texts, images, videos, online user behaviors, online interviews, etc. (Burrell, 2009), serve as input resources, replacing the traditional time-consuming and exhaustive offline data collection procedures. Digital ethnographers should focus on developing the rich experiences on digital social media to conclude a "thick description" based on closed interviews, observation and participation from online communities (Hjorth & Hinton, 2019). Therefore, building upon the above body of research, I argue that digital ethnography, which explores digital social media as part of everyday life, can play a significant role in helping us understand both the social practices and interactions of digital innovations, as well as the reflection of self-identity.

2.2.2 A New Specific Ethnography Approach: WeChat Ethnography

As McLuhan (1994) indicated, the personal and social consequences of any medium that result from the new scale introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology. Ethnographers shall consider the importance of technology in the mediation of interactions and social practices (D. Miller & Slater, 2020). Technology is the driver for the development of society and motivates human activities in any era. If we divide the human era by the principal productive force, we have the Stone Age, the Bronze Age, the Iron Age, the Steam Age, etc., leading up to today's Information Age or Digital Age. The name represents the emergence of the production tool in that age and recalls the microcosm of that era. In a manner akin to historical technology shifts, the advent of digital technology and the ubiquity of digital social media are transforming, or hovering to transform, the lives of individuals globally. In this digital age, we inhabit a world intricately woven with digital codes, where the internet serves as a key axis. Both individual identity and social interaction are simultaneously being

shaped and negotiated within this digital space, as well as in the physical world. Therefore, we cannot avoid rethinking "in which space are we our real selves ?"

Social practice and culture are undergoing revolutionary changes through the wave of global digitalization, particularly in contemporary China. It is worthy that access to the Internet through mobile devices far exceeded PC devices. According to China Internet Network Information Center's data in 2020 [6], China had 989 millions Internet active users and the Internet penetration had reached 70.4% on December of 2020, among which, 99.7% of them (986 millions) accessed the Internet through their mobile phones while 32.8% and 28.2% of them accessed the Internet via PC and laptop respectively. This number proves that the mobile Internet is quickly becoming the first choice in China and increasingly holds a large number of active users. In other words, I can always benefit from these global phenomena, such as my online ethnographic fieldwork focus on the social practice and spiritual practices on digital social media. Before describing my online fieldwork experiences via WeChat, I will first need to introduce WeChat, how it has appeared and has changed Chinese people's daily lives, and why I chose WeChat ethnography as my research approach.

The digital social media WeChat was launched in 2011 by the Chinese Internet company Tencent. It has exploded from the day it launched and quickly became the commonly used mobile application in Mandarin-speaking society. It is an instant chat application but also beyond a communication tool. People use WeChat to communicate with others, friends, families, or people you already know, also colleagues or people you have met only once. Behind WeChat, we see a virtual social network that connects people and shares information. It is no exaggeration that in today's China, anthropologists and ethnographers will choose or have to choose WeChat to access their fieldwork. In the digitalization era, ethnographers have to apply and adapt to the change of external conditions (Hine,

[6] https://www.cnnic.com.cn/IDR/ReportDownloads/202104/P020210420557302172744.pdf

2000). According to my personal experience, I have used the digital social media WeChat since 2011, while smartphones are rapidly adopted in China. With the adoption of mobile systems (e.g., iOS or Android), more and more touch screen smartphones have appeared in the market, and it is indeed the golden age of mobile application development, for instance, in our case, the digital social media WeChat.

However, WeChat had a tiny number of active users when it launched because the majority of the non-iOS or non-Android system-based mobile phones do not support it. Instant communication mainly relies on short text message services and QQ[7] in China. QQ had the most active users in the market and had continuously kept growing since WeChat launched. Until 2016, WeChat active users reached 963 millions and take over QQ (850 millions) for the first time. In 2018, WeChat had attracted beyond 1 billion users in China and overseas. The global flow of knowledge, technologies and cultures, such as tourism, labor migration, expatriate, etc., all these factors collectively contribute to the global reach of WeChat and substantially increase its worldwide user base (Jiang, 2019).

WeChat is not the unique digital social media application available in China's market. However, it is undoubtedly the most successful mobile application and the most popular one. WeChat is integrating more and more features and becoming as like a lifestyle platform and not just a communication tool. It integrates features similar to WhatsApp and Instagram (Peng, 2017), in which, people could send text/voice messages, make voice/video call, and even post photos/videos on personal online profiles called "Moments". Beyond that, people can now watch live streams or channels, perform online finance, travel, shopping, etc (Figure 2.1). As early as 2001, the founder and CEO of Tencent (Wu, 2017) declared,

"Tencent's strategy is to build a (golden) platform. (We) welcome a variety of vertical businesses, such as gaming, information and communication, e-commerce,

[7]QQ is also called Tencent QQ, which is an instant messaging tool and web portal developed by the Chinese tech company Tencent, as WeChat. QQ offers services that provide online social games, music, shopping, microblogging, movies, and group and voice chat software.
Resource From: http://infomory.com/what-is/what-is-qq/

ISP, and IP telephone to develop on the platform, to create an all-embracing environment for applications".

Same as what CEO of Tencent said, their ambition is also exploded from their slogan *"WeChat, a new lifestyle"* [8]. Still, the digital social media WeChat is a medium technology. WeChat ethnography aims to examine the underlying meaning of human activities through the social medium. Moreover, as an infrastructure that both contained and engendered online practices, WeChat was not perceived as a sign of physical separation from reality (Zani, 2021).

All in all, I would rather refer to the WeChat ethnography as the specific extension of digital ethnography (D. Miller, 2018; Boellstorff, 2012). In addition to the traditional way, WeChat offers an integrated environment where ethnographers can observe people who are willing to share their "highlighted" part of their lives in the digital space. In recent years, Chinese academies have paid a lot of attention to social practices and ethnographic on the digital social media WeChat (X. Zhao, 2017b, 2017a; Tang & Shao, 2017; Liu, 2017). According to Chinese scholar Zhao (2017b, 2017a), Chinese society is now undergoing a profound "cultural transformation" from gradual to enormous changes, which require a new anthropological approach and method of writing. The social practices and communication have changed driven by WeChat. WeChat makes the human relationship present a kind of reverse performance between the "front stage/online" and the "back stage/offline" (Goffman et al., 1978). People prefer to represent their "perfect lives/ front stage" in the Moments of WeChat. They create and write their cultural identities and specific languages in their own expression via WeChat Groups. WeChat ethnography should consider online discussions and people's interactions within WeChat Groups as primary data sources, as these reflect the lifestyle of the current generation in modern China.

During my master's fieldwork in Shangri_la in 2015, I met my primary

[8] Resource From: https://weixin.qq.com/

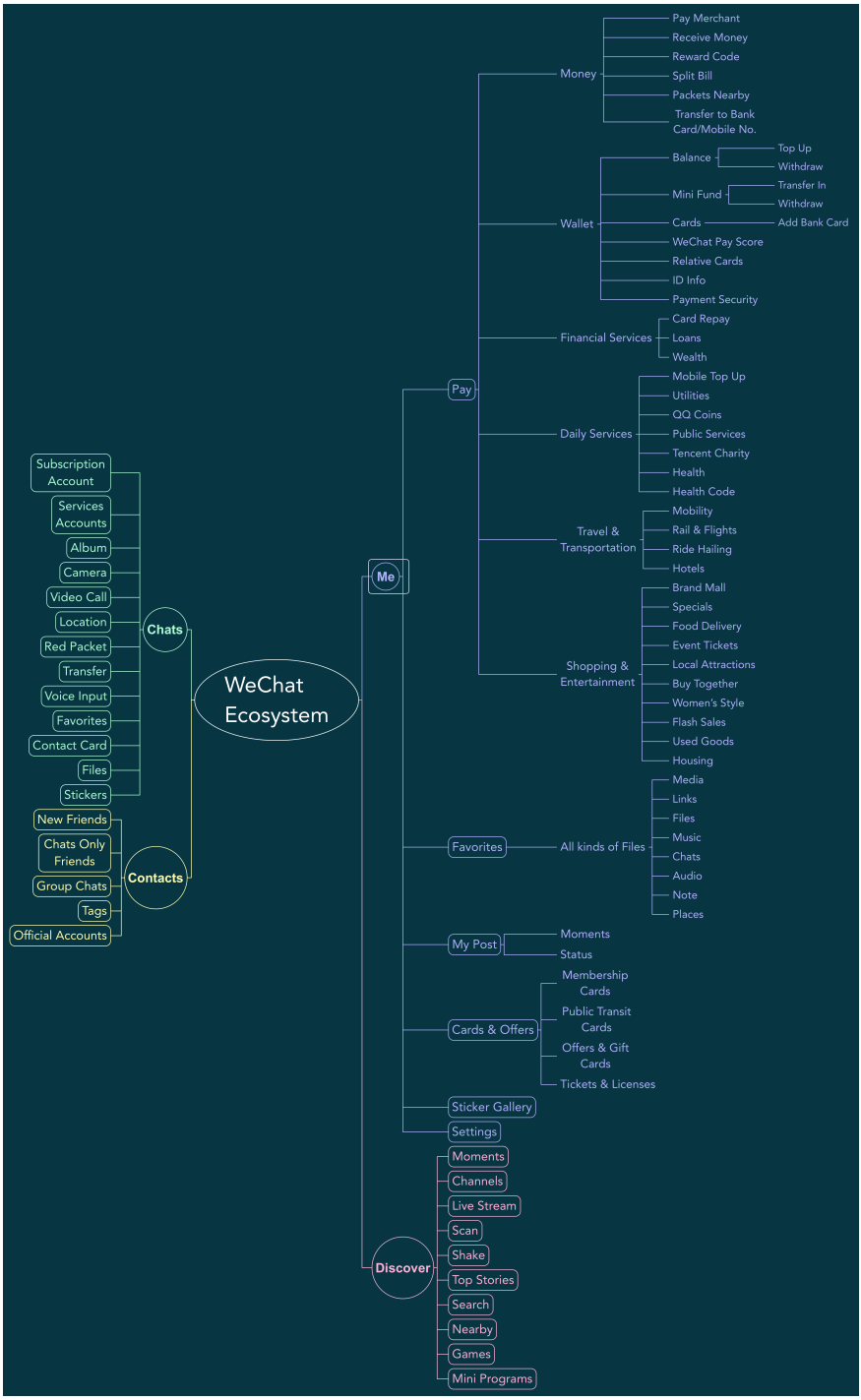


Fig. 2.1 WeChat Ecosystem

informant, monk JC, and he is the first Tibetan Buddhist monk that I added through WeChat. He has used WeChat since 2013, and he is pretty fancy to the newest technologies and always be the first one to touch the latest digital products among his monk brothers. He told me:

"When I was a child, I already knew that I need to make money for my family. I am a monk, I don't need to worry about my life, but only do spiritual practice in the monastery, that's it. But I cannot stand my parents and my older sisters having a tough life. Even though I stay in the monastery, but where is nearby the center city and many visitors will come. So I have a lot of chance to meet outsiders. Sometimes, I sell worm grass and matsutake with my uncle, he is also a monk. We need to go outside to sell local products quite often, and we have to keep in touch with people from outside, that's why I have smartphone and WeChat earlier than others disciples. Moreover, I work at the monastery owned gift shop. In this shop, I knew a lot of outsides who are interested in Tibetan Buddhism. So, we become friends and exchanged our WeChat account. Sometimes, these outside friends will give me some digital products as a gift."

His experience expresses himself as a monk's life and self-identity, as well as how digital media interrupt or affect a monk's spiritual lives. I will discuss the detail in the subsequent chapters. Introduced by monk JC, I have met other Tibetan Buddhist monks and exchanged WeChat with them. Different from other social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or Weibo, etc., WeChat is considered not as open as the other platforms. Former ones are more open and emphasize sharing information, making public statements, having open discussions, anonymous comments, or meeting new friends, etc. Obviously, through these open platforms, people have fewer chances to make real friendships and have solid relationships even they are closely interacting online.

However, WeChat seems like a platform between open and close, which means it is both of them in some ways. On the one hand, users add WeChat friends

from among people they already know, such as family members, colleagues, and classmates. On the other hand, users can randomly add new WeChat friends through features like "Shake" or "Nearby." They can either "shake" their phones, and WeChat will randomly connect them with a stranger, or they can search for someone who is "nearby" to their physical location. Usually, most WeChat users maintain their acquaintance network, and then extend their social relationship network or friend circle by adding WeChat friends as explained above.

As Fei (1992) points out, in the pattern of Chinese organization, Chinese social relationship spread out from individual to individual, and gradually form an accumulation of personal connections, then develop a social network. Social practices in WeChat are influenced by offline interpersonal relationships. To a certain extent, Chinese people who used WeChat present an extension of a "differential mode of association (chaxugeju)" (Fei, 1992) from offline to online. The representation of the "differential mode of association" in WeChat is manifested that WeChat users can only see the personal details and 'Moments' of users with whom have established a friend relationship. With the same idea, people can see the comments left by other WeChat friends, only if they are both WeChat "friends". When a WeChat user sees another friend's comment in his friend's post on the "Moments", then it means that all three people have added each other as friends. However, it does not mean that the relationship between the three is mutual, because their relationship is built by relying on individuals.

Therefore, WeChat, as a digital social media application, can be described as both private and public. However, it leans more towards facilitating relational practices in the context of human interaction. The close interaction with real-life makes our observations and practices in WeChat extend and complement the traditional offline fieldwork approach. Suppose I want to conduct ethnographic practices in that relational case on WeChat. So I first need to establish a solid and trusting offline relationship with the informants, and then dig out more information

through the trust relationship. In addition to the monks' introduction, I also met many monks and local Tibetan villagers during the offline fieldwork and exchanged WeChat with them. So far, I have added 47 monks, 18 Tibetan villagers, and 4 WeChat groups (for spiritual practices). To be precise, I have interviewed more than 50 monks during my physically embodied fieldwork, but some of them did not exchange WeChat after the interview. Among the 47 monks "WeChat friends", I have conducted WeChat interviews with 11 of them and obtained valid information. In contrast, I had maintained daily greetings to the rest of them and asked them if they were available for face-to-face in-depth interviews when I was in the field.

Based on my ethnographic experience, I am often accepted as a "WeChat friend" after conducting the initial offline interviews with informants. In the whole process of the WeChat ethnography practice, only three monks "WeChat friends" met online. Two of them were introduced by friends while the third was met through TikTok and subsequently added as "WeChat friend". Although I have never met with two of three monks offline physically, we keep in touch on WeChat. Fortunately, they are all very willing to accept my continuous interview after clarifying my identity and purpose. Obviously again, WeChat as a digital social media tool is built upon the relationship, and people practice on the social media tool extending their social interaction and maintaining their social relationships (Howard, Rainie, & Jones, 2001).

Kozinets (2009) had concluded the following six steps in digital fieldwork by following the traditional physical ethnographic method: research plan, community selection and enter the field, community participation-observation and data collection, interpretation, ensuring ethical standards, and research representation. By considering both the functional characteristics of WeChat and the digital ethnographic method, I have concluded, in this dissertation, my WeChat fieldwork in the following three dimensions:

1) Direct observation through WeChat in the personal profiles and the posts on "Moments";

2) Participant observation in WeChat Groups and WeChat interview;

3) WeChat questionnaire survey.

Firstly, since the creation of social media, users have started managing their self-impression on their personal profiles online (Marwick & Boyd, 2014). Just like users on other social media platforms, those on WeChat also have the freedom to customize their personal information, including profile pictures, usernames, gender, region, and status messages (often used for sharing favorite quotes or current feelings). For WeChat ethnographers, this offers a valuable opportunity to gain insights into another facet of their research subjects. Certainly, ethnographic practice in digital social media involves the same issues of research ethics and informed consent of research subjects. I ensure to clearly reveal my role as a researcher and explicitly state the goals of my research to gain their informed consent. At the same time, I take measures to conceal the identities of my research subjects to safeguard their privacy. In the rapidly evolving landscape of digital technology, social media platforms have introduced new dimensions to the concept of self-presentation (e Silva & Frith, 2012). Self-presentation has transcended the boundaries of time and space. I can readily view users' digital personas, as they are now openly displayed and public. This feature provides me with a unique opportunity to directly observe the "open" profiles of Tibetan Buddhist monks and villagers. From this publicly displayed information, I can learn users' names and regions and view their posts in "Moments". It's worth noting that WeChat users can also manage who has access to their "Moments", if they're concerned about personal privacy. Overall, digital self-presentation on social media serves as a form of self-identity, while the social practices and relationships that present on these platforms offer another dimension for study, parallel to the existing world. In the

following chapters, I will use the cases of Tibetan Buddhist monks and villagers to further discuss and analyze these observations.

Secondly, as ethnographer needs to find a guider to enter the fieldwork (Atkinson, Coffey, Delamont, Lofland, & Lofland, 2000), digital fieldwork also require permission and guidance (Zani, 2021). During my second fieldwork in December 2019, I stumbled upon a WeChat group focused on spiritual practice, which included Tibetan Buddhist monks and villagers. I discovered this while chatting with monk JC. Subsequently, I asked him to help me join the group or other groups for spiritual practice. JC invited me to two of those WeChat groups in which he is a member. One is named 'Chanting Scriptures of Dongwang Khamsten' (Dongwang Kangcan nianjingqun 东旺康参念经群) with 487 group members, which created by Dongwang Khamsten of the monastery. The purpose of the chat groups is to provide a "prayer chanting scriptures" or "daily religious rituals" services to Tibetan villagers from Dongwang village. The other one is named 'Yunnan' (云南) with 82 group members, which was created by local Tibetans. Mostly, participants in this small chat group share content related to Tibetan Buddhism, such as photos or videos from Buddhist ceremonies, or even Buddhist-themed emojis.

Each WeChat group operates according to its own set of rules and norms. In groups that consist largely of strangers, or are primarily focused on spiritual practice, members generally refrain from engaging in small talk. Even though the group leader —usually a Tibetan Buddhist monk from Dongwang Khamsten —doesn't explicitly state the rules, members understand tacitly the "hidden" guidelines that govern the group's interactions. Take "Chanting Scriptures of Dongwang Khamsten" as an example, members are typically active from around 5:00 am to 12:00 am, without a set schedule. Based on my observations, the group does seem to follow some standard practices or routines during these active hours.

In the first procedure, the requester initiates a monetary transaction by sending

an "electronic red envelope", a prominent feature on WeChat. The amount is usually small, ranging from 5 to 20 yuan (CNY). However, some group members prefer to send amounts that they consider lucky, such as 6, 6.6, 8, 8.88, 16.66, 66.66, and 88.88 yuan. In the second procedure, the requester sends one or two voice messages in Tibetan to the group. These messages typically include the requester's name, the name of the scripture they wish to have chanted, and a brief note of gratitude to the monks.

Occasionally, the requester will also request some specific Buddhist services, such as offering butter lamps, offering Khata [9] to Buddha, hanging the Tibetan prayer flags [10], or conducting WeiSang [11] in the morning. During special Buddhist festivals or major religious ceremonies, monks often share photos or short videos documenting the events. In response, most group members typically reply with "prayer gestures" emojis, creating a cascading effect where others follow suit. This interaction mimics an online version of a live ceremony, allowing for real-time religious engagement. In the last procedure, the monk from Dongwang Khamsten acknowledges the group's messages with brief replies, usually in Tibetan, such as "Yes! Yes! Yes! Got it." Based on my observations, the group leader —or other monks from Dongwang Khamsten —tends to be sparing with text, although they occasionally share short videos of activities like hanging prayer flags or conducting

[9] Khata is a traditional ceremonial scarf in Tibetan Buddhism, originating in Tibetan culture. Khata symbolizes purity and compassion, usually white and made of silk, cotton, or polyester. Among the numerous occasions where Katha is worn and present, such as births, weddings, the arrival or departure of guests, or offered with incense.

[10] The Tibetan prayer flag is a colorful rectangular cloth, often hanging the peaks high, that used to bless the surrounding countryside or for others' wishes. The Tibetan prayer flag is composed of five colors representing five elements. Blue symbolizes the sky, white symbolizes the air and wind, red symbolizes fire, green symbolizes water, and yellow symbolizes earth. Tibetan believed that Buddhist scriptures and symbols printed on prayer flags have a vibration that is activated and carried by the wind, then people are blessed by Gods.

[11] WeiSang is a Tibetan phonetic translation. "Wei" means simmer or smoke, "Sang" means cleanse and eliminate dirty things. WeiSang is a Tibetan household's custom, Tibetans burn pine tree branches or cypress to create cloudy smog for good fortunes, good harvest, and peace in this way. It is said that the scent in the smoke produced while burning the pine trees and cypresses, can not only drive away unlucky and the unclean things of ordinary people, but also flavor the palace of mountain god who will be pleased after smelling the aroma.

Weisang ceremonies. However, they seldom provide feedback on the chanting of scriptures.

Certainly, the observed behaviors outline a structured routine for participation and spiritual practice within the WeChat group, although they lack the nuanced, "thick description" (Geertz, 2008b) typically desired in ethnographic research. Beyond these observed routines, there seemed to be limited interaction within the group, which leaves several questions unanswered through online observation alone. Some of these questions include:

- Why are group members (villagers) willing to engage in spiritual practice on the WeChat group?
- Why does almost every group member choose the same scripture?
- Why did the group leader (monk) not send any feedback to the chanting scriptures, and group members didn't expect that feedback?

To address the aforementioned questions, I would need to engage in either online or offline interviews with the group members or the group leader. As previously discussed, WeChat is more private compared to other social media platforms and tends to rely on pre-existing offline relationships. One can be invited to a group if they are already friends with a current group member. However, if I try to directly add an unfamiliar person from within a WeChat group could make the other individual feel uncomfortable or caught off guard. Thus, for digital ethnographers, WeChat serves as a crucial supplementary research tool rather than the entire field of study. On the one hand, it enables ongoing fieldwork that transcends the limitations of geography and time. On the other hand, it also allows for the efficient gathering of missing information through brief calls or interviews, a feature particularly useful during periods of restricted movement like a pandemic.

Thirdly, to gain a deeper understanding of how WeChat as a digital social media platform influences the lives of monks and their spiritual practices, I

developed a semi-standardized questionnaire. This questionnaire is designed to be broadly distributed among the monks in the monastery. It contains questions organized into three different dimensions, making up a total of 26 questions :

Title: The changes daily life of monks

Three dimensions of questions:

- Age, the age of becoming a monk, the reason of becoming a monk, the way to communicate with their families
- Time of start using mobile phone, the changes in spiritual life after the emergence of mobile phones, how often they interact with their families before and after using mobile phone
- Time of start using WeChat, have done spiritual practice on WeChat or not, personal opinions on spiritual practice on WeChat

From what I received, 25 monks completed and returned the questionnaires. Although only few participants completed and submit the questionnaires, it still illustrates certain issues. For instance, in the first dimension, 32% of them are between 20 and 25 years old, 60% of them became a monk at the age of 10 to 15 years old, 88% of them voluntarily became a monk, and 40% of them will back to parent home at the end of years for Spring Festival, which is also a common occasion for reconnecting with their families.

In the second dimension, 44% of them have used the mobile phone since 2010, 52% of them think the emergence of the mobile phone affects their spiritual lives, and they cannot resist thinking about mobile phone even during their studies in the monastery, and 60% of them will call their families and telling the news, but it's not too often.

In the third dimension, 68% of them started using WeChat from 2015 to 2019, 52% of them think WeChat "Moment" is a new way to spread Buddhism and Buddhist culture broadly, and 32% of them can accept doing spiritual practice on

WeChat, as they consider that's eventually the result of social development, and it won't be matter as long as they're mentally unchanged.

Most of the questionnaires were filled out in JC's store. Given the established familiarity with the monks, they were quite willing to assist me in completing the survey. The WeChat questionnaire survey only use a small sample. Nevertheless, it offers insights into the monks' perceptions and attitudes toward mobile phones and digital social media to some degree. I will continue this topic while I am explaining the questions in the following sections. However, in this dissertation, the WeChat questionnaire survey is designed only to complement the narrative interviews. One reason behind that is because many monks couldn't read Mandarin characters and only know verbal expressions. To accomplish the questionnaire survey, it will need another interpreter and to explain these questions. Therefore, I extended our conversations while I explain these questions. As the narrative interview is the autobiographic method of data collection (Sarantakos, 2012), which refers to the everyday life situations and experiences of interviewers. These conversations and interviews were specifically aimed to obtain more comprehensive and accurate data.

Overall, my online fieldwork experience on WeChat serves as a specialized method for observing people's social practices and activities through digital social media. However, I believe WeChat should be viewed as a supplementary tool that augments traditional, physically-embodied ethnography, rather than replacing it. As Hine (2000) argued in her work, digital studies shall employ multi-site ethnography to garner a more comprehensive understanding of the field.

3

Human Geography and Daily Life Space

3.1 General Introduction

This chapter will first address the unique geographical characteristics and provide an overview of the political and historical landscape of my research location. The focus of my ethnographic study will be primarily on the Ganden Sumtseling Monastery and its surrounding communities. Ganden Sumtseling monastery is located in Shangri_la (in Chinese phonetic alphabet: Xianggelila 香格里拉; Used name: Zhongdian 中甸) city, Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture of Diqing (in Chinese phonetic alphabet: Diqing Zangzu Zizhi Zhou 迪庆藏族自治州), in the northwest of the province of Yunnan (云南省), in China.

Diqing is situated across the borders of Sichuan Province and Tibet Autonomous Region (Figure 3.1). Geographically speaking, Shangri_la City,



Fig. 3.1 Map of China: Diqing, Yunnan Province

the capital of Diqing, is located in the river valley of the Three Parallel Rivers (Jinsha River, Lancang River, Nu River) of Yunnan Protected Areas (Figure 3.2). The city is nestled among snow-capped mountains, resulting in a varied climate dictated by changes in altitude. Elevations in the area range from 1,503 meters in the Jinsha River valley to 5,396 meters in the Haba snow mountains, leading to significant temperature fluctuations and a distinct vertical climate characterized by wet and dry seasons. The wet season runs from June to October and features moderate temperatures, while the dry season, which spans from November to May, is colder. Given that Shangri-la sits at an average elevation of 3,300 meters, the area experiences a long winter, lacks a traditional summer, and has brief spring and autumn seasons. According to the "Zhongdian County Gazetteer (1997)" , winter in Shangri-la spans 243 days, while the combined length of the spring and autumn seasons is 122 days. Snow typically starts falling in October and continues until April or May.

The Diqing area is abundant in natural resources, featuring diverse vegetation, expansive meadows, and a rich array of wildlife. Several provincial nature reserves, such as Haba Snow Mountain, Napa Hai (Napa Lake), and Shudu Hu (Shudu Lake), are located in Diqing. Villages are interspersed between the meadows and river valleys, amidst fertile farmlands and herds of yaks, painting a picture of an area primarily focused on agriculture and animal husbandry. The region's vertical climate and rich meadows create an eco-friendly environment for livestock rearing. Major crops grown in the area include corn, highland barley, coarse cereals, wheat, potatoes, and rapeseed.

Shangri_la City governs four towns and seven townships. The towns are Jiantang Town (which serves as the capital of Shangri_la and is known in Chinese as 建塘镇), Xiao Zhongdian Town (小中甸镇), Hutiaoxia Town (虎跳峡镇), and Jinjiang Town (金江镇). The seven townships are Shangjiang Township (上江乡), Sanba Naxi Township (三坝纳西乡), Luoji Township (洛吉乡), Nixi Township

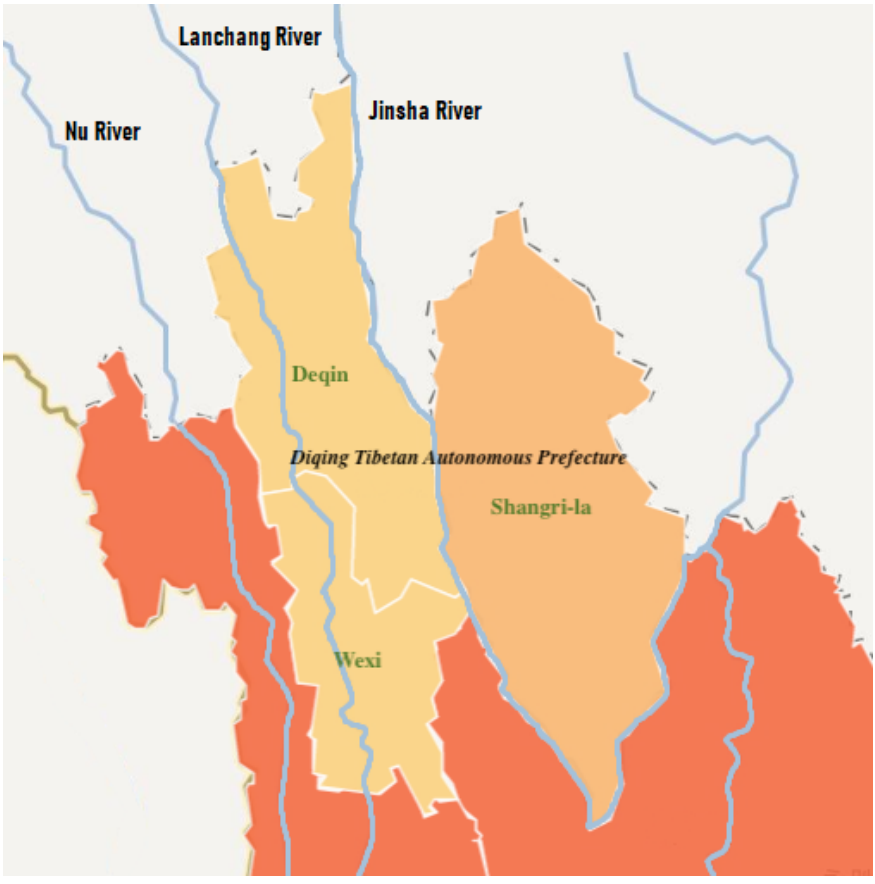


Fig. 3.2 Map of Diqing

(尼西乡), Gezan Township (格咱乡), Dongwang Township (东旺乡), and Wujing Township (五境乡). The Tibetan Buddhist monks from the Ganden Sumtseling Monastery predominantly originate from these towns and townships.

3.1.1 Shangri_la Human Geography

Originally known as Zhongdian County, Shangri_la City has undergone various name changes that reflect its rich history and evolving governance. In Tibetan, the area is called *rayalthang*, and its Chinese transliterations have included *Jie dang*, *Jie tang*, *Jia tang*, and *Jian tang*, all of which signify "the saint place". The pronunciation of the toponym has shifted subtly over time, in tandem with changes in the ruling political regimes.

From the Tang Dynasty (AD 621) to the Yuan Dynasty (AD 1293), the region was governed by a series of regimes including the Tang, Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms Period, Song, Tibetan, and Yuan Dynasties. During this period, names like *Jie dan*, *Qie dang*, *Dan dang* were used, aligning with the Tibetan meaning of the area.

In 1553, during the 32nd year of Emperor Jiajing's regin in the Ming Dynasty, Naxi chieftains took control of the area and named it Zhongdian. In the Naxi transliteration *ndzi dy*, Zhongdian means "the place where the chief lives". This name remained in use until 1997.

On December 17, 2001, the Chinese government officially renamed Zhongdian County to Shangri_la County. Further, on December 16, 2014, the Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs upgraded it to Shangri_la City. These name changes have significantly bolstered the area's socio-economic development, particularly in the tourism sector.

Shangri_la was an imaginary name created by British writer James Hilton's novel *Lost Horizon*, published in 1933. In the book, Hilton describes Shangri-La as an idyllic, otherworldly village nestled in a remote part of the Himalayas in China.

Enclosed by a lama monastery, its residents live blissful and carefree lives, akin to residing in paradise. While the name originally referred to a fictional location, it captured the public's imagination, inspiring many to seek out this mythical haven.

In the early 1990s, the authorities of the Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture of Diqing seized upon the allure of *Lost Horizon* as a catalyst for economic growth. By 2006, the Ganden Sumtseling Monastery had become a focal point in the area's transformation into the tourist destination known as Shangri_la. This economic strategy did more than boost tourism; it had a transformative impact on local lives. Residents started renting out their homes, opening restaurants and hotels, setting up specialty stores, becoming tour guides, and hosting tourists, effectively shifting their roles from traditional farmers to entrepreneurs or city workers. Moreover, the exoticism of Shangri_la began to attract an influx of outsiders, including young people from larger cities who sought to escape urban life and find their own "paradise". For the Tibetan monks residing in Ganden Sumtseling Monastery, the renaming of the city was considered a watershed moment, gradually altering their day-to-day monastic experiences.

3.1.2 Population, Ethnic, and Language

Located at the crossroads of Sichuan Province and the Xizang Autonomous Region, Diqing has been a melting pot of diverse cultures and ethnicities through various dynasties. It has welcomed a significant influx of immigrants, resulting in a multi-ethnic region. Shangri_la, in particular, is region to an array of ethnic minorities, including Tibetans, Naxi, Han, Bai, Yi, Lisu, Hui, Miao, and Pumi. These communities have a long-standing presence in the area, with roots tracing back to at least the Qing Dynasty in 1884. According to the Seventh National Population Census in 2020 (Figure 3.3, Figure 3.4)[1], Tibetans constitute the majority of the population in the region, and their culture holds a

[1] Data Sources from: http://www.xgll.com.cn/xwzx/2021_06/04/content_376300.htm

predominant influence. In daily interactions, Tibetans primarily speak Tibetan but use Yunnan dialects when conversing with other minority groups and switch to Mandarin Chinese when engaging with outsiders. Despite the diversity in ethnic backgrounds, languages, cultural customs, and religious beliefs, the communities here enjoy harmonious relationships and coexist peacefully. This multicultural integration is what makes the area unique.

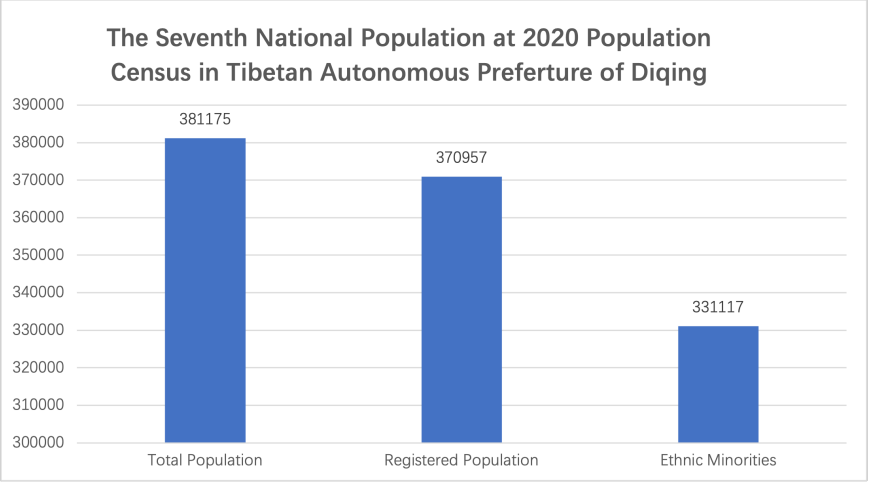


Fig. 3.3 The Seventh National Population at 2020 in Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture of Diqing

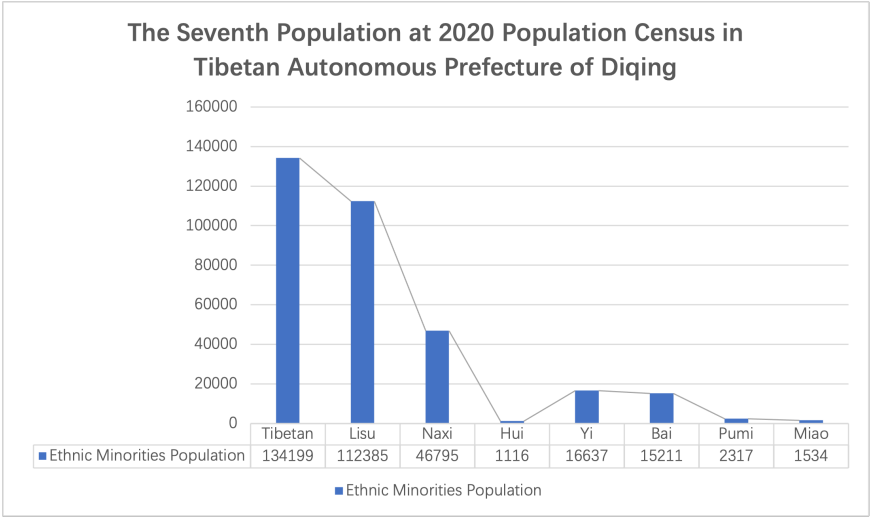


Fig. 3.4 Tibetan Population at 2020

3.1.3 Religious Affiliation and Religious Practice Space

According to the *Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture Gazetteer of Religion* (1994), there are five primary religious beliefs in Diqing: Tibetan Buddhism, Christianity, Catholicism, Islam, and the Dongba (ethnic-religious of Naxi). The religious diversity in the area is visually represented in a map of religious places (Figure 3.5), which also highlights the ethnic distribution. For example, Tibetans in Jiantang Town predominantly practice Tibetan Buddhism, while the Han population in the same town mostly follow the same faith. The Naxi people are concentrated in Sanba Naxi Township, Jinjiang Township, and Shangjiang Township, and primarily adhere to the Dongba religion, with some following Tibetan Buddhism. The Lisu people, mostly residing in Luoji Township, are followers of Christianity, Catholicism, and Tibetan Buddhism. The Yi ethnic group, living across multiple areas like Hutiaoxia Town, Sanba Naxi Township, Luoji Township, and Jinjiang Township, practice their indigenous Bimo Religion.

Lastly, the Hui people, primarily residing in Jiantang Town and Sanba Naxi Township, follow Islam. These towns and townships make up the geography of my study area and are closely connected to the Ganden Sumtseling Monastery. The map of religious activities (Figure 3.5) further illustrates that Tibetan Buddhism is among the most influential religions in Shangri_la, and its places of worship are scattered throughout various towns in Diqing (Figure 3.6).

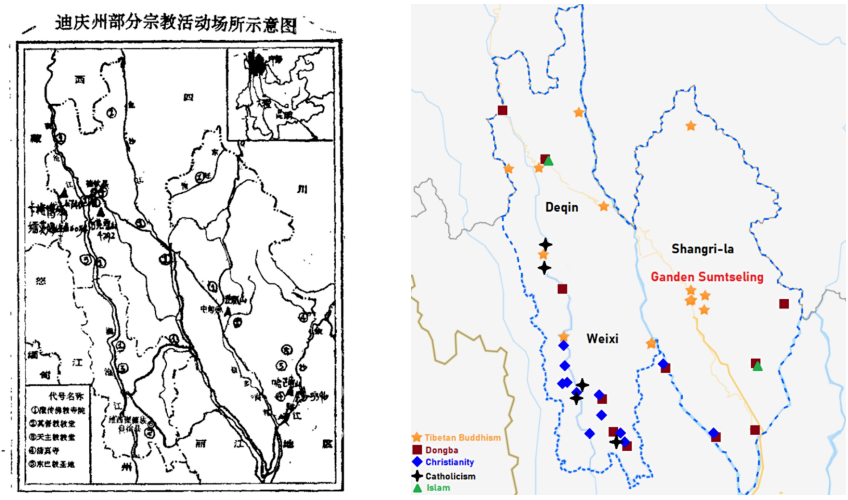


Fig. 3.5 Map of place of religious activity in Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture.
Source from "Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture Gazetteer of Religion", By Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture Nationalities Religious Affairs Committee, 1994.

3.2 The largest Tibetan Buddhist Monastery in Yunnan Province: Ganden Sumtseling Monastery

3.2.1 The Location of the Monastery

The Ganden Sumtseling Monastery is scenically situated against the backdrop of Foping Mountain (in Chinese: 佛屏山) and faces Lamuyangcuo Lake (in

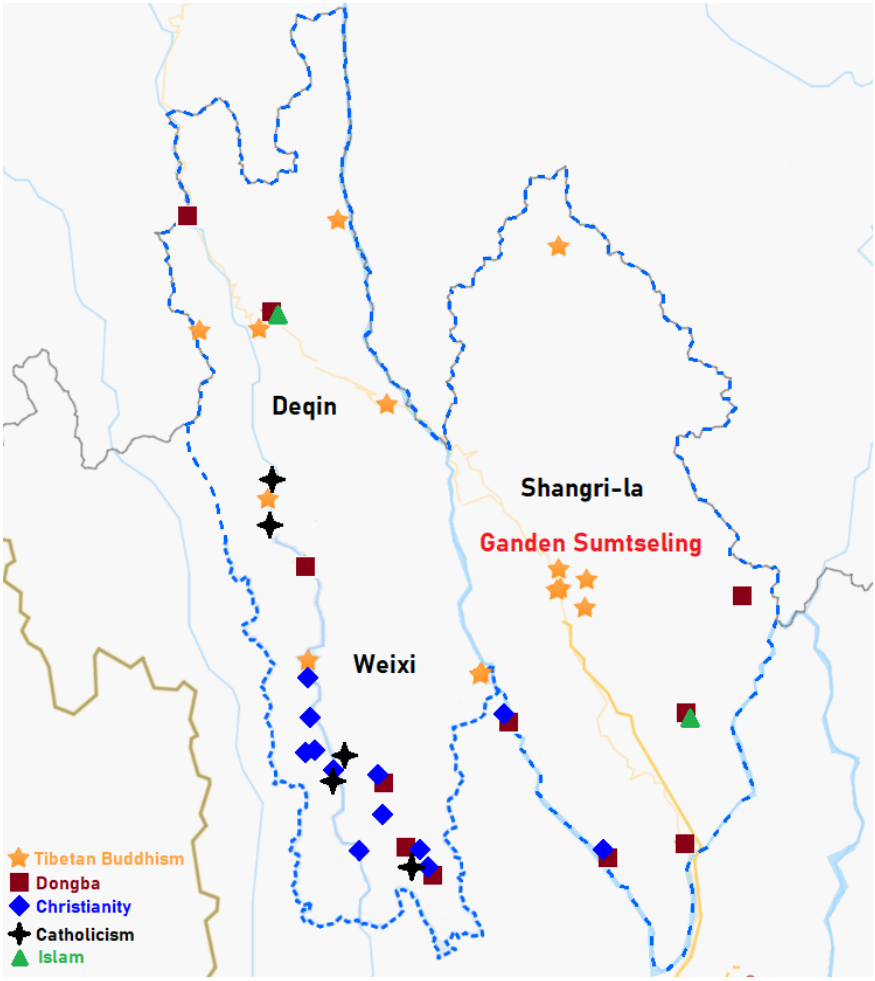


Fig. 3.6 Map of Shangri-la: The distribution of Town

Chinese: 拉姆央措湖). It's located 5 km from the center of Shangri_la city, and you can reach it within one hour's walk from downtown. As a popular tourist destination, the monastery is open every day from 7:30 am to 5:30 pm. For ease of access, visitors can take the No.3 bus from the city center to the monastery's visitor center for 2 yuan (CNY) or opt for a taxi ride that costs around 10-15 yuan. Admission to the monastery is priced at 115 yuan (around 15 euros), a fee that includes tourist bus service as well as a guided tour. It is worth mentioning that the guide teams are composed of Tibetan villagers who living in the communities around the monastery. In terms of serving as a local place of worship, the monastery offers free entry to Shangri_la residents. Additionally, vehicles with local license plates are allowed to drive directly into the monastery's community.

3.2.2 The History of the Monastery

The Ganden Sumtseling Monastery has a history dating back to 1681, during the reign of Emperor Kangxi of the Qing Dynasty. The whole monastery covers 500 hectares. It is designed in the architectural style of Lhasa's Potala Palace, earning it the nickname "Little Potala". The monastery's original name, "Ganden Sumtseling", was given by the 5th Dalai Lama, Tsangyang Gyatso. This name is a transliteration from Tibetan. In 1724, it was also given a Chinese name by Emperor Yongzheng of the Qing Dynasty: "GuiHua Temple" (归化寺). It's commonly referred to as Gadan Songzanlin in Chinese. The word "Ganden" (Wylie [2] transliteration: dga'ldan) refers to a state of being lovable, joyous and satisfied, and it is considered the heavenly residence of the future Buddha Maitreya. "Sumtseling" is composed of the Wylie transliteration "sum", "rtsen", and "gling", where "sum" means three, "rtsen" refers to playing, enjoying, taking delight in games, and "gling" signifies a monastery. According to the local scholar (He, 2015) explains the connotation of "Ganden Sumtseling": *"any spiritual practice*

[2] Wylie transliteration is a method for transliterating Tibetan script.

—be it classical or secret mantras, or the pursuit of immortality or Buddhahood — will unfold gradually, step by step. The monastery was thus built with the purpose of spreading Buddhist doctrine, with the aim that the spiritual advancement of all beings could reach satisfactory completion" (He, 2015, p. 9).

The monastery features three significant halls, as shown in (Figure 3.7): Dratsang Hall, Master Tsongkhapa Hall, and Sakyamuni Hall. Positioned at the apex of the structure, Dratsang Hall faces south and is flanked symmetrically by Master Tsongkhapa Hall and Sakyamuni Hall. The monastic residences, numbering in excess of 200, are arrayed in a harmonious descending order, contributing to a balanced spatial organization. The whole complex is contained within a layout resembling an inverted trapezium. Architecturally, the edifices exhibit Tibetan stylistic elements, with monks' abodes commonly featuring earthen and wooden constructions and white exterior facades.

3.2.3 The Institutional Framework of the Monastery

Today, there are two principal administrative institutions of the internal monastery (Figure 3.8) : commonly referred as "Drastang" (Wylie transliteration: Gra tshang; in Chinese: Zha Cang 扎仓) and "Khamtsen" (Wylie transliteration: Khams tshan; in Chinese: Kang Can 康参) in the Tibetan language. "Drastang" serves as the monastic college and constitutes the central hub for foundational religious activities within the monastery. Capable of accommodating over 1500 individuals, the Drastang Hall is a focal point of the institution. Conversely, "Khamtsen" designates the residential communities or houses for monks and operates as a subsidiary unit within the overarching framework of "Drastang". As of 2019, the monastery housed a total of 668 monks across various Khamtsen units (Figure 3.9). Each Khamtsen functions as a miniature monastic college, complete with its own administrative structure and rigorous educational system. Novice monks in these Khamtsen communities are required to undertake studies



Fig. 3.7 Panorama of Ganden Sumtseling Monastery.
Photo by Autor from Ganden Sumtseling.

in the Tibetan language, Buddhist scriptures, and liturgical practices. Importantly, monks often reside in specific Khamtsen units based on their geographic origins and upbringing.

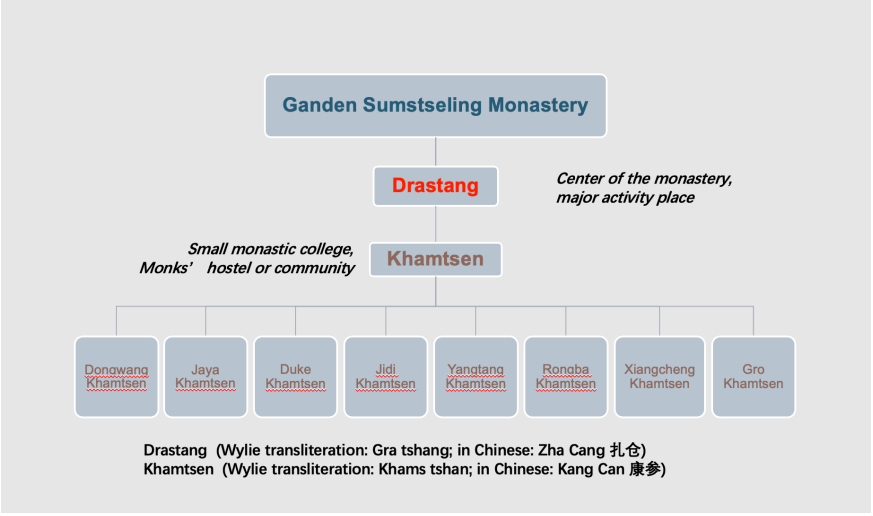


Fig. 3.8 Monastic Institution

The majority of monks maintain significant familial connections that are both economic and spiritual in nature. Given this, it is crucial to scrutinize the mutually beneficial relationship between the monastery and the community by considering various factors such as geopolitics, historical evolution, and economic interplay. This sets the stage for the principal inquiries of this thesis: What factors underlie the robust connections between the monastic and the devotee ? How are the dynamics between the two entities established and maintained ? In addressing these questions, this study seeks to delve into the interdependencies between the monastery and the local population, informed by a comprehensive analysis that includes the monastery's structural characteristics, its geographic context, and its historical evolution, with a particular focus on the role of Tibetan Buddhism.

The layout of the Khamtsens within the monastery is arranged on the order

in which monks from different villages joined the monastic institution. For instance, Dongwang Khamtsen represents the first village to provide monks to the monastery, followed by communities from Jaya, Duke, Jidi, Xiangcheng, Gro, Yangtang, and Rongba. These eight Khamtsens serve as microcosms for their corresponding towns or regions. To illustrate, monks originating from Dongwang, Gezan, Wengshui, and Niru Townships reside in Dongwang Khamtsen. Generally, each Khamtsen is responsible for conducting Buddhist ceremonies for their respective villages.

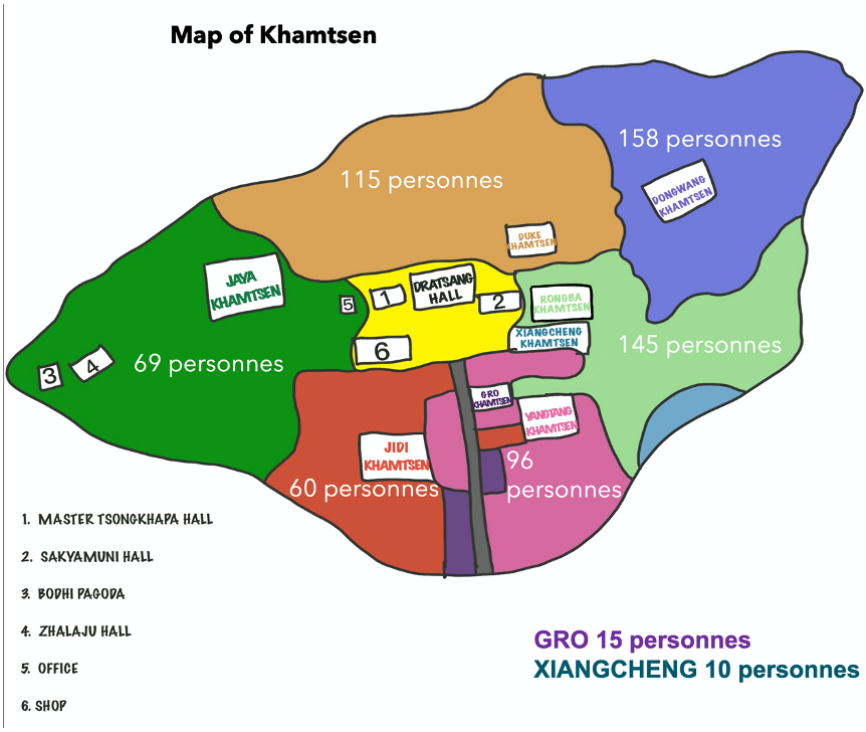


Fig. 3.9 Map of Khamtsen

Each Khamtsen features its own separate hall, functioning much like the central Dratsang Hall by providing Buddhist materials and statues of the Buddha.

Moreover, Khamtsens serve a vital educational role within the monastery. In their respective halls, monks engage in the study of Tibetan culture, sacred texts, and participate in religious rituals. The monks themselves construct the residences that encircle the Khamtsen, often purchasing the land from either the Khamtsen organization or monks who have exited monastic life. This is typically facilitated with support from their families or home villages. Further elaborations on monastic living spaces and daily routines will be presented in subsequent chapters (see Chapter 4.2.2).

3.2.4 The Function of the Monastery

The Tibetan monastery serves not only as a focal point for religious practices but also as a pivotal instrument of spiritual influence for the ruling elite throughout political history. By the close of the 10th century, Buddhism had achieved widespread adoption in Tibet, leading to an increasingly influential role for the Buddhist clergy in the political sphere. As a result, Buddhism came to occupy a position of significant prominence (Kolås, 2004). Moreover, the Gelugpa [3] sect of Tibetan Buddhism managed to establish a symbiotic political and religious alliance with the central government, following a sequence of sectarian disputes with other Tibetan Buddhist traditions. By the late 16th century, multiple Gelugpa monasteries had been erected in the Diqing region, supported by the central government. The policies set by the central government and those of the Tibetan area are intimately connected with the governance of these monasteries, allowing them to gain a highly esteemed status and multiple privileges. Prior to the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the monastery maintained an affiliation with the chieftains of the Naxi tribe. These leaders leveraged their spiritual authority to govern the diverse ethnic communities in the surrounding

[3] In the 14th century, Lama Tsongkhapa reformed Tibetan Buddhism and founded the School of Yellow Hat or Gelugpa. Led by the Dalai Lama (Lhasa region) and the Panchen Lama (Xigazé region), Gelupa is the most influential stream of Tibetan Buddhism today (Martens & Testot, 2011)

areas (Yang, 1994).

Despite the region's rich natural resources, the harsh highland climate limits their availability, making it difficult for residents to survive natural disasters and providing scant means of subsistence historically. As a result, reliance on supernatural intervention through prayer became an important coping mechanism for the community. This has been a significant factor in the widespread acceptance and propagation of Tibetan Buddhism in the area (Wang, 1995).

Prior to the 1950s, a pronounced hierarchical structure was evident between monks and peasants, reflecting a theocratic feudal society where feudal officials, aristocrats, and clergy constituted the ruling elite. According to historical accounts, the majority of monks originated from noble lineages, and their clerical status was often hereditary (M. Goldstein, 1991). These nobles exercised ownership over the serfs, requiring them to perform unpaid labor and subjecting them to burdensome taxes. The serfs were obligated to cultivate the land, the benefits of which accrued to local governments, monasteries, and their feudal lords. Through a variety of mechanisms —including land leases to local populations, imposition of taxes, usurious lending practices, and engagement in commercial trade —the monastery presented considerable socio-economic influence over the community.

Beginning in the 1950s, the dissolution of the political-religious system significantly weakened the monastery's once powerful economic standing. Chinese government interventions emancipated serfs and enslaved individuals and implemented specific policies aimed at curtailing the monasteries' influence over both politics and economics.The obligation for laypeople to support monks and monasteries—both materially and financially—was abolished. Support for religious institutions transitioned from being obligatory to voluntary. As part of the new "Self-Sustaining Monastery (Yi si Yang si; in Chinese: 以寺养寺)" policy (Y. Qi & Xiluo, 1990), monks are encouraged to be self-reliant for their subsistence needs, including food. Consequently, the relationship between the community and

the monastery has evolved into a more balanced partnership (Yang, 1999).

During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), Ganden Sumtseling Monastery was branded as superstitious and subjected to destruction by the Red Guards in 1966 (Lezan, 2003). Monks were forcibly laicized and sent back to their family homes and farms, as all cultural and religious activities were suspended by the state. However, in a shift of policy, the government initiated the renovation of the monastery between 1982 and 1984, as noted in the *Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture Gazetteer of Religion* (1994). This policy shift encouraged the resumption of religious activities, as many monks who had previously left returned to reestablish monastic communities and rituals.

Since the 1990s, the local economy has been significantly buoyed by state-sponsored tourism (Z. Qi, 2007). This tourism-centric approach has created a commercial ecosystem around the monastery, which now involves various revenue streams such as ticket sales, retail outlets, and the sale of religious paraphernalia. In addition to tourism, the monastic economy has diversified to include support from the state, contributions from families, donations from adherents of Buddhism, and self-sustaining agricultural practices. In this modern context, the monastery remains a critical locus of religious and cultural significance in Shangri_la.

In summary, Ganden Sumtseling Monastery remains a vital institution in the local community, maintaining its importance even in the face of significant social and political shifts. With the support of the local government, the monastery continues to serve as a cornerstone of both spiritual and social life. Tibetan Buddhism is integrated into the societal and political fabric, and Ganden Sumtseling itself is emblematic of a powerful political philosophy. The relationship between the monastery and the community is one of mutual dependency and shared benefits. On the one side, the community contributes resources and support to the monks and the monastery, enhancing its sustainability. On the other side, the monastery serves as a haven for spiritual growth and religious

observance, fulfilling an essential role in the lives of local residents. This reciprocal relationship, based on both economic and spiritual exchanges, forms a resilient and crucial social bond, particularly in the context of modern society.

In this study, the focus on Ganden Sumtseling Monastery serves as a window into the lives and identities of the monks who inhabit it. While the historical development of the monastery is undoubtedly significant, it serves as a backdrop for understanding its current function as a space for daily religious practice and identity formation among the monks. My primary argument will explore the nuances of monastic life in the post-1980s period, following the monastery's restoration. This will involve investigating how the identities of monks are evolving in the face of burgeoning tourism and the advent of the digital age. Such forces are likely to exert considerable influence, necessitating an in-depth look at how monks navigate these changes while maintaining their spiritual and social roles.

In the following chapter, I will focus on the first central question of this research: How do Tibetan Buddhist monks construct their identities in an offline context ? This will provide a foundation for understanding the broader implications of identity formation in a monastic setting, particularly as it intersects with contemporary social and technological challenges.

4

Offline Daily Life and Self-Identity of Tibetan Buddhist Monks

"Whenever we speak of identity, there is at the back of our minds a faint image of harmony, logic, consistency: all those things which the flow of our experience seems –to our perpetual despair –so grossly and abominably to lack. The search for identity is the ongoing struggle to arrest or slow down the flow, to solidify the fluid, to give form to the formless" (Bauman, 2013b, p. 83).

As Bauman points out, our understanding of identity often involves a sense of coherence and consistency, in contrast to the disorganized and unpredictable nature of our experiences. As such, the pursuit of identity becomes a continuous effort to impose order and stability on something inherently fluid and formless.

It could be posited that identity is experienced and shaped, and the search for self-identity is an imaginary and moral constraint of the self. Despite being frequently discussed in contemporary discourse, identity was never both a "private matter" and a "private worry" (Bauman, 2001). In other words, according to Bauman (2001), our identity and individuality are socially shaped, which is a trivial truth. However, the obverse fact needs to be more emphasized that the shape of society and how we interact with each other are influenced by the approach taken in the process of "individualization" and how people respond to it. Essentially, identity is a "production" that is never completed, always in process, and always constructed within, not outside, representation (Hall, 2005). Therefore, identity is not an already accomplished fact that the cultural practices represent.

In the context of modernity, looking back at the history of individuals' experiences, identity is a fragmented, uncertain, and unfix process that evolves (Bauman, 2013b). The individual's actions always pursue an imagined external identity and strive to achieve a harmonious unity between symbolic identity and inner desire (Goffman et al., 1978). With the rapid development of the economy and technology, it is easy to get lost in searching for the purpose and meaning of life (Bauman, 2013b). The search for purpose is always fraught with change, and the process offers various choices, so people begin to fall into a blind pursuit and anxiety. As Bauman indicated that,

"In other words, the quandry tormenting men and women at the turn of the century it not so much how to obtain the identities of their choice and how to have them recognised by others, but which identity to choose, and how best to keep alert and vigilant so that another choice can be made in case the previously chosen identity is withdrawn from the market or stripped of its seductive powers. The main, the most nerve-breaking, worry is not how to find a place inside a solid frame of social class or category and, having found it, how best to guard it and avoid eviction. What makes one worry is the suspicion that the hard-won framework will

be soon torn apart or melted" (Bauman, 2001, p. 126).

In contrast to these dynamic processes, the monks' identity appears to be static in the dimension of external social perspective and Buddhist precepts. To rigorously conceptualize the identity of monks within the scope of this study, it is imperative to delineate what the term "identity" entails in this research context. I follow the essential starting point. Identity is the ability of humans to distinguish themselves and others based on language, which involves recognizing who we are, who others are, how they perceive us, and how we perceive them (Jenkins, 2014). As individuals and members of a collective, our identities present a multidimensional classification in our lives. The term identity is often described variously in social science literature, such as personal identity, collective identity, social identity, social roles, etc. (Ashmore, Deaux, & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004). Such identity descriptions usually refer to the initial statement about categorical membership collectively and socially. As Bernd Simon (2008) has noted, the social world's interactions give rise to identity, which subsequently shapes interactions within the social world. In the words of Thoits and Virshup (1997), social identity as socially constructed and socially meaningful categories that individuals accept as descriptive of themselves or their group.

In this monastic community of 668 monks, all of them wear the same monastic clothes, have the same hairstyle, and even have the same names, which makes it challenging to distinguish themselves from others. Monks' wearing constantly evokes their identities as monks, while restraining their own words and actions. As Dant indicated that, *"Wearing clothes is in that what people wear is treated by those around them as being some sort of indicator of who they are"* (Dant, 1999, p. 107). With society continues to evolve, the newest smartphones, car brands, watches, and shoes allow a monk to express his personal identity. He can distinguish himself from other monks by selecting his own actions in these ways. However, it does not mean they didn't place themselves in the monastic category. Rather, they have

a strong sense of subjective certainty and pride in their monastic identity. This differs from Mohr and Fassinger's (2000) suggestion that collective identity can sometimes be ambiguous due to respondents' subjective uncertainty about their identity. What constructs the subjective certainty of monastic identity ?

Therefore, to analyze the impact of digital material and digital spiritual practices on monks' identity and daily life, it is necessary first to explore their reasons for becoming monks, how they perceive their monastic status, and their reflections on self-identity in everyday life practices. This chapter will examine several monks' cases through the ethnography description. Then I will conclude the reasons for becoming a Buddhist monk, and examine the process of constructing monastic identity through their monastic life. This contextual background is crucial for comprehensively understanding the relationship between digital technologies and monastic identity.

4.1 Change of lay identity: Becoming a Buddhist Monk

4.1.1 JC monk's household and monastic life

In 2014, I met JC monk during my first fieldwork in Shangri_la. He was 22, an offering maker in the Drastang Hall at the time. He became a monk at 15 years old in 2007. He comes from Dongwang village, where many monks stay in the Ganden Sumtseling monastery. JC monk comes from a polyandry family, two fathers and a mother. This is a traditional marital arrangement in which a woman has several husbands. His two fathers are brothers. JC is the youngest and the only boy among the three children in the family. His two elder sisters are both married, and the eldest one remaining at home to care for their aging parents. JC willingly became a monk after finishing elementary school. His parents were very supportive of his decision. On the one hand, within the context of a traditional Tibetan family adhering to Buddhist beliefs, having a family member who is a monk is considered a source of great honor and esteem. On the other

hand, JC's decision to become a monk was also significantly shaped by his maternal lineage, which boasts a considerable number of monks. Within Ganden Sumtseling monastery, JC has familial ties with 17 individuals, all of whom affiliated with the Dongwang Khamtsen. This phenomenon can be interpreted as a manifestation of a particular historical and cultural tradition endemic to Tibetan society.

As Goldstein (1991) indicated, the Tibetan region is the only region on earth that maintains both spiritual and temporal systems, which are dedicated to the welfare of humanity through prayer rituals led by monks. In this context, the level of religiosity is quantified by the prevalence of monastic establishments and celibate monks; that is, by the count of men who forgo matrimonial and familial commitments to join the monastic order. This marks their initial phase in an extensive trajectory aimed at spiritual advancement and ultimate liberation (M. C. Goldstein, 2009). In such cases, the motivation for entering monastic life is commonly perceived to be solely rooted in religious convictions.

Nonetheless, financial considerations within the family unit serve as a critical element for Tibetan parents when opting to enroll their children in monastic institutions. On the one hand, to relieve the financial burden on Tibetan families, children who live in monasteries have reduced the number of family members to feed (M. Goldstein, 1991). On the other hand, sending one child to the monastery is seen as a way to preserve the family's heritage and establish a long-term connection with the institutions that have a significant impact on the region's political, economic, and moral landscape (Schneider, 2009). Additionally, a son residing within a monastic environment can contribute labor and material resources back to the family unit. Reverting to JC's account, subsequent discussions will scrutinize these facets within the context of his personal narrative.

JC distinguishes himself within the Dongwang Khamtsen community, as evidenced by the commendations from his monastic peers : "Master JC speaks Mandarin well and knows many people from outside"; "Master JC is doing

good business ! He has a lot of resources"; "Master JC knows a lot" ! These competencies can be attributed to his prior professional experience in the monastic gift shop.

Since 2007, he has been working in the monastery gift shop (Fawu Liutongchu; in Chinese: 法物流通处). Consequently, this role has afforded him numerous occasions to interact with individuals external to the monastic community. The gift shop pecializes in the sale of religious paraphernalia such as Buddhist beads, Thangkas, and medallions related to Buddhist iconography. Proficient in Mandarin and possessing a keen interest and expertise in such religious artifacts, JC is customarily enlisted by the monastic stewards to educate tourists about these Buddhist commodities. A considerable proportion of tourists purchasing these Buddhist items either possess an interest in Buddhism or are adherents of the faith. These individuals frequently express a willingness to engage in dialogue with JC, given his monastic standing.

JC is involved in the operation of the monastery's gift shop, which yields an annual revenue ranging between 20,000 - 30,000 CNY (approximately 2700 to 4000 euros). The remuneration JC receives from his role in the gift shop is variable, contingent upon the shop's earnings. Given that the shop is an entity of the monastery, its annual profits are equitably distributed among the monastic community. JC mentioned that his involvement in the store was initiated at the request of the monastic steward, and he is remunerated on an annual basis. The amount he receives is determined by the allocation of the steward on duty for that year, thereby making it a non-fixed form of remuneration. During the summer months, JC engages in the trade of matsutake mushrooms and cordyceps, earning an estimated seasonal income between 10,000 and 15,000 CNY. This level of income is deemed relatively substantial when compared to the earnings of other monks within his Khamtsen community. Monks within this community typically generate an annual income of around 20,000 CNY per year. I will describe their

income sources in detail in the following part.

Unlike numerous other monastics, JC's family is not able to provide financial support for him. His elder sister and brother-in-law are engaged in farming, with their principal revenue sources from traditional agricultural activities. Moreover, they supplement their income by harvesting cordyceps and matsutake mushrooms from mountainous terrains. Due to their responsibility for caring for their parents and two children, their annual income of only tens of thousands of CNY does not allow them to provide significant financial support to JC. Conversely, JC, who is domiciled within the monastic establishment, has shouldered the majority of his family's financial burdens.

In the year 2016, JC's familial residence required refurbishment, a financial undertaking that his sister and brother-in-law were unable to support monetarily. JC said, *"The house in my hometown was too old, and I felt embarrassed to bring my friends over many times. Moreover, both of my parents are getting older. I want them to live in a more comfortable house. So we decided to rebuild our family house"*. However, due to insufficient funds, JC took out a personal loan of 300,000 CNY from the bank and used the money to rebuild the family's house. As his source of income was unstable, he encountered financial stress in meeting his monthly loan obligations to the bank. He eventually borrowed a sum of money from his own master to repay the bank loan in one lump sum. He planned to return the money little by little to his master every year. However, as of 2021, he still owed roughly 200,000 CNY. The economic pressure of his family's situation compelled JC to seek endless opportunities to earn money. It is worth noting that the different financial circumstances of individual families contribute to heterogeneity among the monks, thereby influencing their identity construction.

"The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to renounce this life's concerns,
For friends and relatives, long acquainted, must all go their separate ways;
Wealth and prized possessions, painstakingly acquired, must all be left behind;

And consciousness, the guest who lodges in the body, must in time depart"(Gyalse Tokme, 2006, p. 1(No.4)).

This passage is from the *Thirty-Seven Practices of All the Bodhisattvas*, which express the ideology of Buddhism, and describes the practices of all the Buddha's sons. Within the Tibetan Buddhist monastic institutions, the pedagogical regimen for monks typically incorporates discourses analogous to the aforementioned text. Extensive studies have stated that becoming a monk, which refers to renouncing a world of social interconnectedness (Day, 1989), breaking all the social secular bonds, and concentrating all one's energies on seeking enlightenment of Buddhahood (Ortner, 1995). Moreover, the monastic institution produces and sustains a solitary framework of social isolation by systematically severing the monks from their intricate network of familial obligations and connections (M. C. Goldstein & Tsarong, 1985).

In contrast, within the Shangri_la context, Tibetan Buddhist monks manifest pronounced secular characteristics and predominantly sustain intimate relationships with their original families. To be a monk does not mean to be cut off from one's original secular interpersonal relationships. In this particular setting, monasteries predominantly function as centers for religious practice that serve the broader village community. Likewise, monks assume responsibilities as facilitators of religious ceremonies and intermediaries in spiritual communications. Their interaction with villagers and family members becomes a part of village life. The interaction between monks and lay people in the religious and living practices is opposite, in a certain sense, to the traditional Buddhist philosophy of monks immersing themselves in spiritual pursuits while remaining detached from worldly concerns. Nonetheless, the monastery and monk community constantly strive for an institutional framework that is both "of the world" and "out of the world" (M. C. Goldstein & Tsarong, 1985), which means they want to seek a balance status. Such balance also creates multiple layers of meaning in the perception of

monastic identity among lay people and monks.

JC is a typical example. Examining JC through a secular lens reveals that he is deeply entwined with material and worldly concerns, maintains a global network of friendships, and his way of life does not markedly different from that of the ordinary lay individual. It is challenging to distinguish his monastic identity when he removes his monk's clothing. His business partners, SG, once considered,

"There is no difference between JC and ordinary lay people, except that he cannot drink, smoke, get married, or have children. He must earn money and pursue a good life like the rest of us. Many monks remain unmarried and childless to find liberation in a life of solitude. They believe that is liberating. However, I do not share this view. Having worked with many monasteries in Tibetan areas, I have conflicting feelings.

On the one side, I believe that monks should distance themselves from the secular world and focus on their spiritual practice. On the other side, I also feel that their lives are very difficult, and they should be allowed to earn money to improve their quality of life. In Ganden Sumtseling monastery, it seems the monks have few rules to follow, as long as they do not violate the basic Buddhist precepts. I chose to work with JC because he was intelligent, honest, and a good collaborator".

- -SG, 08.2021

Subsequent to Zhongdian County was renamed Shangri_la County, local authorities have promoted monasteries as "cultural resources" to attract tourists, which has undoubtedly brought an enormous economic benefit but has invaded the monastic life (Kolås, 2004). From a secular viewpoint, particularly within the cognition of ethnic Han Chinese society, there exists considerable imagination about the daily life of Tibetan monks.

On the one hand, the histories of Tibetan esoteric Buddhists in China and the mystery of Tibetan monasticism spread between Han Chinese and Tibetan

are fruitful and complex. Many scholars have detailed these studies (Li, 1994; M. C. Goldstein & Kapstein, 1999; Yu, 2013). Following the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, various religious traditions, including Tibetan Buddhism, embarked upon a process of institutional regeneration, particularly in urban locales, commencing in the 1990s (Jones, 2011). Even though there are some religious restrictions, and religious activities are only practiced at officially registered "religious sites". A noteworthy development is the escalating prevalence of ethnic Han Chinese adherents embracing Tibetan Buddhist traditions and spiritual leaders, and partaking in diverse Buddhist practices across various places (Jones, 2011). Furthermore, the enigmatic charisma associated with living Buddhas subtly facilitates the proliferation of Tibetan Buddhist ideologies within Han Chinese social structures. Individuals naturally possess elevated moral expectations and idealized conceptions concerning Tibetan monastic figures. In addition, these ethical illusions would not change with socio-economic development.

On the other hand, as previously discussed, the Ganden Sumtseling monastery has undergone a transformation into a touristic destination, aimed at promoting the local cultural economy and reviving traditional religious cultures, all under government auspices. Authorities posited that the marketing idea of a "mysterious Shangri_la" would attract tourists. However, this tourism marketing strategy, which uses the "sacralized" notions of place, has also led to new tensions (Kolås, 2004). Numerous tourist groups visit the monastery from morning to evening, even during the ritual performances. The visitor demographic predominantly comprises ethnic Han Chinese, a considerable fraction of whom possess basic comprehension of Tibetan Buddhism and holds idealized perceptions of monastic spirituality. Consequently, witnessing monastic figures partake in activities such as meat consumption, commercial engagements, or digital entertainment disrupts their preconceived notions, making them suspicious of the monks' identity. Interestingly, such skepticism is also mirrored in the perspectives of the local

populace.

"The monastery is changed. It is a tourist spot and service for tourists, not us. The monks are not like before, and young monks always have a good life, not a spiritual life. We usually go to another temple to pray, where are not many tourists. But if the funeral, we also invite them to help chant Buddhist scriptures at home".

- -ZC, K village, 04.2021

"Nowadays, society has changed well, and we hold a better life than before. People also have only two children, and we hope our children study in the school, not in the monastery. The monks are becoming less than less. And the monastery has already changed, they don't have a strict educational system, and the monks always go to the city center, not stay in the monastery".

- -B, C village, 04.2021

The advent of tourism and consumerist economics has inevitably deconstructed the mysterious image of the monastic community. Within the framework of imaginative conceptualizations, the construction of monastic identity is predicated on differentiation, signifying a lifestyle that diverges from secular norms, thereby shaping the monastic identity. For Buddhist monks, the disciplined existence led by monastic institutions exudes a sense of structure and orderliness. As Bauman (2013b) pointed out by comparing Joshua's discourse, order means monotony, regularity, repetitiveness, and predictability. It was the vision of the secular world, of imagination, and that was people stand a moral expectation high ground reshaped spiritual practice. However, those imaginations about monastics exactly led to a different kind of identity performance, especially in the digital social media world, where monks reconstructed their images. The subsequent sections will focus on an analysis of these digitally mediated monastic identities. Monks are confronted with various identity challenges, leading to diverse interpretations among the secular community. Nonetheless, they have cultivated a well-founded rationale to explain their identity and subsequent

actions.

Despite JC's lifestyle bearing similarities to a secular one, his perspectives on the world are relatively out-of-world. He stated that his financial constraints have never led him to experience anxiety or miserliness. No matter how little money he had left after sharing with family, friends, and brothers, he was never hesitant to help them. His values towards life, which embrace the concepts of fate and impermanence, are deeply rooted in Tibetan culture and Buddhist doctrine. Such personal characteristics brought him many opportunities, and many Buddhists from outside the province regarded him as a master and provided him with material or economic support. Despite not having obtained any monastical academic title or receiving the Gelong ordination, JC, an ordinary monk within the monastic system, was regarded as a master of high moral standing in secular society. JC introduced the lay Buddhists he knew to his master, a senior and qualified monk who could take on disciples. These individuals became closer to him, as they became co-disciples under the same teacher.

JC said, *"They are interested in Buddhism. It is merit and also is my responsibility to introduce them to convert to Buddhism. As a Buddhist monk, the initial resolve is the most important thing for us, which is what's in your heart. I don't care what people think about me. I follow my heart"*.

Identity is an individual's self-perception and what kind of person they want to be (Hayes & Stratton, 2013). The transition to monastic life does not necessarily entail the severing of specific social ties or the relinquishment of particular social obligations. On the contrary, individuals must negotiate a balance between their internal self-conceptions and external behaviors to sustain their monastic identities. In the case of the monk JC, his social milieu and lived experiences should not be disregarded. His internal spiritual convictions, rooted in Buddhism, and his external life experiences have continually influenced and redefined his worldview. In other words, the monastic institution has played a significant role in shaping his

monastic identity.

4.1.2 "It is liberating to be a monk"

Through the case of JC, the transition to a monastic identity can be viewed both as a familial survival strategy and as an expression of individual intention. According to the submitted questionnaires (Figure 4.1) that I received from my fieldwork, I can conclude the several reasons for becoming a Buddhist monk. As noted earlier, the questionnaire findings contribute to a subset of the data, limited by the relatively small sample size of participating monks. Nonetheless, these results acquire heightened relevance when considered alongside observations gathered during the fieldwork.

Moreover, in earlier scholarships, many scholars (Li, 1994; M. C. Goldstein & Kapstein, 1999; Dreyfus, 2003; Nietupski, 2011) have analyzed that Tibetan parents sent their children to the monastery and becoming a monk was a traditional culture in Tibetan region. It was a deep religious belief as well as a way of avoiding their children staying in hardship village life. However, these investigations tend to overlook the subjective experiences of individual monks, focusing instead on socio-economic rationales for monastic life rather than considerations of personal intention or self-identity. According to Liogier (2020), identity is indistinguishably linked to the religious perceived as a fundamental infrastructure of human imagination. Furthermore, articulating a precise definition of identity is a challenging endeavor, particularly given its frequent, and sometimes indiscriminate, utilization by the media. In this study, I aim to scrutinize the monastic identities of the subjects through an examination of external factors, while concurrently shedding light on their self-identities from the monks' viewpoints. In other words, identity is embedded in the outer material and the internal ideology.

"Why did you become a monk"? is a fundamental yet broad question. That I ask each monk during our initial encounters to deepen my understanding of

第 6 题 您出家的原因？ [多选题]
No.6 What is your reason for becoming a Buddhist monk? [Multiple Choice Questions]

选项 | Option	小计 | Total	比例 | Proportion
A. 出于自愿，想要当和尚 Voluntary to be a Buddhist monk	22	88%
B. 身边有小伙伴出家了，然后想一起出家 There are some friends around who have become Buddhist monks, and then want to become monks together	5	20%
C. 家里人要求的，说当和尚好 Family choices	4	16%
D. 家里有亲戚是和尚，然后就出家了 A family member or relative is a Buddhist monk, and then follow becomes one	9	36%
E. 其他 Other reasons	0	0%
本题有效填写人次 | effectively completed	25	

Fig. 4.1 Questionnaire example

their motivations. Occasionally, the monks find it challenging to articulate a specific rationale for their monastic calling due to the diversity of underlying motivations. Certain monks have inherited the monastic registration of their family in the monastery; others were sent to the monastery by their parents, but did not refuse the choice. A subset of monks view monastic life favorably, whereas others were influenced by their peers to collectively enter the monastic community. Field observations indicated that most monks entered monastic life during childhood, ranging from 8 to 18 years old. Delannoy's study on Tibet revealed that before the 1950s, approximately one-sixth of the male population was registered in monasteries as children (Obadia, 2013).

Despite children's lack of understanding about the implications of being a monk, parents must communicate with them and respect their decisions. Certain Tibetan parents perceive entering the monastic order as an endeavor imbued with merit and significance, not only for the individual but also for the family unit. Alternatively, there are parents who straightforwardly inquire whether their children have a desire to pursue monasticism, recognizing that the vocation demands a level of wisdom and karmic alignment, thus requiring little explanation. According to Obadia (2013), the children were neither given a choice nor the

freedom to refuse the decision of their authorities to enter the monastic life. They were obliged to conform and embrace it, which entailed relinquishing their involvement in economic and familial pursuits. However, the monks argue that regardless of the underlying motives and objective reasons for one's decision to become a monk, such a decision must be voluntary and not forced.

A senior monk recalled, *"I became a monk when I was 16 years old. I was the youngest child among six children in my family. My parents asked me if I wanted to be a monk and go to the monastery. I don't know anything, but I agree with that".*

- -LR, 06.2021

Another 24 years old young monk said, *"My grandmother's brother is a monk. He asked if I wanted to follow him to the monastery. I was 13 years old at that time. I think it is a good idea because I am not a good student in school. Maybe becoming a monk is a new choice".*

- -LS, 05.2021

On the surface, the choice may appear arbitrary. Nonetheless, it is imperative to acknowledge that the Tibetan family's decision to send their offspring into monastic life is deeply embedded in localized spiritual belief. One driving consideration is the belief that engaging in this act confers substantial privilege upon their children while simultaneously accumulating positive spiritual merit. For many young children, the monastic community is fascinating. Despite the general lack of comprehensive understanding of monastic existence among these children, there exists a palpable desire to participate. In the Tibetan region, the monastic tradition still holds to a particular orthodoxy (Obadia, 2013), so the figure of the monk serves as a symbol of religious instruction. Particularly within the milieu of ritualistic communities, religious practices and beliefs are deeply ingrained in individual family units. While children may not possess explicit awareness of religious nuances, they are in direct interaction with their parents who influence their perspectives. As a cultural model, religion influences children's feelings and

perceptions (Obadia, 2013). In domestic and village settings, children frequently encounter monks garbed in red robes and witness their parents' reverential behavior towards these monastic figures.

A young monk recalled,

"I am a special example. My parents don't want me to become a monk. Because my father's brother was once a monk, but later, he returned home and became a lay-man. My mother's brother was also followed the same road. My family thinks that is not good, and they are without the Buddhist fortune. When I saw many monks wearing red uniforms, I thought it was so beautiful. And they stand a social reputation in the village, all the villagers show respect for them. I guess monks lead extraordinary lives. So I asked my parents if I could go to the monastery and become a monk. My parents were worried about that, they didn't want to go through one more shock, which is afraid of a monk returning to lay-man. Even though I had no idea what it meant to be a monk, I was so insistent on my idea. So they finally agreed".

- -ZB, 05.2021

One villager of C village said,

"We always showed our respect for Buddhist monks. When I was a young child, about 30 years ago, when ordinary people saw monks from a distance, they needed to stop, take off their hats, and reach out their right hand, palm up, to show their respect for monks. No matter the age of a monk, he sits in the highest position in his family. Although he went out to the family and became a monk, his words were often powerful in his family".

- -AB, 04.2021

The uniforms worn by monks signify their monastic identities and serve as an external manifestation of their spiritual authority. These tangible symbols are known to capture the interest of certain younger individuals, thereby leading them to consider the path of monasticism. Hence, these external signifiers not only

mirror the societal perception of monks but also contribute indirectly to the shaping of their individual identities. Nonetheless, the concept of identity is subject to continual change and adaptation, more so during the formative teenage years. As the special example of ZB, he said,

"Until I actually became a monk, I realized that monastic life is not as good as it seems. I had to get up very early every day, study Tibetan, learn and recite the scriptures. If I couldn't recite the scriptures by heart, my master would punish me and beat me. During my novice years, I had to do a lot of chores. But I can't return home because I don't want my parents to disappoint me. I wish to stay a monk all the time, just like my insistent decision before. I've been through a lot of struggles about my monastic life. While I was a novice monk, I followed my master perform religious ritual in villagers' homes. At that time, my inside thought was to finish these rituals early and eat great food quickly. Villagers have always offered us the best food. I didn't even care about why these villagers perform these religious practices. My master always taught us that we should chant the scriptures with good intentions for villagers who believe in Buddhism, from a deep heart, instead of eating their food for free. But then, I was too young and didn't want to know these teachings. My master never gave up teaching me. As I grew older, I gradually understood a monk's duty".

- -ZB, 05.2021

Individuals often seek logical justifications for their behavior, be it internal or external, thereby intellectualizing their quest for identity and self-definition. As Giddens (1991) indicated, self-identity is not one particular characteristic or even a group of features that an individual possesses. It refers to the individual's reflexive understanding of themselves in the context of their life history. In this framework, while identity presupposes a sense of continuity across both time and space, self-identity is that very continuity, as reflexively apprehended by the individual themselves. Temporarily setting aside perspectives related to religious

practices in a cultural context and the alleviation of family financial burdens in an economic context, let's focus on the monks' identity and subjectivity through the lens of their own experiences. On the one hand, monastic institutions and Buddhist doctrines serve as normative guides that regulate their daily conduct. On the other hand, the relentless instruction from their spiritual mentors enriches young monks' understanding of their monastic identity. In other words, the content of monks' self-identity is constructed by their biographical experiences (Giddens, 1991). Hence, they are engaged in a continual quest for equilibrium and stability between a dynamic social milieu and steadfast monastic regulations.

The monastic identities have slight differences from what Bauman (2013b) stated,

"Given the intrinsic volatility and unfixity of all or most identities, it is the ability to 'shop around' in the supermarket of identities, the degree of genuine or putative consumer freedom to select one's identity and to hold to it as long as desired, that becomes the royal road to the fulfillment of identity fantasies" (p.180).

His discourse suggested out that identity is not static but rather a dynamic and fluid process of seeking. The journey toward identity is, in certain aspects, propelled by motivations rooted in consumerism. In pre-modern societies, such emphasis on identity is absent (Baumeister, 1987). During that pre-modern era, it was unimaginable for an individual to exist without the predefined social roles assigned by God, society, and family (Baumeister, 1987). God gave each individual a particular place in the group. The community was viewed as stable of a unit as any living thing (Nisbet, 1973). It is common for people to attribute their identities to specific authority systems, such as a state polity, a religious community, a family, etc. Individuals could more easily acquire their meaning of identities through authority symbols and rule systems.

In contemporary consumer cultures, freedom is often equated with the breadth of consumer choices available, implying that the quest for consumer

goods is indispensable for attaining both freedom and identity (Bauman, 2013b). Technological and productivity progress has transformed the relationship between individuals and society, turning individuals from "producers" into "consumers". The role of consumption in propelling the economy has surpassed that of production, thereby making consumption the catalyst for production. As a result, consumption encourages the development of public spaces and goods, ostensibly providing individuals with extensive freedom to consume. A consumer society's entire purpose is to provide choice, which promises to represent the fundamental ideal of modernity: liberty (Gauthier, 2012). Utilizing the economic freedom inherent in consumption, individuals inject their values into consumer dialogues and behaviors (Sen, 2005) as a form of resistance against pre-modern authoritative structures. Nevertheless, an increase in freedom from limitations and regulations results in a greater array of choices (Kolm, 1994). This amplified freedom intensifies desire, leaving individuals perpetually unsatisfied and trapped in a cycle of anxiety and existential dread (Bauman, 2013b; Aubert, 2004).

As Bauman (2013b) emphasized, modernity is built upon a freedom order system, which cannot reach a stable point toward a specific order, in contrast to the authoritative order and specific system that were authoritative and stable in pre-modern society. In the consumer-oriented society of today, individuals wield considerable personal autonomy and have the capacity to voice their views on governance and societal issues. The advent of digital technologies, particularly social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Weibo, has democratically involved individuals in the politics of daily life (Giddens, 1991). Giddens (1991) pointed out, "personal is political" in contemporary society. While this information deluge appears to empower individuals to actively participate in and critique societal discourse, it also tends to confound one's understanding of the future and self-identity. Individuals find it increasingly difficult to keep pace with rapid socio-economic changes, which, in turn, fuels an unending quest for self-identity

under the guise of self-transcendence (Aubert, 2004).

Meanwhile, the role of religion has evolved from being a tool of power to a source of personal spirituality and guidance for life, particularly in the Chinese context. Since the early 1990s, China has committed to policies of reform and market opening, fostering individual development opportunities and underscoring the importance of mutual growth for individuals and society. In this landscape, people actively work to align themselves with the expectations of specific systems or communities they wish to join, as there is no longer an inherent or natural system to which they belong. Frequently, individuals strive to meet the expectations set by their families and society; however, this effort often leaves them feeling unfulfilled and lacking a genuine sense of belonging and purpose. The term "suspension" by Chinese anthropologist Xiang Biao (2021) is used to describe the current situation for Chinese individuals. He noted that,

"*'Suspension' is the translation of the Chinese term xuanfu, literally "hanging and floating." This term can be explained more clearly through images than words. A typical image of xuanfu is one of a hummingbird frantically vibrating its wings, striving to sustain itself in the air. The bird struggles hard but moves nowhere, yet it is incapable of landing. People keep moving, but do not engage with the present critically"* (Xiang, 2021).

In modern society, the emphasis on individuality and the fragmentation of information have intensified people's anxiety about self-identity (Bauman, 2013b). In a certain sense, anxiety comes with human liberty, and dread is entangled with freedom (Kierkegaard, 2013). According to this sentence, Giddens (1991) further noted, such anxiety stems from the "faith" or belief in the independent existence of individuals and objects, which is integral to ontological security. These existential issues refer precisely to self-identity, routinely created and sustained by the individual in the reflective activity. In this context, the ontologically secure individual is one who can achieve a stable sense of self-identity despite

the changing external environment. Such individuals possess a coherent temporal experience and narrative, allowing them to reflexively grasp the continuity of their own existence and engage meaningfully with others. By establishing early trusting relationships, such individuals can also establish protective belts that allow individuals to develop or maintain trust in self-integrity (Giddens, 1991).

In the milieu of continual external transformations, the monks not only observe these shifts but also adopt a strengthened awareness of individuality within an enlightened understanding of the modern era. They draw on the opportunities for spiritual practice provided by monastic systems or social structural changes to change their perceptions and mindsets. Their spiritual routines serve as a medium to understand and define their identities, exemplified by consumption behaviors that manifest within the scope of their spiritual engagements. The choices they make in their daily rituals and consumer behaviors contribute to the refinement and elevation of both their self-conceptions and cognitive frameworks.

The Tibetan monastic system is a manifestation of social order in pre-modern society. They fixed an authoritative procedure for the monks to submit. Under this authoritative framework, monks constantly reinforce established regulations and construct their monastic identities. When individuals transition from their lay status to embrace the role of a monastic figure, they experience a definitive shift in their social identity, as perceived from an external standpoint. Having already integrated into a monastic institution, these individuals are not required to exert additional effort to join any alternative system. In the context of Buddhist philosophy, a monastic community represents the epitome of collective dedication to the pursuit of Buddhist doctrines, encompassing commitments to celibacy and the renunciation of material attachments (M. C. Goldstein, 1998). Monetary gain, material possessions, and vocational achievements are of negligible significance to Buddhist monks residing in monastic communities. They do not have to be anxious about their future but only concentrate on spiritual practice for the

sake of all sentient beings and a better afterlife. This represents an ethical imperative and a spiritual obligation imposed upon monks by Buddhist tenets. However, the boundary between laypeople and monks is increasingly indistinct in the monastic institution where my research was conducted. My findings indicate that, particularly in terms of daily practices, the lives of monks are gradually converging with those of secular individuals, influenced by factors such as tourism, scientific advancements, and technological proliferation. Examples of this include the manner in which monks adorn their living quarters, the types of smartphones they employ, the brands of watches they wear, and the vehicles they operate. In summary, the lifestyle of a monk increasingly parallels that of a lay individual, with the exception being the observance of specific Buddhist precepts.

Contrary to lay individuals, monks possess a unique perspective on vocational pursuits and financial objectives. Monks hold the conviction that their monastic identity provides them a sense of liberation and emancipation, especially when contemplating and reflecting upon the lives of laypersons.

A middle-aged monk who was 50 years old, he said,

"I think it's good to be a monk. We don't have to consider many trivial things and take on family responsibilities. Moreover, we don't have too many material desires. On the one hand, there is no need for us. On the other hand, it will be empty in the end if I pursue it. So you lay people are quite hard, and can not feel free. Lay people always desire too much. That's why you are confused".

- -LS, 08.2021

A young monk who was 20 years old, he gave a similar response,

"My father sent me to the monastery. I am the first monk in my family. I feel it is good merit to be a monk. My responsibility is prayed for everyone. I don't need to make money for my families, and my sisters will care for my parents well. I don't need to worry about my daily life, just study Buddhist scriptures and do spiritual practice. Even though I became a leader chanter at a young age, it benefited to my

master's strict teaching. But it's ok if you want to be a common monk, no title, no academic degree. Everything depends upon your initial heart, not compelled and desire too much. We don't have competition as much as you lay-man".

- -YJ, 01.2020

The aforementioned pair of monks are not isolated in their perspective of ignoring material desires; this sentiment is echoed by the majority of monks. For them, being a single male committed to celibacy who lives in a Buddhist monastery is a state of liberation. Traditionally, in their daily discourse, monks have exhibited a propensity to employ the term "heart" (in Chinese:xin, 心) over "freedom"(in Chinese: ziyou, 自由). They hold the view that all one does is ponder in their mind before acting. In their interactions with the external world, monks posit that common people bear too many constraints and have too many thoughts in their minds. More broadly, within the idealized confines of the monastic setting, human life can be managed rationally, allowing for the differentiation between authentic needs and satisfactions and those that are illusory (Collins, 1988). Most monks today set themselves apart from laypeople by emphasizing that they are not tightly entangled with the contemporary consumer society and taking on family responsibilities and financial needs. The monks who reside here unavoidably experience the effects of contemporary commercial society. However, to fend off the encroachment of consumerism, they create a collection of spiritual discourses. It would be premature to categorize such discourse is a kind of liberation. Nonetheless, these discourses serve to resist, to some extent, the prevailing anxieties and confusions endemic to contemporary society.

Instead of just considering it from a Buddhist viewpoint, it is vital to put this conception of monks as having little material needs in the context of their daily life. The primary focus is the monastic setting in which they reside. The monastic structure is intrinsically configured to prioritize communal cohesion and order, and, within this framework, the spiritual endeavors of the monks are fundamentally

intertwined with the institutional mechanisms. Given that monasteries uphold a comprehensive system of monastic governance and order, it becomes plausible to juxtapose the lifestyle of monks within this specific monastic setting against that of a pre-modern societal framework. As Durkheim pointed out,

"The individual submits to society and this submission is the condition of his liberation. For man freedom consists in deliverance from blind, unthinking physical forces; he achieves this by opposing against them the great and intelligent force of society, under whose protection he shelters. By putting himself under the wing of society, he makes himself also, to a certain extent, dependent upon it. But this is a liberating dependence; there is no contradiction in this" (Giddens et al., 1972, p. 115).

Before integrating into the ever-changing landscape of contemporary society, Tibetan Buddhist monks initially engage in a process of cultural assimilation within the established monastic framework. They rely on the monastic institution and submit to the monastic community. One of the requirements for liberation is the organization's submission. Concurrently, they draw upon secular cultural constructs to navigate their identities and contemplate their lived experiences. To elaborate, the differences in values between strict monastic adherence and those of a secular society plays a formative role in shaping their monastic identities. In the current socio-cultural context, the prioritization of material gains and the pursuit of personal success are particularly pronounced in consumer-driven societies, thereby accentuating the unique attributes of monastic communities. The lack of material desires among monks serves as a contrast, yet not a contradiction, to the values upheld by consumer societies. This perspective emerges from the monks' understanding that the ideals of freedom and liberation are not solely rooted in Buddhist philosophy, but may also have explicational elements within the framework of contemporary consumerist ideology.

4.2 Monastic Organization: Regular Monastic Lifestyle

In the preceding chapter, I discussed the structure of monastic institutions and the function of monasteries in history. Ganden Sumtseling Monastery possesses a comprehensive institutional structure and organizational framework, akin to the majority of monastic establishments within the Tibetan tradition. Adherence to these established regulations is essential for an individual's official admission into the monastic institution. In other words, institutions are comprised of individuals and their respective interactions (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006). Such interactions are pivotal in both sustaining and transforming established rules, norms, and meanings. Consequently, this section will concentrate on the normative monastic lifestyle, concurrently delving into the processes by which monks construct their monastic identities.

4.2.1 Three pillars of monastic institutions

Following their initiation into a monastic setting, monks' daily activities are guided by the established organizational structure of the institution. As Scott (2013) define the conception of institutions that,

"Institutions consist of cognitive, normative, and regulative structures and activities that provide stability and meaning to social behavior. Institutions are transported by various carriers, cultures, structures, and routines and they operate at multiple levels of jurisdiction"(p. 33).

Employing Scott's definitional framework in the current context, one observes a resemblance to the monastic institutional structure. To facilitate the identification and characterization of institutions, Scott conceptualized a three-pillar model (Table 4.1) [1]. Similarly, I draw three pillars of monastic institutions (see Table 4.2) by considering Table 4.1.

[1] Resource from : Scott, W.R. (2013). *Institutions and organizations: Ideas, interests, and identities.* Sage publications. pp. 60.

	Regulative	*Normative*	*Cultural-Cognitive*
Basis of compliance	Expedience	Social obligation	Taken-for-grantedness Shared undenstanding
Basis of order	Regulative rules	Blinding expectations	Constitutive schema
Mechanisms	Coercive	Normative	Mimetic
Logic	Instrumentality	Appropriateness	Orthodoxy
Indicators	Rules/Laws/Sanctions	Certification/Accreditation	Common beliefs/Shared logics of action/Isomorphism
Affect	Fear Guilt/Innocence	Shame/Honor	Certainty/Confusion
Basis of legitimacy	Legally sanctioned	Morally governed	Comprehensible/Recognizable/Culturally supported

Table 4.1 Three Pillars of Institutions

- Regulative pillar

Regarding the regulative pillars of the institution, the monastery has instituted a comprehensive set of guidelines that monks are required to follow. Before fully embracing their monastic identities, monks often rely on their status as citizens as the foundational framework for adhering to institutional regulations. In order to facilitate the management of the monastery and solidify monks' identities, the monastic institution also set regulative rules. For example, the Ganden Sumtseling Monastery has instituted a democratic management committee tasked with implementing democratic governance. The Buddhist Association and the monastery's governing body serve as the democratic management committee's guides. However, they had no authority over the internal affairs of the monastery. The Democratic Management Committee is responsible for overseeing the monastery's public resources, coordinating its religious events, and maintaining both the security and environmental well-being of the establishment. The Monastery Management Committee is charged with formulating and executing governance rules, employing legal measures against monks who violate these law guidelines. As Scott (2013) indicated, the regulatory pillar is underpinned by elements such as force, sanctions, and expedient responses. When such coercive mechanisms are legitimized through laws, they evolve into authoritative power. Most monks at Ganden Sumtseling Monastery see the Democratic Management Committee as the body issuing official state directives that govern their political conduct, which they view as separate from the monastery's internal

moral governance norms.

A senior monk from Xiangchen Khamtsen said,

"Democratic management can't manage the internal affairs of the monastery. Their function is just to publish some government policies and restrain our monks from participating in political activities. This democratic management is new institution management, not traditional management. But, as a monk, we are first as a citizen. We need to respect our country's law. And then, we follow the Buddhist discipline".

- -LS, 07.2021

The monks often say, *"Our monastery is quite stable and harmonious"*, and *"We are all fine law-abiding citizens".* One peaceful afternoon, I joined four other monks for a conversation and some tea at JC's shop. One monk mentioned that the Monastery Management Committee would be holding a general assembly for the monks the following week. Curiously, I inquired about the agenda and whether attendance was mandatory for all monks. He explained that attendance at these yearly meetings is not obligatory for all monks; however, if you are available and on monastery grounds, it's customary to participate. The meeting usually revolves around matters of discipline, including legal compliance, abstaining from violent gatherings, and not affiliating with foreign religious groups. The monks indicated that, even if these meetings might seem like a mere formality, they hold no objections to attending. They regard it as part of their duty and believe that understanding and adhering to government regulations is consistent with their monastic identity.

Therefore, despite the spiritual ethos that suggests monks should live in isolation from the secular world, monastic structures have traditionally been organized using worldly principles. Monks are expected to reconcile their civic identities with their religious ones, establishing citizenship as a foundational aspect of compliance within the monastic setting.

	Regulative	*Normative*	*Cultural-Cognitive*
Basis of compliance	Citizen/Monastic identities	Social obligation	Taken-for-grantedness Shared undenstanding
Basis of order	Monastic regulative rules	Blinding expectations	Constitutive schema
Mechanisms	Monastic coercive power	Normative	Mimetic
Logic	Instrumentality	Appropriateness	Orthodoxy
Indicators	Rules/Buddhist perceptions/Sanctions	Monastic certification/Title	Common beliefs/Shared logics of action/Isomorphism
Affect	Fear Guilt/Innocence	Shame/Honor	Certainty/Confusion
Basis of legitimacy	Legally sanctioned	Morally governed	Comprehensible/Recognizable/Culturally supported

Table 4.2 Three Pillars of Monastic Institutions

- Normative pillar

According to Scott's framework on the pillars of normative, he emphasized on prescriptive, evaluative, and obligatory dimensions in social life (Scott, 2013). Scott argued that normative systems are built on a foundation of values and norms. These values aim at an idealized form of existing structures or behaviors, which are continually adjusted and refined. Social obligation is the cornerstone for compliance with these norms. Norms are used to define how things should be done under the frame of values. Scott highlighted that some values and norms apply only to special types of members, but not all members. These specialized values and norms construct the appropriate goals and spiritual activities for these particular types of members, and give them rise to specific roles or specific social positions. In addition, other social members will have expectations of these specific people and will morally restrain their actions, which converts to normative expectations. As previously noted, ordinary people and local communities hold Buddhist monks to high moral standards. These external moral expectations further shape the monks' identities as individuals.

Within the framework of the normative monastic system, monks undergo education in their designated Khamtsen, studying the Tibetan language, Buddhist scriptures, philosophy, and various religious rites and ceremonies. These elements are the basis of a monk. In contrast to the regulative system, monks initially identified as citizens before identifying as monastics. The primary identity of monks is their monastic identity, while lay citizens' identities come in second

place in the normative structure of the monastery institution. The emphasis here is on adherence to values and norms, rather than enforced regulations. To solidify their monastic identities, monks must follow and respect these religious guidelines. Concurrently, the monastic educational system of the monastery helps each monk identify their specific roles and titles.

In Scott's (2013) opinion, the normative framework places more emphasis on appropriateness than on instrumentality. Members of the normative system are not primarily asking, *"Which is the best alternative for my personal best interests ?"* Instead, they are confronted with the question, *"Considering this situation and my function, what is the appropriate way for me to behave ?"* Much like the regulative system, the normative system stirs powerful emotions that are distinct from those brought on by dread, guilt, or legal penalty. This emotional connection is context-dependent and tied to specific roles, often resulting in a deep sense of shame or dishonor. To circle back to the example of monks: their mindset is deeply shaped by both the monastic system and Buddhist teachings. If a monk deviates from the norms, he would feel anxious and ashamed.

By the example of the JB monk, we can better comprehend the type of affection. JB spent eight years as a monk before converting to the laity in 2020. He recalled,

"That day was actually quite routine. I never thought I would leave the monastery and return to my family as a layman. My other brothers asked me to leave the monastery that evening and head into the city. They wanted to eat BBQ, but it was so late. Although I didn't want to go with them, I was forced to because I had been asked many times. They made our bed and made it look like someone was in it. Our master must not be made aware that we are out this late. Yet, our master still found out we were not in the monastery. He called and requested us to return immediately. They all came back, but I insisted on remaining in the city center. I stayed in a hotel for one night. I'm afraid of returning to the monastery

the next day. I have no idea how to speak to my master. I then fled to another city. I feared being punished. I remain hidden so that no one can locate me. I am aware that everyone was looking for me at the moment. I know that if I don't return right away, I will never have a chance to return to the monastery. My master and the monastery won't accept me. Then until I ran out of money after two months of hiding. I had already been removed from the registry by the monastery. I was embarrassed and unsure how to face my master, so I avoided him for six months out of fear".

- -JB, 07.2021

I asked him why he did not follow the other brothers back to the monastery at that time. *" I felt uncomfortable with why I went back when they told me to go back and went out when they told me to come out and play, and I didn't want to explain anything to the master. We've already lied ",* he added. He didn't tell me what really happened that night. Likewise, we are unable to evaluate whether he violated any standards or moral principles. However, his emotional response to the situation revealed a sense of guilt. Can we assume, in this way, that the self's perceptions and emotional thoughts about identity in a specific situation and position are shaped by the norms ?

Moreover, monks are continually reminded of their monastic identities through moral principles. They must continuously evaluate their words and deeds in the context of both secular morality and monastic institutionality. When I was conducting fieldwork in 2018, I made an appointment with a monk named LR to meet and chat at a cafe. The coffee shop is located in the heart of the ancient town, with many cafes and restaurants. Many youthful residents and visitors who come here to have fun. Sometimes, young monks frequent these cafes and restaurants. I initially heard about LR through monk, JC, back in 2015. LR became a monk in 2004 at the age of 14. He claimed to have been on duty this year at his local temple, attached to the Ganden Sumtseling monastery. He had come downtown

today to buy some necessities to bring back. He utilized the café's wireless internet to download his iPad with various TV shows. He said that these TV shows provide him with entertainment when he finds himself with idle time at the temple.

The monk LR said,

"The life of our monks is better now than it used to be. Many outsiders and tourists visit our monastery because it is a popular tourist destination. Since then, we have received additional funding. Additionally, more and more villagers perform religious rituals in their homes, and we benefit financially and in terms of resources when we chant scriptures for them. We do occasionally hang out because of this. But we worry that our superiors already know that. On the one hand, our masters believe we are still young monks and that becoming fascinated with the outside world is not beneficial for us. He is concerned that young monks won't be able to follow the disciplines of Buddhism. On the other hand, laypeople will discuss the remarks and deeds of our monks. If we dress in the monks' uniform, we do some terrible things, that will lead to monks' reputation damage".

- -LR, 09.2020

Thus, the normative structure involves both self-imposed discipline by the monks and moral expectations from others. When I chatted with LR, I noted that LR usually seemed to be glancing around and searching for someone or something when we were conversing. I asked him whether he was looking for something. He smiled and said, *"No. I'm not searching for anything. I just look around and see some people in this coffee shop. But neither anyone I know nor anyone knows me. I feel constricted by the fact that you're a young girl. I am a young monk having coffee with a young girl while wearing the monk's robes. Even if we only communicate, I am concerned that someone will spread rumors about us".* As I mentioned earlier, this kind of talk has already caught the public's attention in various secular settings. Such scrutiny from the secular world highlights the unique nature of monastic identity and the high moral standards it is held to. Increasingly,

people are raising questions about the authenticity of monks and are skeptical of their lifestyles in the material world. Clearly, as society progresses, the bond of trust between monks and their followers has grown more complicated. An owner of an inn from another province remarked,

"I am a businessman. I often had a few superstitions quality. I believe Buddhism and Buddhist monks could be lucky charms for me. Buddhist monks, in particular, deserve my respect because, in my opinion, they are distinct from ordinary laypeople like me. They live in a tranquil and pure world and lack competitive desires. However, I'm also confused. Recently, I noticed numerous Ganden Sumtseling monks driving brand-name vehicles, donning designer clothing, dining at expensive places, even going to bars, etc. My perception of these acts is genuinely startled by them. If they don't wear the monks' robes, I can't tell them apart from the rest of us".

- -W, 04.2021

His opinion illustrates the morally governed in the system of norms. In other words, those who remain in the secular world believe monks have a routine and straightforward life that can discern between social and religious obligations. This moral expectation establishes the monk's self-identity while also shaping the monk's outward appearance.

- Cultural-cognitive pillar

In addition to regulatory and normative aspects, the cultural-cognitive framework also significantly impacts identity formation. The institutionalists of cultural-cognitive emphasize how shared understanding builds social reality and gives formed frames their meaning. As Scott (2013) has already mentioned, the cultural-cognitive viewpoint is primarily seeking to explain how institutions are created, maintained, and changed overtime. This understanding covers both the official rules and guidelines steering institutional conduct, as well as the more informal cultural assumptions and shared beliefs that define how these institutions

are perceived and interpreted. According to this perspective, institutions are constantly constructed and reconstructed via ongoing social interaction and negotiation and profoundly connect to cultural beliefs and values.

Furthermore, the cultural-cognitive pillar also emphasizes the role of symbolic representations in shaping institution behavior and identity. Symbolic representations include things like the expression of language, the types of daily diet, the kinds of living house, and the ways of livelihood. These symbolic representations reflect cultural beliefs and values, and are also indirectly used to construct and reinforce those cultural identities. In the cultural-cognitive framework of institutional theory, these symbolic elements function as both internal and external influences. On the one hand, symbolic representations are internal to the institution or organization, in that they are part of the cultural beliefs and values that shape institutional behavior. For instance, the dress codes and daily routines of monastic communities are internal symbolic representations that help to reinforce the cultural values of monasticism. On the other hand, symbolic representations can also be influenced by external factors, such as broader cultural norms and values within society. For example, tourism and the development of technology are external symbolic representations that may affect the monastic identity and practices.

The overall situation of monks' daily existence is shaped by these symbolic representations, such as the rituals they follow, their daily meal, their places to stay, their leisure activities, their sources of money, their retirement and return to their families, etc. The changes in external factors require monks to adapt their spiritual practices to remain relevant and sustainable in internal factors. I'll begin debating how monks conceptualize their sense of self in their everyday practice by examining the abovementioned elements.

4.2.2 Monks' daily practices and routines

- Monks' repetitive daily practices

Tibetan Buddhist monasteries adhere to a structure resembling mentorship, just as Western research institutions. Before a youngster enters a monastery, according to my fieldwork, he needs to find a monk who has been there for at least 30 years to serve as a mentor or as his master. In addition, they require permission to enter the monastery and take the vows of a monk from the living Buddha or the monastery's abbot. The youngster is permitted to become a monk once a verbal agreement is made voluntarily by both. To enter the monastery, the child must pay specific dues, which stand for tuition. The payment need not, however, be in cash; it may be in the form of meat, butter, salt, highland barley flour, or even firewood. These items or money will be given to their master, who will keep them. And the other disciples in Khamtsen will receive some food things. It is the first step for a layman to enter a monastery, but since he hasn't been ordained, he isn't allowed to use the title "monk".

Most of the time, their masters are their close relatives. Particularly at my field site, the monastery where monks reside serves as an acquaintance society. Novice monks reside with their masters, and although each master has a distinct daily routine, they all share the common trait of being strict. Two monks from different Khamtsens recalled,

"I am 28 years old. I became a monk when I was 12 years old. My big brother is also a monk. He became a monk when he was 8 years old. Our master is our mother's close relative. We lived with him when we were novice monks. My big brother is 12 years older than me. He studies very well, and entered the monastery earlier than me. So we were not in the same class. I lived with my other 12 brothers in our master's house. We had a hard period. During that time, we woke up at 6 am., cooked breakfast, and then learned Tibetan phonetic. We took turns cooking, and two brothers worked together for one day. In the evening, our master will

examine our studies; if we can't answer or memorize the texts, he will punish us. Our master hit us on the shoulder or head with the wood stick".

- -LZ, Dongwang Khamtsen 05.2021

"When I initially arrived at the monastery, it was a challenging period, and I had a lot of work and studying to accomplish. I believe it is a sort of test for us. At the time, we were not ordained. When I was a novice monk, I had to put in a lot of study time to meet my master's criteria. I'll be able to claim to be a monk only after ordination. All the novice monks reside together in our Khamtsen. We studied Buddhist literature, the Tibetan alphabet, ritual dances, and instruments. There is little time for rest because the daily program is jam-packed from morning to sunset".

- -LR, Yangtang Khamtsen 09.2020

Although the monks' degrees of title change depending on how long they have been monks, their specific areas of knowledge are more influenced by their own work and efforts. They all essentially have the same experience in daily practice. As already explained, the normative system governs how monks spend their daily lives. In his book, *The life of Tibetan Buddhist monks*, Chinese writer Zhang (2003) summarized the monks' lives into 13 points, which are studying Buddhist texts, self-cultivation, praising Buddhists, reciting Buddhist texts, public Buddhism speech, spiritual practice, interpreting Dharma, Buddhist scriptures debating, keep right mindfulness, establish monks group, establish training hall, respect Buddhist precepts. Under the monastic institution, monks hold a regulative daily routine. Monks follow a set daily routine as part of the monastic structure. Although depending on the Khamtsen to which they belong, study time and progress may vary. However, as stated in the following table (Table 4.3), the daily schedule is often similar.

Apart from participating in religious events inside or outside the monastery, monks must adhere to a set schedule. Typically, those who have been in monastic

5:30–6:00	get up	cleaning the chapel, get water for Buddha , praying and blessing
6:30–8:00	meditation	recite scriptures
8:00–9:00	have breakfast	participate in the morning recital in the main hall or Khamtsen hall
9:30–11:00	study in Khamtsen	or go out doing religious rites
11:00–13:30	have lunch	study in Khamtsen (Buddhist scriptures, religious dances, or religious instruments, etc.)
14:00–15:30	young monks continue to study or practice Tibetan calligraphy	older monks can go to the center of town to buy daily necessities or groceries
16:00–18:00	study and recite Buddhist scriptures	ask some questions to the Master, or prepare items for religious ceremonies
18:00–20:00	have dinner	participate in the Buddhist scriptures debating class
20:30–23:00	recite or meditation	have a rest, sleep

Table 4.3 The daily routine of Tibetan Buddhist monks

life for less than ten years are not allowed to leave after 8:00 pm. If a master discovers that his disciples have left their quarters at night, disciplinary action will be taken. In extreme cases, monks may be officially expelled from the monastery.

- Monks' daily diet : "Threefold pure meat" evokes monastic identity

Since they live in high-altitude places with high-temperature variations, a lack of oxygen, and other factors that make them need high-calorie food to get energy, Tibetan Buddhist monks have a different diet than Han Buddhist monks (Barstow, 2017; Buffetrille, 2018). Few crops that are necessary for living thrive on this soil due to these poor conditions. Only highland barley and Tsampa are available to Tibetans and monks as their daily meals. Primarily, Tibetan Buddhist monks consume nearly identical diets as the Tibetans, mainly composed of butter tea, highland barley, potatoes, beef, and pork. Most Tibetans consumed meat, but a tiny minority of people chose to become vegetarians in some way, either by giving up meat totally, reducing back on how much they consumed, or attempting to lessen the negative karma associated with eating meat by praying for the animal (Barstow, 2019). It is worth mentioning that most major monastic guidelines do not mention meat eating. However, meat was usually allowed to Tibetan Buddhist monks under certain circumstances, but where it was still regarded negatively (Barstow, 2019).

For the monks, there are strict guidelines about meat consumption, and not all flesh may be consumed. Monks must adhere to the meal rules and maintain a proper attitude toward the people, believers, and other monks. A monk's attitude toward eating embodies his whole attitude toward society (Horner & Brahmali, 2014). It

is essential to know where the meat originates and the purpose of the animal killed. Buddhism has a neutral stance: if there is no link between the monk consuming the animal's meat and its slaughter, either directly or indirectly, he is not breaking the rules of law. For this reason, eating flesh was not entirely forbidden in Buddhist monasticism (Wijayaratna, 1990).

According to traditional Buddhist monk discipline, Buddhist monks are permitted to eat "threefold pure meat", which means the monks are not seen, heard, or suspected (Horner & Brahmali, 2014). Not seen indicates that no monks were present as the animal was being trapped or slaughtered. Not heard entails no sound made when the animal was slaughtered. The animal that was allegedly intentionally slaughtered to help a monk is referred to as suspected. If a monk consumes this impure flesh, it is a serious crime.

In my fieldwork, a living Buddha said:

"Our followers treat us with such respect. They constantly bring our monks wonderful presents when they visit the monastery. For the believers, offering beneficial items to the monks is a means to get merit. All living things must be prayed for, and we must assist them in finding a way to emancipation. While we accept others' gifts at discretion, we should demonstrate compassion instead of taking it for granted. I won't consume any meat that is killed for me by a follower who welcomes me to his house to help them in prayer. But actually, monks don't be allowed to refuse any offerings".

- -KS, 10.2020

Laypeople can earn merit by giving money and other items to the monastery. The monks must accept these goods to benefit the believers' ability to make merit. As Schopen (1996) noted, *"a monk here is one who accepts gifts so others can make merit, and he is obligated to do so by the authority of the Buddha".* The connection between monks and laypeople is fundamentally based on this obligation across the Buddhist world, and Tibet is no exception (Barstow, 2019). As a result,

a monk is not permitted to reject a gift of meat from a laity. It is not only against Buddhist precepts to break such a rule, but also poses the risk of corrupting trust in the relationship with the faithful.

Some monks commit to vegetarianism during traditional Buddhist festivals or periods of self-control. Specifically, many monks adopt a vegetarian lifestyle on the first or fifteenth day of April, a holy month according to the Tibetan calendar, in honor of Buddha Shakyamuni's birth, enlightenment, and attainment of nirvana. People believe that restraining meat eating during this holy month will make more merits. While staying with two scripture master monks in May 2020, the younger one, LZ, informed me that they were practicing vegetarianism for 15 days while chanting rituals internally, to honor the significant events in Buddha Shakyamuni's life. He emphasized the importance of maintaining inner peace during this time, though he clarified that the choice between a vegetarian or non-vegetarian diet was voluntary.

His brother, monk LS claimed that *"We have better living conditions now that we can eat meat, veggies, and fruits. Thirty years ago, life was not at all as it was today when I was a youngster. There was no such thing as not eating meat at this period; there were just potatoes and barley flour available to consume. Their young monks' living conditions are always improving, and becoming vegetarian for a period is like a form of practice. The truth is that we monks were forbidden from placing demands on food"*.

In the monastic community I observed, meat consumption wasn't universally prohibited. Instead, restrictions on eating meat were typically tied to specific religious events. In order to better understand their way of life, I adopted the same daily routine and eating habits as they did at the time. Although some monks are against eating meat, it is actually acceptable as long as it isn't prepared during any particular religious rituals and is based on the threefold pure meat. However, according to my observations, the boundary for determining whether

meat is threefold pure meat is somewhat vague. Monks usually go to the market to buy meat from the butcher, who usually leaves fresh meat for them. According to the monk, the primary indicator of whether meat is edible is whether it was carefully prepared for him. The adherents don't specifically emphasize this preparation, so there appears to be some unspoken understanding and trust between the two parties.

In short, the diet of Tibetan Buddhist monks is the same as that of Tibetans. The general shift in the social environment has impacted the monks' alimentation. However, as a cultural-cognitive component, eating regulations evoke the identities of monks, giving the diets varied significance.

- Monks' living space : Belonging and Retirement

According to the different Khamtsen locations of Ganden Sumtseling, the dormitories distribute throughout the monastery. The dorms for the monks are designed after typical Tibetan bungalows, which are widely spaced separately and feature a single type of outside decoration. In contrast, the interior design changes depending on the monks' preferences and financial situation. To accommodate the cold highland environment, the majority of monks' dormitories are constructed with aluminum or steel glass cottages in the courtyard. Since the social economy has grown recently, monk dorms typically have two or three floors up. The main bedroom, a second bedroom, a living room, a kitchen, and a chapel hall are divided inside the monks' dormitory. The chapel hall must be located in the uppermost portion of the home since it is a crucial component of the monks' dormitory. A monk should sleep with his head facing the chapel. A monk's day also begins with chapel cleaning and water delivery for Buddha.

In the monks' dormitories which builds in the early years, the toilets were usually set in the courtyard and not placed in the rooms. The explanation is that the restrooms were once pit toilets, which would emit foul odors and were unhygienic. The monks believed bathrooms to be dirty and thought the smells would harm the Buddha. Although the authorities have improved the sanitary conditions inside

the monastery and allowed the installation of flushing toilets in the monks' dorms, many monks still construct toilets in the courtyard.

Two or three monks usually share a dormitory. These monks often have a master-disciple connection, a family relationship, or friendship with other monks. The dormitory does not allow visitors to spend the night, save in exceptional circumstances. For monks whose hometowns are distant from the monastery, there are often one or two guest rooms in the dormitories where their parents or other relatives can spend the night when they visit the monastery on a pilgrimage. Furthermore, I learned from my field that some monks would temporarily keep youngsters of their relatives' families in their dormitories. In Shangri_la City, these youngsters attend boarding high schools. Since their hometowns were distant from the schools, they occasionally spent weekends in the monks' dormitories. In actuality, the monastery has no rules that must be followed prohibiting outsiders from staying in the dorms used by the monks. However, smoking, drinking, and gambling are prohibited in the monks' dormitory. The outsiders and the monks will be kicked out of the monastery if the master or management team member notices these behaviors.

The monastery owns the land where the monks live. There were three ways that monks could get the land. The first is by inheritance, which entails that a family will always have a monk in the monastery, and the younger generation will be eligible to receive the land upon the death of the senior monk. The second way involves buying land or a residence from the passed-away monks' families. If a monk has gone away and there are no monks in the family of the following generation, his family may inherit this house. However, because this house lacks a real estate license, laypeople can only sell it to monks in the same village for a low price and cannot stay there for themselves or sell it to citizens. If not, the monastery may reclaim the land. The third option is to buy land from Khamtsen. Those monks who have enrolled in advance will receive unoccupied land from Khamtsen.

At the monastery, monks acquire land through verbal agreements, never through written contracts. The monks explained that as each house has a number, you may claim a license of belonging by Khamtsen and registering your name and number. When monks buy parcels inside the monastery, neither a land certificate nor a contract is required. The price of the land fluctuates and is inconsistent depending on when it is acquired. In addition, several Khamtsen with a small population of monks, such as Xiangchen Khamtsen, Gro Khamtsen, and Jidi Khamtsen, will provide monks with free land. In general, buying monastery land costs far less than the market rate —typically between 6,000 and 30,000 CNY (around 820 to 4200 euros). Only 300 monks have dormitories at the monastery due to the limited space, which means that about one-third of the monks still need land for dorms. Because of this, a dormitory is shared by some monks from the same families and villages. Young monks frequently stay with their masters for longer than ten years. They are allowed to leave and construct their own house after ten years. In addition to a restricted amount of land, many monks lack the funds to build and furnish their houses after buying the land. A Tibetan-style house needs to be constructed for at least 300,000 CNY (around 41,095 euros). This represents a considerable expense for many monks. However, the desire among many monks to build a dormitory piqued my interest. In the Buddhist case, the Buddhist monks have been equated with the life of householders, meaning that becoming a monk entails joining a brotherhood of the "homeless" (Collins, 1988; Mills, 2000).

Likewise, numerous studies that I have mentioned define monks as religious renouncers, characterizing renunciation as the monk's "departure" from the world of social interconnectedness, reshaping the renounced monk as a rationalized, unconnected individual, detached from particular ties (Ortner, 1978; M. C. Goldstein & Tsarong, 1985; Day, 1989). In actuality, becoming a monk means joining a "sangha lineage" that resembles a kinship system (Carrithers, 1979) in the monastery. This lineage establishes a genealogy of knowledge and

authority, including his teacher, teacher's teacher, and so on. The monastery and its kin-like teaching lineages support the monks' sense of belonging and fellowship. Under this monasticism cultural-cognitive, monks seek to construct their own house in the monastery and establish their own identity as part of a broader tradition.

Take JC Monk as an example: In 2008, he submitted an application to Khamtsen for a land parcel. The 528 square meter piece of land costs 30,000 CNY (about 4200 euros). In 2015, he constructed the house's model and facade. He spent 500,000 CNY to completely refurbish his house up until 2022. While the house wasn't being built, he lived in his cousin's home. He has been generating income through business operations in order to complete his house. As far as I can recall, JC has been planning to build his own home ever since I first met him in 2014, but owing to a lack of resources, he didn't finish it until 2022, one year after I left the field. After assisting in rebuilding his original family's house and completing the construction of his own residence, JC —from a low-income family —also accrued some debts. I once questioned him on the importance of constructing his own home. Why couldn't you continue to reside in your master's home ? We were in his cousin's house's living room at that time. He explained that he left his master's home in 2013 and has moved elsewhere. He felt he had graduated after ten years of study with his teacher, despite not having his own house then. Besides, several other brothers have moved. Everyone wishes to construct their own home. He continued,

"I have no intention of returning to the outside world. I want to have my own home at the monastery, as I could spend my entire life as a monk. My parents would have a place to stay when they visited me in the monastery. It is also easier to visit my home for a cup of tea and some downtime when other brothers come to see me or friends like you. Even though I'm currently preoccupied with my business, when I'm older, I want to practice my spirituality in the home that I constructed".

By building his house, he deepened his sense of belonging to the monastic community and consolidated his ties to the other monks. In addition, he could create a living space that reflected his own tastes and aesthetics and supported his spiritual practice by building his own house. His residence has two levels with roughly 180 square meters each and a 100 square meter backyard. The first floor included the dining room and kitchen. On the second level, from left to right, are the chapel hall, bedroom, second bedroom, and living room. In the courtyard, there is construction for a toilet. His cousin and he both live in this dorm together.

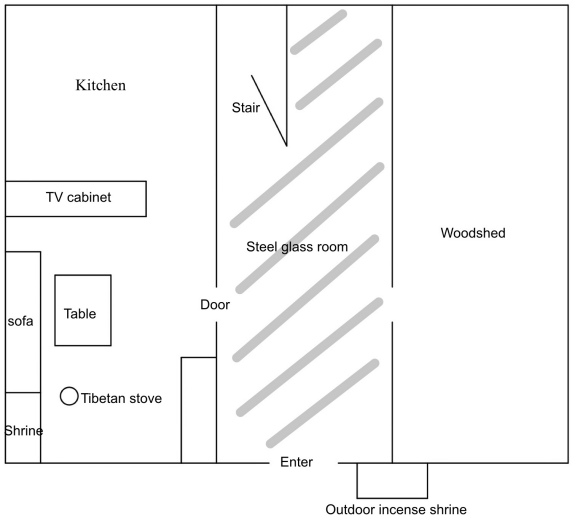


Fig. 4.2 Monk dormitory A-1

"The monastery does not have any particular regulations about how monks must construct their residences; instead, it mainly depends on the monks' financial capabilities and tastes. However, the houses of ordinary monks cannot be over the height of the Khamtsen Hall and the home of the living Buddha. Furthermore, only the home of the Living Buddha is permitted to place yellow curtains on its windows, not the windows of ordinary monks. The yellow curtains indicate which house the

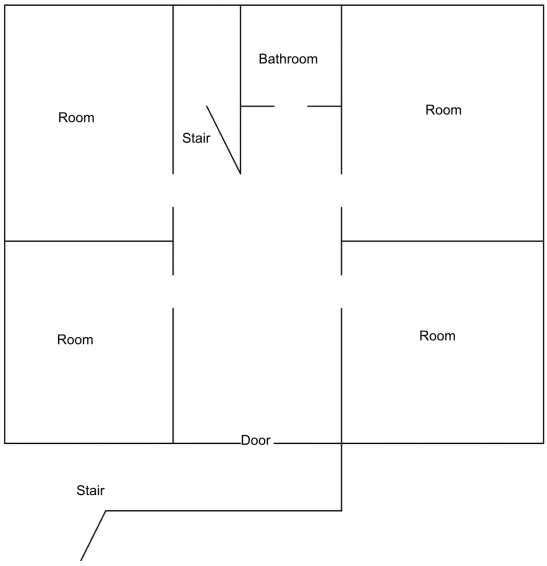


Fig. 4.3 Monk dormitory A-2

living Buddha resides in.

The decoration of our monks' dormitories is similar to Tibetan laypeople. That difference, there is sanctified order in the chapel hall. Monks usually put the Buddhist scriptures, Master/teacher, and Buddha on the Buddhist shrine from left to right. In contrast, Tibetan lay people typically put the Buddha, Buddhist scriptures, and Master from left to right. For our monks, if we want to find a path of liberation, we must understand the Buddhist Dharma. The first thing is to study and practice the Buddhist scriptures. And we cannot understand without a Master; a Master can instruct us. When we consistently abide by the path of the Buddhist texts and Master, we will finally encounter the Buddha. For their lay people, they first know that Buddhism is Buddha Shakyamuni, who led his believers got self-liberating. And that is the reason for the different order of our placement".

- -JC, 10.2022

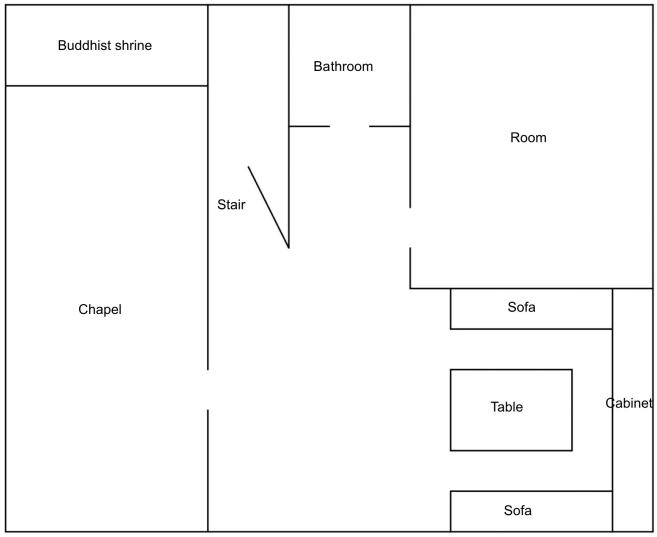


Fig. 4.4 Monk dormitory A-3

Another young monk, NJ, built a house with his uncle. His parents contributed to the cost of it in part. NJ added that when they aren't leaving his master's home, his master helps them manage their yearly revenue. When he was prepared to construct the house, his master gave all that money to him. In other words, although monks have a similar desire for a home to laypeople, the master-disciple transmission structure inside the monastic institution support shaping the monks' sense of self. If a monk does not return to secular life, the dormitory will serve as his permanent residence. When a monk grows old, his family will take him home to retire if he has no dormitory in the monastery. Nevertheless, most monks wish to retire and spend the rest of their lives in the monastery. I spent a short time in the residence of two monks in 2021. One of them, the senior monk LS, claimed to have built his current residence eight years ago to support his daily spiritual practice and eventual retirement here. LR monk, his younger brother, can also look after him

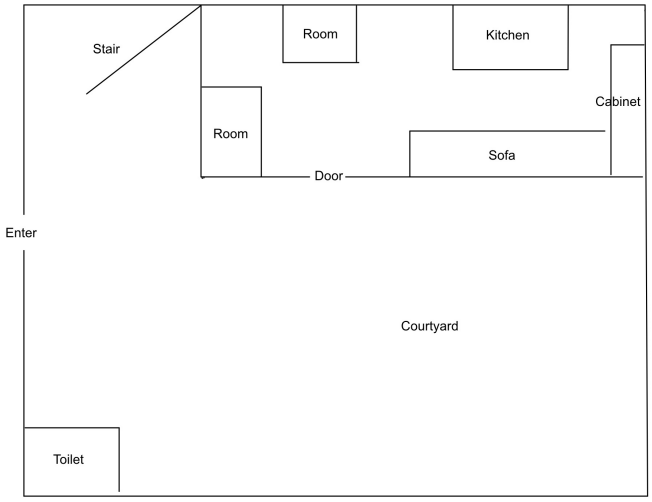


Fig. 4.5 Monk dormitory B-1

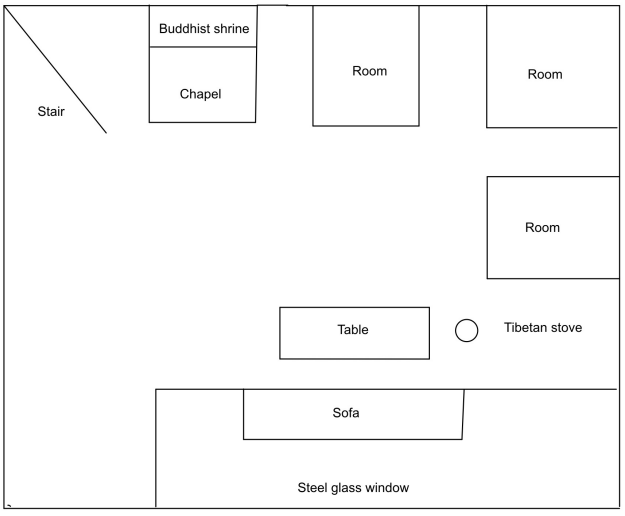


Fig. 4.6 Monk dormitory B-2

in the future. LS is only 40 years old, but has begun to make retirement plans.

He followed by highlighting the value of owning a residence. *"The world of today is evolving quickly and effectively, and as monks, we must consider our own life. Actually, you laypeople are not much different from this. Even though our families will help care for us as we age, they won't have any issues if we have our own houses. I frequently perform religious rituals in my home and pray for my family"*. Therefore, through my conversations and observations, it's evident that the monks' wish to build living quarters, either for enhancing their spiritual practices or preparing for future retirement, signifies their strong ties to and identification with the monastery.

- Monks' leisure activities

Anthropologists defined leisure activities as making no direct contribution to production or reproduction. These activities include lying down, games, sports,ceremonies, etc (Rubin, Flowers, & Gross, 1986). Under the monastic institution, monks live following the rules. According to the Buddhist discipline (Horner & Brahmali, 2014), they are not allowed to engage in lay-world activities. However, monks maintain a dual identity while residing in a secular society. One is that of a national citizen, and the other is a specialized monastic identity, unique to their monastic institution. In addition to engaging in religious practices and activities associated with their monastic community, monks are allowed to partake in recreational pursuits, provided these are in alignment with Buddhist tenets and institutional monastic guidelines. Specifically, after a decade of monastic life, monks affiliated with the Ganden Sumtseling Monastery have a certain degree of latitude in determining their daily activities.

Monks typically spend their free time strolling, conversing with their fellow monks, going on pilgrimages to other places or monasteries, or visiting their parents at home during the holidays. The Spring Festival is a one-week holiday for them. They'll return to their hometowns to see their family. For them, it is the most

extended holiday of the year.

"Right before the spring celebration, we'll return home. Typically, I go with December 27th or 28th. I wasn't old enough to own a car when I was a novice monk. I thus frequently ride the bus. When we return, our master will give us 100 yuan. He only gave us what we needed—50 Yuan for the bus fare, 20-30 Yuan for the hotel stay, and the rest for dinner. I'll spend a week at home before going back to the monastery. On the sixth day of the first lunar month, we shall return to the monastery, where we will recite Buddhist scriptures and make prayers for all beings".

- -NJ, Dongwang Khamtsen,06.2021

"We had very little free time when we were novice monks. We stayed with our master during that period. He constantly pushes us to improve ourselves and manages us strictly. The rules of Buddhism must be observed. We must consult our master if we wish to go out on Sunday. I spend my free time reading, practicing calligraphy, doing laundry, or going to the local natural spa. I frequently return home to see my parents because my hometown is close to the monastery".

- -DJ, Jaya Khamtsen, 08.2021

"Living conditions were poor at that time, and there weren't many leisure activities available. We were simply conversing with other monks or amusing ourselves, occasionally playing Tibetan chess or hide-and-seek. We took a group walk to the lake in front of the monastery during the lunch break".

- -XL, Jidi Khamtsen, 08.2021

Due to the monastery's transformation into a notable tourist attraction, monks increasingly find themselves engaging with people from outside their community. This public exposure has indirectly put the monastery's internal management and disciplinary systems to the challenge. Additionally, as the social and technological landscapes evolve, monks are presented with a broader range of leisure activities. These contemporary forms of recreation include playing basketball, engaging in

pool games, frequenting downtown cafes or teahouses, shopping online, and even watching short videos on platforms like TikTok.

"Living conditions have improved in recent years. Previously, the monastery was a strictly controlled institution, but it is now open to tourists. The management and discipline appear to be weakening. We have been monks for many years, and we manage our lives. When we are not living with our master, we have a lot more free time. We usually take breaks by watching TV, watching movies on our phones, or going downtown for supper with friends, which is quite different from when we were novice monks. In the past, we monks gathered in the dormitory to chat and were chastised by the master. The government has now distributed televisions to each monk's dormitory, allowing monks to comprehend national policy. We can all watch television and other shows".

- -LR, Yangtang Khamtsen, 09.2021

"Nowadays, the social climate is overly loud, and visitors pack our monastery, making spiritual practice hard. And there is no way for us not to touch and accept new things, just like ordinary people. Material things also attract us. However, I will accept them on a case-by-case basis. I generally watch Buddhist films or singing competitions. I watch it with the intention of learning from it. Understanding how teachers and students interact in singing competitions will benefit me. If I see anything unpleasant, I will meditate to clear my head of any negative or seductive thoughts."

- - LS, Rongba Khamtsen, 09.2020

Undoubtedly, the traditional monastic way of life has undergone considerable transformation due to the rise of the tourism sector and advancements in technology. The leisure pursuits and recreational activities of monks have become increasingly indistinguishable from those of the general lay population. Leisure activities in contemporary society are more related to potential consumption than the sorts that stop production and reproduction. Cleary (2020) concludes through

Bauman's words, leisure under modernity is described by our enslavement to the consuming life. Bauman stated the modern liquid context that *"the era of deregulation, individualization, frailty of human bonds, of fluidity of solidarities and of seduction replacing normative regulation"* (Jacobsen & Tester, 2007, p. 313). Consumption is the only path to achieving the desired certainty.

Certainly, the influx of new leisure activities and opportunities to interact with secular society poses a nuanced challenge to the monks' identities. With years of monastic education and disciplined living under their lives, these individuals find themselves at a crossroads. On the one hand, they are faced with the imperative to adapt and integrate into a rapidly evolving secular society. On the other hand, they bear the responsibility of upholding their religious vows and Buddhist precepts, particularly to maintain the trust and spiritual connection with their community of believers.

This complex landscape creates a dynamic tension in which monks vibrate between the rigidity of monastic regulation and the fluidity of a deregulated contemporary context. However, rather than undermining their monastic identity, this interplay appears to reinforce it. The normative monastic system and the cultural-cognitive pillar of institutional theory serve as anchoring points, providing the monks with a robust framework for self-reflection and identity construction, even as they navigate this fluid modern social milieu and array of activities.

- Monks' sources of livelihood : Self-sufficiency

In historical Tibet, it was common for the large monasteries do not supply their monks' needs except for formal gatherings where tea was served (M. C. Goldstein, 2009). Although these monasteries possessed land, the sustenance of monks largely depended on the donations and offerings from the laity, rather than any productive activities undertaken by themselves (M. C. Goldstein, 1997; Kapstein, 2013). In recent times, Tibetan Buddhist monasteries have gradually entered a morden transition stage, following a development path that presents a multi-layered

compound economy of devotee support, monastic self-support, and social security. These economies serve as the material vehicles of Tibetan Buddhist beliefs. While numerous scholarly works (M. Goldstein, 1991; Nietupski, 2011; Jansen, 2015; Mortensen, 2016) have explored the intricate relationship between monastic economies and broader Tibetan society, I aim to focus on the economic practices of individual monks as a lens through which to examine their evolving identities.

As in the past, most monks depend on their families, and their families are generally responsible for providing them with housing, sustenance, clothing, and the necessary resources to pursue scriptural education. As a result, the financial standing of monks' families determines their level of wealth. If their families are wealthier, monks will live in dwellings made of the finest materials, equipped with modern conveniences like mobile phones and cars. The monks whose financially struggling families were forced to reside in the homes of other monks because they could not afford to build their own houses. Therefore, they carry out a variety of productive activities all year to generate income. Some monks worked as partners for other monks, while others ran Buddhist chaplet shops, engaged in Tibetan medicine, or offered religious services to non-monks.

Along with the "Shangri-la" cultural industry has grown, the monastery has developed its tourism industry and fulfilled its needs. According to Chinese scholar Lixia Ding's fieldwork (2014) noted in 2013: In 2009, the monastery saw 17.6 million CNY in tourism ticket revenue, which increased to 27 million CNY in 2011, then to 38 million CNY in 2012. As a result, the monastery can provide the monks with 20,000 - 40,000 CNY per year in subsistence allowances, renovate the monastery, and spend money on Buddhist activities. The monastery has not only become self-sufficient but also feeds the local community.

During my 2020 fieldwork, many monks conveyed that the financial allowance extended to them annually was perceived to be subject to variation, contingent upon the amount of tourism revenue amassed by the monastery

throughout the year. According to pertinent reports [2], the ticket revenue for the initial half of 2019 amounted to 23 million CNY. Conversely, tourism in 2020 witnessed a delayed peak until July, resulting in a lower recorded ticket revenue of 3.45 million CNY. In light of the global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the monks got roughly 10,000 CNY in 2020. These monks stated that the subsidies that are disseminated annually are a fundamental component of their revenue streams. To a certain extent, this suggests that the transformations in the outside world could straight impact monks' means of sustenance. Furthermore, the distribution of annual amounts among the monks in different Khamtsens is uneven. The variation in donations income received by each Khamtsen is the underlying reason for this difference. It has been observed that visitors tend to favor Khamtsens situated in proximity to the main hall, thereby resulting in lesser donations being received by those that are comparatively distant. Consequently, this discrepancy in donation revenue is reflected in the income disparity of the monks.

Additionally, monks often receive offerings, including modest monetary gifts and food, during Buddhist ceremonies hosted at their monasteries. They may also be invited to recite chants at the homes of their followers in their free time, in return for donations that help sustain their daily lives. Alongside these traditional sources of support and monastery-provided subsidies, some monks engage in business ventures to supplement their income. The lay community holds diverse views on monks participating in commercial activities. Some individuals see no issue with monks engaging in commerce, as long as their actions are aligned with Buddhist principles and are carried out with a sense of compassion. Conversely, there are those who believe that monks should primarily focus on their spiritual pursuits within the confines of the monastery, arguing that regular involvement in worldly affairs could hinder their spiritual practice. It has come to my attention that monks are increasingly involved in an array of entrepreneurial endeavors, such as selling

[2] http://www.szljq.com/Cpage/CharacterPaitingDetail.aspx?TID=52&ID=7&PID=1
https://www.tibet3.com/news/zangqu/yn/2022-07-26/283226.html

Buddhist-related merchandise and locally harvested specialty items like cordyceps, matsutake mushrooms, and Tibetan saffron. They also often collaborate with laypersons to establish Buddhist shops or restaurants.

Typically, monks attach their reputation and available resources to engage in commercial endeavors. Nevertheless, what caught my attention was the common consensus among monks and locals that monastic individuals lack the requisite business insight. Last year, the 41-year-old LS [3] monk decided to shut down his Buddhist supplies store, which had been struggling financially. I was introduced to him by JC, and LS would often meet JC at his store for a cup of tea. The monk LS has operated a Buddhist supply store in partnership with his cousin since 2014. However, due to his commitments to chanting and religious activities both at the monastery and within the community, the store faced many challenges. Despite receiving some support from their supporters and devotees, the shop was still operating at a substantial loss, which prompted the decision to close rather than incur further debt.

I was conversing with LS at JC's store, where two other cooperative monks were also there. It is common practice for store visitors to participate in a friendly conversation over tea. Even outside tourists who go shopping are invited to join the conversation and share tea, which the monks believe is crucial in facilitating positive connections. The monastics believe that cultivating and maintaining relationships has a higher significance than the deal and investment of goods. A local customer, who had purchased at their store, subsequently joined us and expressed his opinion that these monks were inexperienced in conducting business transactions. According to his statement, the monks are open to negotiating with their guests. It is worth noting that transactions with haggling may lead to missed earn money because monks will agree with any price. However, in stores run by monks, local customers generally refrain from bargaining, as doing

[3] As the names of the monks take a significant degree of the same name, I differentiate them according to their respective ages.

so is not considered conducive to accruing merit. It must be acknowledged that monetary support is necessary for the monks' livelihood; therefore, their financial sustainability is crucial. Local residents place unwavering trust in the monks and view spending money in their stores as a form of spiritual offering. However, certain instances indicate that these monks were lack of effective management in their business operations.

To some extent, I share the same opinion as the local guy. During the last three months of my fieldwork, I resided at JC's store. But he was infrequently present in the shop. His absence was mainly due to the necessity of procuring the store's supplies and exploring other business opportunities. The two other monk partners were present daily. However, they showed a lack of interest in the store's growth and revenue. Despite attracting a significant number of daily clients, most were engaged in conversing and enjoying the offered tea. Although the daily expenditure surpassed the profits, these monk bosses displayed positivity towards business operations.

Occasionally, I ask if they have ever thought of modifying their strategy for business, as their business frequently results in a deficit. They convey an attitude of acceptance towards the outcome of their commercial endeavors and attribute financial success or failure to factors beyond their control. This suggests a certain detachment from material gain. They clarify that they are not concerned about losing money in business, asserting that make money is typically the result of divine intervention. These two monks added, *"The clients who come to drink tea every day are our friends, and they frequently assist us"*. It holds true that the revenue generated by their shop from the surrounding community as well as the unwavering support of numerous followers.

Therefore, while nowadays the monastery provides economic support for its resident monks, it is the adherents who form a crucial part of their livelihood. For monks engaged in commercial activities, their religious status and resources are

leveraged, and the financial rewards received are also reliant on the generosity of the faithful. Despite the ever-evolving external environment, the monks remain unchangeable in maintaining their cultural values and monastic identity. It is worth noting that the advent of technology and tourism has presented new opportunities for monks to engage in digital spiritual practice and consumption. By collaborating with laypeople, they have found a new means of earning a living, demonstrating adaptability to the changing world around them. Further elaboration on the impact of digital on the monks' lives will be discussed in the coming chapter.

4.3 Education Mechanism and Monastic Hierarchy

To adequately evaluate the effects of digital technology on monastic life and the formation of monastic identities, it is essential to explain the underlying educational structure and hierarchical organization present in the monastic system. This is since a monk's position within the monastery particularly impacts their identity within the digital realm. According to Scott (2013), education is a primary societal institution that holds immense significance in shaping an individual's identity. Through the educational journey, individuals acquire abundant valuable knowledge, critical skills, and solid intrinsic values central to their self-perception and place in society. In the case of the monastic community, it is essential to thoroughly understand monks' training and hierarchy systems to analyze how these factors intersect with the digital age.

Tibetan monasteries employ a hierarchical system of titles to distinguish among monks, which could be divided into general and administrative categories. The monastic system allows for a clear delineation of roles and responsibilities within the monastery's organizational structure. In this study, the general titles include those related to religious practice and learning (Figure 4.7), while the administrative titles denote leadership or management roles (Figure 4.8) in the monastic community. This monastic category ensures that each monk is recognized

for their unique contribution and receives the appropriate level of respect within the community.

Title››	Academic Years	Academic Activities
Bande (བན་དེ་) Junior monks	<10 years	doing the laundry, sweeping the floors, cooking, fetching water, learning Tibetan alphabets…
Gelong (དགེ་སློང་) the general term for an ordained monk of a Tibetan Buddhist order	>10 years	memorizing and recite the scriptures, training courses in logic, practice praying in ritual…
Geshe(དགེ་བ་ཤེས་) the Tibetan Buddhist academic degree, means virtuous friend	between 15 and 20 years, or more than 20 years	The exoteric study of Buddhism, as well as the five major topics

Fig. 4.7 General Titles

General term	Minimum academic years	Responsibilities	Selection Criteria	Service time
སྐུ་དབུ་ living buddha	not limited	**management position(spirits symbol)**,the incarnation of Buddha, living Buddha	no special limite	perpetual
མཁན་པོ་ Abbot	> 20 years	**management position**, head of a monastery, in charge of all the monastic activities	got the Geshe degree or living buddha	3 years Jul.16 change
དགེ་བསྐོས Lama discipline	> 20 or 30 years	**management position**, in charge of the roster and discipline of the monks	according to the age and reputation	1 year Jun.3 change
ཟུགས་མཛོད་ monastic steward	> 20 years	**management position,** monastic steward, in charge of monastic financial, 6 monastic stewards for one year	according to the age	1 year Dec.3 change
དབུ་མཛད leader chanter	between 10 and 15 years	leader of chanting sutras when the monks collectively recite sutras	personal interest, voice loud, good memory, selected by Khenpo(abbot)	6 months Jun.3 and Dec.3 change
མཆོད་དབྱན་ offerings maker	junior monk, < 10 years	chief of shrine offerings/ procedures	personal interest, manual dexterity	3 years in Drastang 9 years in Khamtsen
འཕགས་འཚམ་མཁན shrine dancer	junior monk, < 10 years	chief of masked religious dance	personal interest, lightness body	10-13years

Fig. 4.8 Administrative Titles

4.3.1 General Titles and Their Educational Structure

In general, it is customary to refer to novice monks as Bande [4] in Tibetan culture. These novices mean those who have "renounced" lay life or "have

[4]There are several different ways to spell this borrowed term (Jansen, 2015). Bande is derived from the Sanskrit word vandya, from which the English word "bonze" in Japanese is also derived (Snellgrove,

gone forth" (Jansen, 2015), and they must dedicate a minimum of 10 years to studying and residing in the monastery. Over the course of this period, they are expected to perform various duties such as laundry, floor sweeping, cooking, and learning the Tibetan language and Buddhist scripture. Furthermore, they are typically housed under the guidance of their teacher within their Khamtsen. As part of their daily routine, junior monks engage in both practical tasks and intellectual pursuits, such as memorizing sacred texts, which are the foundation of their monastic practice. After every nightly session, their teacher will review the monks' academic progress. The monks must commit scriptures to memory as part of their study. Many masters, however, have adopted an approach wherein they discipline their apprentices with physical punishment if they falter in their recitations or demonstrate an unsatisfactory level of knowledge.

After completing decade-long discipleship under their teacher's tutoring, junior monks can relocate and construct a dwelling. They also have the option of receiving the Gelong [5] ordination. Most Tibetan Buddhist monks at Ganden Sumtseling monastery typically opt to receive this ordination after a decade or more of training. This entails upgrading their vows into full ordination and accepting the responsibility of upholding the 253 precepts. In numerous Tibetan traditions, however, many monastics opt out of receiving Gelong ordination and remain so for several reasons. This gives rise to a category of aged "novices" observed in Tibetan monasteries (Jansen, 2015). Through my fieldwork, I have gathered that the decision to receive the Gelong ordination among monks is voluntary. Several monks have informed me that those who are not prepared to adhere to the 253 vows that come with this ordination have the option to decline it temporarily. Among middle-aged monks, the majority choose to receive the Gelong ordination, and they

2003). Davidson (2005) identifies a group of historical agents called the Bendé (ban de), who had a close affiliation with the ancient monarchic lineage. According to him, they were a composite of clerical and secular members, adopting some monastic rituals on a sporadic basis.

[5] In many works, Gelong also refers to the term bhikṣu, translated as "fully ordained monk", which means this person has taken the full gamut of vows. According to Silk (2008), the word "monk" only for the term bhikṣu (Gelong).

are confident that they can keep their vows and sustain their commitment to praying for all. Conversely, it is observed that monks below the age of 40 often delay their Gelong ordination, perceiving themselves as too inexperienced and liable to err in upholding the virtuous precepts set forth. The decision to embrace the Gelong ordination among monks is primarily influenced by age and one's perception of their ability to enforce the associated commitments. Furthermore, various factors will be considered when a novice embraces the Gelong ordination.

Monk DJ has been residing with a respected living Buddha, who is also his master, since his childhood initiation into a monastic way of life. Nowadays, he has dutifully assumed the role of caregiver and remains ever-present to tend to his master's day-to-day needs. Despite having lived the monastic lifestyle for 16 years, DJ has not yet undergone the Gelong ordination. In explanation, he has stated that while he is attentive to his master's teaching and illustration, he retains concern about the potential for erring behavior on his part. In particular, his master is a living Buddha. The depth of reverence the DJ Monk showcases towards his master permeates all aspects of his daily life.

On one occasion, I was favored to partake in dinner with the monk DJ and his master. The living Buddha was positioned at the center corner of the room during this meal, precisely opposite the fireplace. Notably, the living Buddha's eating utensils were differentiated from those of the other people and served distinctly on the fireplace. Our seating arrangement was positioned beneath the fireplace mantle, with a long table on the adjacent side that contained our meals. During the conversation next to the revered living Buddha, the monk DJ made an unconscious action that exhibited his profound reverence. Specifically, he lifted the seat cushion he was sitting, thereby offering the living Buddha a raised surface to remain seated on. I inquired about the reasons for his action, and in response, he expounded that he functioned not only as my master but also as an embodiment of Buddha. *"Following the teachings of Buddhism, it is crucial to accord him with utmost*

reverence, particularly in light of my status as his disciple. Further, as monks, we should infuse the humility principle within our training".

According to Silk (2008), only those individuals who have adopted the full ordination for a bhikṣu (Gelong) may rightfully identify themselves as monks. However, in this monastery, novice monks may claim the identity of a monk provided that they adhere to the ethical framework of bhikṣu and observe the precepts of Buddhism. For many young monks, acquiring the Gelong precepts is a natural progression within their spiritual development. Therefore, Bande represents the initiation of novice ordination, while Gelong signifies the attainment of full ordination as a monk within the Tibetan Buddhist monastic community.

In contrast, the title of Geshe represents a significant level of academic achievement, which can only be obtained through arduous study and debate (Dreyfus, 2003). It is worth noting that although attaining the Gelong ordination is a mandatory requirement in the path toward achieving the Geshe degree, not all monks who have undergone the Gelong ordination possess the title of Geshe. To attain the Geshe degree, a monk is required to undertake a comprehensive study of the five major texts about Buddhist philosophy. Acquiring expertise in a particular field necessitates a long-term commitment to study, ideally spanning a period of not less than two decades, or even up to three. Demonstrable competence in the degree is gained built upon successfully passing through the content of texts, and challenging debate examinations. These examinations assess the monk's understanding of Buddhist texts and ability to engage in intellectual discourse. The attainment of the Geshe degree signifies more than mere intellectual accomplishment, as it also holds significant social importance. This revered qualification endures reputation and authority, serving as a recognized title that commands respect. Moreover, it is a gateway towards occupying influential roles within the monastic community through leadership opportunities.

Due to the degree's rigorous curriculum, a limited number of monks,

approximately a dozen, only possess this esteemed qualification in this monastery of around 700 monks. The senior monks I have encountered who possess a Geshe degree are generally aged forty years and older. The vast majority of these monks have undertaken an intensive course of study within Tibetan Buddhist monasteries situated in India and have subsequently been awarded that degree. It is noteworthy that these Geshes are not only esteemed by their peers within the monastery but also command high regard from those outside, specifically within the community they serve. Nowadays, in the larger Tibetan monasteries only the more senior and high-level Geshes are considered for the post of abbot (Gyatso, 2003). In like manner, the selection of the abbot for this monastery applies to choosing from among the more experienced monks who have achieved the esteemed academic title of Geshe.

In an interview, I asked the abbot, who holds a Geshe degree, why he chose to pursue his education in India rather than in his own monastery. The abbot explained that his monastery stands apart from other Tibetan monasteries because it focuses more on conducting ceremonial practices rather than delving into traditional Buddhist philosophy. Although their educational system resonates with other Tibetan monasteries, there is no specialized curriculum here, with a monk's learning being predominantly decided by the professors they choose to follow. Additionally, the monastery does not furnish any standard academic structure for degree attainment. Thus, monks who aspire to acquire a Geshe degree must undertake their studies in other monasteries, such as in Tibet, India, or Beijing.

Furthermore, he added, *"the systematic education of monks has become a crucial consideration in this monastery. As our management echoed, we have initiated sutra study classes within the monastery and sent select monks to Buddhist colleges for further study. Nevertheless, it should be noted that these pursuits are undertaken exclusively at the choice of the monks. The significance of a monk's education in today's social climate cannot be overstated. In its current situation,*

the monastery functions not only as a traditional spiritual sanctuary, but also as a tourist hot spot accessible to the public at large; as such, the actions and conduct of our monks reflect the overall image of the monastic community".

Here, in the pursuit of a degree, the actions of a monk align closely with those of the secular society. Personal aspirations may be pursued freely, and a higher degree often translates to elevated status and respect among peers in the monastic community. Notwithstanding individual rank, it is incumbent upon all monks to uphold the reputation of the monastic order. Therefore, the monk's freedom in this regard is defined by the precepts of the monastic system and not those of secular society. While some scholars (B. D. Miller, 1958; Welch, 1967; Mills, 2000) have noted that the guidelines of monasteries are subject to change in response to economic and political shifts in society, Jansen (2015) cautions against neglecting the role of religious practices and emotions in these transformations. He emphasizes that the primary responsibility of monks is to preserve the integrity of the Dharma, foster the harmonious coexistence of virtue and justice, and advance the welfare of all sentient beings. Therefore, it is fundamental for monks to remain adaptable while preserving the solidity of their self-identity amid the constantly evolving social landscape.

4.3.2 Administrative Titles and Their Monastic Hierarchy

The table (Figure 4.8) shows the various monk titles associated with the Ganden Sumtseling monastery, organized hierarchically from superior to inferior. Specifically, the living Buddha, abbot, lama discipline, and monastic steward are categorized under the administration title, signifying their managerial roles within the monastery. Although certain aspects of the monastic structure exhibit egalitarian tendencies akin to those found in Buddhist literature (Jansen, 2015), there is no doubt that the titles given in the monastic system establish a clear hierarchy among its members.

In the monastic system, attaining higher degrees increases the likelihood of assuming leadership positions within the monastery. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that factors such as reincarnation and monastic experience also carry significant importance. In fact, the organization of Ganden Sumtseling lacks a straightforward and uniform ranking system between junior and senior monks. Rather than evaluating a monk's level of mastery in spiritual practices, the hierarchy within the monastery is primarily influenced by his age and duration of involvement in the monastic community. This fundamental distinction between monks indicates one's status within the institution, rather than their level of ability in spiritual practices. Executing such a mechanism may reduce the monks' enthusiasm concerning attaining management positions within the monastery, eventually leading to a static title development trajectory. This trend, formed as a kind of promotion inertia, entails unconcern in pursuing ranked promotions within the organization due to the perceived insufficiency of abilities or the futility of the effort.

Consider the table presented above as a pertinent illustration. For instance, The living Buddha entails a revered religious figure who is believed to embody the reincarnation of a notable spiritual teacher and bears an emblem of spiritual significance. The status of a living Buddha is predetermined when birth and only a select few of the monk fraternity can attain the certification of being a living Buddha during their lifetime. This form contrasts the tenets of Hans Buddhism, which emphasizes the cultivation of Buddhist wisdom and individual practice of monastic leadership.

Similarly, the abbot manages all the monastery's communal matters and rotates this leadership position every three years. The abbot is selected by a living Buddha or an esteemed monk possessing a Geshe degree. Since the achievement of the respected Geshe degree is uncommon in the monastic community, aiming for the abbot position is often an unrealistic and unattainable aspiration for the

majority of monks. This is because the Geshe qualification is perceived as an indispensable condition for the abbot position, thus necessitating a challenging and extensive pursuit of learning and inner development. Merely carrying a dream of becoming an abbot without possessing the necessary intellectual ability and moral aptitude required for such a role can be considered a fanciful and unattainable effort, particularly in light of the rigorous demands and expectations placed on those assigned the responsibility of conducting a monastery.

In the context of this particular monastery, the roles of disciplinary lamas and monastic stewards are relatively undemanding, with the standard required dependent on the monk's age and monastic experience. The idea that pursuing a management title among monks in this monastery is somewhat futile may require reiteration, as it is rooted in the fact that most monks are likely to ascend to the position of disciplinary lamas and monastic stewards in the future. Consequently, attaining a managerial position in this context is rendered insignificant. It remains prominent that a monk's management title status, in this monastery, is a form characteristic.

A significant indicator of a monk's hierarchical position in the monastic community is his age, monastic experiences, and cultural awareness. The cultural ethos of Tibetans shares similarities with the traditional Chinese Confucian culture, which holds for elders and those with vast knowledge and wisdom in profound reverence. In this regard, it is worth noting that even without any formal monastic degree, an older monk will command respect from the public owing to his advanced age and accumulated monastic experiences. Even without a degree, monks who have committed to extensive and thorough study of Buddhist texts for an extended time continue to receive community respect. One illustrative instance is that during the collective recitation of sutras by monks, the leading chanter is responsible for initiating the chanting while the remainder follows suit. According to a senior monk, the position of a leading chanter is revered within the monastery due to

their intellectual and literary prowess in Buddhist scriptures. This is evident by their extensive repertoire of sutras and their authoritative prominence in performing religious rites. However, it is observed that the leader chanters do not necessarily comprehend the significance of the scriptures; they consider the act of recitation is also as highly valuable. This demonstrates the vital role that experience, cultural knowledge, and age play in shaping the social status of a monk beyond their formal education and monastic hierarchy.

4.4 Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has comprehensively examined Tibetan Buddhist monks' offline daily life and their self-identity of monastic life. Firstly, through the primary research approach in the customary ethnography of field materials, which serves as the fundamental framework to expound and examine the underlying reasons behind the transition of individuals into monkhood. The prevalent factors influencing this decision comprise three main dimensions: inheritance of monasticism through family membership in the monastery, family survival strategy, and voluntary monkhood. Of these, the social status of monks in the local community and the propagation of beliefs within their family roots are the primary motivations driving the decision to children into monkhood voluntarily.

Despite indications from many monks that their actual monastic experiences differ significantly from the idealized expectations they once harbored, they remain steadfast in their commitment to monasticism and its associated principles. In contrast to Bauman (2013b), who suggests that the mobility of modern society leads to a constant search for identity stability, monks can adapt and enhance their self-perception in the ever-changing social environment. I attribute this solid self-perception to the monastic surroundings. Even though the surrounding society is rapidly advancing, the monastery remains dedicated to its adherence to discipline and Buddhist principles, regulating and reinforcing the values that

comprise monasticism. As such, the monks' unwavering commitment to their picked way of life can be attributed to the monastic institution's ability to foster their perception of self-identity.

Secondly, I have developed a comprehensive analytical deconstruction of their monastic life experiences. I use Scott's (2013) institutional theory to address the first research question concerning how monks construct their offline identities. Within this institution framework, it is evident that the identities of monks are constructed by the three dimensions of monastic institutions: regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive. The monks' routines, including their food, housing, leisure activities, livelihood patterns, and education, are integrated into an analytical material that systematically examines the monastic system. As a result, this chapter provides a nuanced interpretation of the offline identities of Tibetan Buddhist monks by observing their daily lives within the broader institutional framework.

Building upon this chapter, the subsequent sections will delve further into online monastic identity. My continued section will explore the strength and coherence of monastic identity, particularly concerning the degree to which their offline identity construction influences their online expression. The goal is to gain an increased understanding of how monastic identity manifests in online digital environments and explore the factors that may contribute to forming such identity cognitions.

5

Online Changed Lifestyle and Self-expression

In September 2018, I stayed in a youth hostel in the old town of my fieldwork. Throughout my extended stay, I frequently conversed with the owner, an approximately sixty-year-old woman from Guangdong, who had been running the hostel for five years. When I explained the reason that I was there, she showed great interest but considered the study of that particular group may be fruitless. She does not identify as a follower of Buddhism or any religion, yet contends that Buddhist monks should reside within a pure atmosphere rather than hurrying through the city. The owner has shared her observations about the presence of monks in cafes, mentioning their possession of expensive shoes and high-end smartphones. These observations challenge her preconceived ideas about Buddhist monks. At the same time, she offers an ascetic perspective on the lifestyles of monks in modern urban settings. She has also expressed concerns regarding the

authenticity of online short videos where monks share their daily lives and Buddhist teachings. This uncertainty has led her to question the faithful adherence of monks to the moral and ethical codes of Buddhism.

Moreover, the owner was surprised to discover many young people among her guests who identified themselves as followers of Buddhism. She said these youths were interested in Buddhist-themed videos on short video applications. Many of them embarked on journeys to Shangri_la or Tibet to discover a spiritual tour or fulfill a pilgrimage. She suggests that Tibetan Buddhism seems to be currently enjoying a wave of popularity among the youth. Her viewpoint represents the inherent impression of the monk's image within the secular societal framework. Monastics are expected to adhere to and regulate their own lives strictly. Any deviation from the trajectory set by monastery rules may raise questions and concerns from both the faithful and the wider public (Jansen, 2015).

However, it is essential to recognize that her viewpoint does not encompass the perspectives of the entireness. Specifically, some believe that individuals embodying a monastic identity should refrain from integrating into secular society. They must adhere to a disciplined and ascetic lifestyle. Conversely, another segment of the population embraces incorporating technology into monastic practices. GS, a native of Dongwang Township, serves as a tour guide and docent in the monastery. He maintains an optimistic perspective on integrating digital technology into the daily lives of monks as well as the administrative processes of the monastery. He shared the experience that, in the past, inviting monks to chant sutras was a challenging task that involved significant time and effort, as they had to travel to the monastery physically. Nevertheless, with the advent of cell phones, the local community can efficiently and promptly connect with the monks through group-based communication platforms like WeChat. Although some may criticize this approach for potentially shifting from the traditional essence of rituals, he emphasizes the importance of personal faith and remains unaffected by such

external concerns. He believes, similar to the general population, that monks should adapt to the changing times and embrace technological advancements. Indeed, the reality aligns with this perspective, as the development and progress of technology have accelerated the dissemination and fluidity of Buddhism.

The advancement of technology has given rise to a digital social platform, facilitating easy access to information about Buddhism for both its followers and those not affiliated with the faith (Yonnetti, 2017). For instance, in mainland China, religious entities maintain their own WeChat, Weibo accounts, and internet websites, and certain devotees conduct rituals in the digital realm (Travagnin, 2020). At the same time, the Digital Monastery Project endeavors to educate Buddhist monks, nuns, and community cultural protectors on safeguarding and conserving their sacred art relics within their monasteries (Shaftel, 2017). Participants in this training primarily focus on creating digital inventories using their mobile devices. Through these diverse approaches, religious practices undergo innovative transformations and preservation facilitated by rapid technological advancements. As Daniel Veidlinger (2014) stated,

"In the future, there is little doubt that Buddhism's digital presence will expand even more as these technologies pervade every corner of our lives[...]"(p. 9).

In China, from the late Qing dynasty and Republican period until today, Buddhists have been committed to spreading Buddhism through various means, including print media, radio, television broadcasts (Travagnin, 2016a), media discs (Tarocco, 2019), the internet and social media (L. Huang, 2013; Travagnin, 2016b; W. Huang, 2016; Tarocco, 2017), and even today's artificial intelligence robots (Travagnin, 2020). As Travagnin (2020) stated, on the one hand, Buddhists have increasingly utilized various forms of media, including social and digital media and robotics, to propagate the teachings of the Dharma and garner new disciples; on the other hand, these modern channels have also been used to reconfigure the public images of Buddhism within the broader Chinese society. Indeed, an enduring and

fruitful interaction between Buddhism and digital media and technology has not only spread throughout the Asian region but has also made its way into Western societies, leaving a lasting impact (Travagnin, 2020).

It is important to note that in China, to some extent, the restriction of religious activities by the state and the rapid socio-cultural changes pose pressures and challenges to religious practices within social media (Vala & Huang, 2019). During the National Religious Work Conference held in 2016 (April 22-23), Xi Jinping emphasized

"the need to give attention to the issue of online religion...To enhance legal governance in religious affairs, it is necessary to regulate government management of religious matters through lawful means and use the law to regulate various social relationships involving religion" [1].

According to the conference, firstly, the integration of the Internet and religion has become increasingly close. However, neither of them is considered a problem, the problem arises when the Internet undermines the state's religious policies, regulations, and encourages political division. Secondly, many concepts and regulations in the current laws and regulations do not align well with online religious affairs. Some online religious behaviors have surpassed the scope of existing laws, resulting in a highly challenging management vacuum. On December 3, 2021, the State Administration of Religious Affairs issued the *Measures for the Administration of Internet Religious Information Services*. Article 6 states:

"Provide the public with religious doctrines, rules, religious knowledge, and religion in the form of text, pictures, audio and video through Internet sites, applications, forums, blogs, microblogs, public accounts, instant messaging tools, webcasts, etc. The service of cultural and religious activities and other information shall obtain an Internet religious information service license" [2].

[1] http://news.cctv.com/2016/04/25/ARTIISUwFpWYD6Zk2RWfkdWi160425.shtml

[2] https://english.www.gov.cn/

Despite these regulations, certain temples and religious organizations still include possibilities for religious interaction and spiritual practice services, utilizing platforms such as websites, microblogs, or WeChat official accounts.

Yet, the incorporation of digital technology and the Internet into monastic settings goes beyond merely affecting surface-level religious communication; it also influences the essence of the monastic lifestyle. Therefore, this chapter will explore the impact of technological advancements and digital devices on the practices and lifestyle of monks, delving into their transformative effects. Does this transformation construct a bridge for their interaction and communication with the modern secular world ? Does it reshape and influence their self-awareness and sense of identity ?

5.1 Changed lifestyle through digital technology

5.1.1 "I feel like I have a closer bond with my family".

Many academic studies (M. C. Goldstein & Tsarong, 1985; Schneider, 2011; Jansen, 2015) have demonstrated that the family bond is the most evident and ever-present relationship between monks and the secular community, although the shared vision is that entering monastic life means separating individuals from their biological families and renouncing their fraternal ties. Shayne Clarke (2013) dismantles the notion of renouncement of familial relations in Indian Buddhist legal literature (Vinaya), employing a comprehensive analysis. As per Clarke's findings, it is clear that the writers of Indian Buddhist legal narratives presumed monks and nuns would sustain contact with their families. Regarding Tibetan monasticism, a symbiotic relationship exists between family members whereby both parties benefit (M. C. Goldstein, 2009). Monks would occasionally assist their kin, while the family would support them with monetary or sustenance-based. In the context of Tibetan culture, the support provided by a family to a monk residing in a monastery is akin to that of sending a child to attend a boarding school (Das & Das, 1978),

wherein financial assistance from the family remains necessary. Likewise, for these monks, as Schopen (2014) noted that

"even a son who has entered the religious life must procure food and clothing for both father and mother" (p. 322).

If they fail to satisfy the previous requirement, that is an offense. Overall, it is apparent that the ties between Tibetan Buddhist monks and their respective families are fundamentally embedded in economic support relations.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the monks residing in this monastery have a strong connection with their families. This bond is particularly evident in their mutual economic benefits. In an era characterized by limited technological advancements and inadequate infrastructure, it was usual for most monks to have rare reunions with their parents, generally during the Lunar New Year. Similarly, due to the constraints above in infrastructure, their parents infrequently had the opportunity to visit them at the monastery, further contributing to the limited interactions between monks and their families. However, the advancement of technology has brought remarkable convenience to monks. Digital devices have revolutionized the daily communication practices of monks, allowing them to communicate and interact with their families effortlessly.

Monk DZ, an experienced monk of over three decades, bears witness to the development of cell phones entering the monastery. In 2021, at 42, he served as one of the stewards of the monastery. I met him at the monastery store. While interacting with him, I found him open-minded to new things. However, like many middle-aged individuals living in secular society, he struggled with operating his smartphone. He frequently holds his phone high to face and, with one finger, taps the screen. Nevertheless, he engaged with his phone day-to-day. One day, I noticed him chanting scriptures with his head raised, eyes fixed on his phone screen, and mouth moving in prayer. I asked him if he was chanting on his phone, to which, he responded yes by smiling. Adding that this way, he did not need to hold the

scriptures printed on paper constantly.

I asked him, *"Has the cell phone changed your monastic life in any way"?*

He placed aside his phone and said to me,

"I think there are still some changes. One of the changes I have experienced is that I no longer hold the printed sutras as frequently as I used to. Instead, I chant using my phone, something I couldn't do before. However, the most significant change brought by cell phones was being able to keep in touch with my family more often. Actually, I usually go back home in the past. This is because my hometown is close to the monastery, making it convenient to visit my family. In contrast to those monks whose hometowns were situated at a considerable distance, I am lucky.

However, with the emergence of cell phones, I call my family often and can keep up-to-date with the happenings at home, thus, reducing my trips home. Nowadays, I also have video calls in touch with my family even more convenient. Although my mom knows nothing about smartphones, my younger brother is always around to help, and they often make video calls to me. Despite the frequent communication, I still miss the feeling of visiting home frequently. Calling my mom through the screen like this makes me feel a little guilty".

Monk LZ holds different perspectives when faced with the same topic. He declared,

"With the emergence of cell phones, I feel I have a closer bond with my family. My hometown is far away from the monastery, and I rarely visit my parents, except for the spring festival. As I am a renounced monk, thereby I believe that frequent visits back home are not in adherence to my monastic identity. Moreover, my brother often returns home to perform rituals and spend time with family similarly. When he comes home, I feel like I'm coming home too. Occasionally, I contact my mother to obtain assurance of her well-being. I know it's hard not being able to see my mother physically, but I'm glad to hear her voice or watch her face through the cell phone".

Despite the two monks holding different expressions of emotion, both words suggest the family connection to their identity as sons co-exist in their monastic identity. Notably, even as they convey monastic emotions, the underlying sentiment is embedded in their identity and integrated into secular society.

From a technological perspective, it is apparent that cell phones have significantly transformed the mode of communication amongst individuals and the way of sharing information. The advent of mobile phones has enabled individuals to arrange and rearrange their social engagements with parental figures and peers, affording them the convenience of temporal and spatial flexibility (Stefania & Marina, 2015). As a result of this widespread adoption, cell phones have become an indispensable component of modern society, occupying a pivotal role in shaping how people interact with one another.

In a particular monastic context, the mobile device functions as a medium that reinforces the relationship between the monks and the outside world. This tie between the monks and their families is an economic benefit and a deeper emotional connection. It is highlighted that cell phone further strengthens this bond, enabling frequent communication between the monks and their families. It is evident that the use of cell phones in monasticism significantly impacts the social and emotional aspects of the monks' lives.

5.1.2 Digital Spirituality: A Controversial Practice Amongst Monks

As we observed in contemporary society, the prevalence of digital technology has permeated all aspects of human existence, with religious communities no exception. These religious institutions, constructed according to secular society's general contexts, have also embraced digital devices in their daily spiritual routines. According to Travagnin's (2020) understanding, technology has historically played a significant factor in shaping Buddhist cultural and social lives. She suggests the lives of Buddhists, both those who are ordained and those who are not, are shaped

and influenced by the continuously growing prevalence of various technological tools such as live streaming, blogging, and the persistent use of social media platforms accessible through smartphones.

Scholars generally draw attention to the utilization of recording technologies and the creation of digital Buddhist items, identified as "electronic scriptures", indicating a transition from communal rituals within particular religious groups to more broad ways (Travagnin, 2016b, 2020; Shaftel, 2017). Despite this shift of form, the technological culture of Buddhism remains firmly committed to the idea of "community" as a means of propagating Buddhist knowledge and ideas (Helland, 2000, 2004). I concur with the viewpoint that Buddhist clergy and practitioners utilize social media platforms as a tool for spiritual practice, which is a type of propagation of Buddhist principles. However, my attention is drawn toward the identity of the Buddhist clergy itself, that of monks. In my view, the participation of monks in digital spiritual practices serves not only the dissemination of Buddhist ideology but a means of identity representation. I argue that the utilization of digital social media by monks for spiritual practice represents a novel way of projecting their image to a broader social community. Through this utilization, Tibetan Buddhist monks can effectively exhibit and shape the public's perception of their ascetic lifestyle, while reinforcing their self-identity.

The Monks' View: The Dichotomy Between the Convenience of Using Electronic Scriptures and the sense of Irreverence

During my research fieldwork, it became apparent that the prevalent adoption of digital devices, such as the monk DZ, for the purpose of chanting scriptures was not a common practice among the monastic communities. In other words, it can be inferred that electronic scriptures were not commonly employed within this particular monastery. The monks expressed different attitudes and discourses regarding this issue. Remarkably, the attitudes towards emerging digital technologies held by the monks are not contingent upon their age.

Despite monk DZ's willingness to embrace new digital technology, he appears to struggle with smartphone usage due to his limited knowledge of Chinese characters and unfamiliarity with various functions. Although certain smartphones can accommodate the Tibetan language, the proficiency of Tibetan monks in the Tibetan language is restricted to mere spelling and does not encompass their comprehension of the text. This lack of linguistic understanding has led to many challenges for them when utilizing smartphones. Despite facing potential challenges related to age-related vision changes or unfamiliarity with certain device features and functions, monk DZ adeptly navigates these obstacles and effectively utilizes his smartphone. When I questioned his reasons for electronic scriptures, he explained,

"Given the inconvenience of carrying physical copies of scriptures at all times, specific texts have been made accessible through a downloadable application. Furthermore, I have encountered certain scriptures that I frequently recite, but unfortunately, they are unavailable as apps. However, some devoted believers have taken the initiative to compile these scriptures into an electronic version and generously shared them with me. Although smartphones are prevalent in our monastic community, only a few are proficient in utilizing their functions. Being an elderly individual, I often encounter difficulties with presbyopia when attempting to read physical sutras. But I find reading digital versions on my phone more convenient, as which can be easily zoomed in for better visibility. While using a smartphone offers an alternative to reading physical scriptures, it can occasionally strain my eyes".

Likewise, monk LS, a 24-year-old novice, shared his perspective that electronic scriptures offer more convenience regarding accessibility and portability. It is worth mentioning that monk LS has not been a monk for a significant period. He has been entered monastic life in 2014. He attested that the use of cell phones in monasteries had become ubiquitous by the time he joined

the monastic community, and electronic versions of the scriptures were already available at that time. For him, there is no fundamental distinction between the electronic and paper versions of the scriptures, as both contain the same valuable content. However, he added,

"Monastics generally avoid using electronic versions during sutra recitations at the monastery, particularly in the main hall, as they consider it disrespectful to the Buddha. Therefore, our monastery has implemented a regulation prohibiting using iPads or cell phones in the main hall. Yet, it has become increasingly common for monks to use iPads when reciting sutras in villagers' homes.

On the one hand, there is no explicit prohibition in the monastery's regulations, monks have the option to visit villagers' homes and recite sutras using iPads. On the other hand, electronic versions of these texts offer greater convenience in terms of portability and are less susceptible to damage compared to traditional paper sutras.

Additionally, it is worth noting that the villagers do not express any displeasure about using iPads in reciting these sacred texts, as the paramount concern remains the faithful recitation of the scriptures. I believe that both paper and electronic sutras hold the same value and significance".

In contrast to monk LS and DZ, monk LZ, a leader chanter, presents a distinct perspective regarding electronic scriptures. He stated,

"Using my phone to chant scriptures is not usual. I think the Buddhist scriptures are sacred, so I make it a point to wash my hands before reading them. I believe that it would be disrespectful to the scriptures if I failed to do so. Additionally, the sutras must be positioned in the Buddha Hall. If you do not have a private chapel, put them in a high place within a clean room. Although digital versions of the scriptures are convenient to store on my phone, I do not find them appropriate.

Although I do not entirely support the utilization of electronic scriptures, I

am inclined to lend more significant support to the Buddhist channels that have surfaced on various social media platforms. I follow various Buddhist public accounts through WeChat and participate in Buddhist WeChat groups. I argue that the digital format differs from the traditional and revered physical form of religious texts. However, the emergence of Buddhist channels on social networks has provided a unique opportunity for individuals to engage with Buddhism culture in a contemporary. By leveraging the reach and convenience of social media, these platforms have enabled greater dissemination and accessibility of Buddhist principles and practices, ultimately contributing to the broader dissemination of the religion.

Moreover, our Khamstsen created a WeChat group for the villagers of my hometown. The group members often invite us to recite sutras and offer prayers. However, we usually perform these rituals offline rather than online. Once the sutra recitation is complete, our monks on duty respond uniformly via WeChat to inform the group member that it has been recited".

Upon my daily observation, it can be supposed that monk LZ is highly attentive when handling his scriptures. Usually, these scriptures are wrapped in a red textile, matching the color of the monk's clothing. Alternatively, the monk may encase it in a yellow cloth, a color representative of the Gelugpa. These bound texts are often placed with great care and reverence before the Buddha statue in the chapel.

For monk LZ, the sutra is not merely a physical item like standard books; it serves as a conduit through which he may communicate with the Buddha. It is an intricate and integral part of his spiritual practice that he holds in high esteem. In a daily routine, he would arise promptly at 6:30 at the break of dawn. Then start a busy morning.

Firstly, he burned incense in the censer on the wall before his house. Burning incense entailed utilizing a portion of fire-smoked ghee, adding a touch of highland

barley, and placing the mixture into the censer. Following this, a small amount of water would be applied, allowing the unmistakable ghee tsampa aroma to permeate the air. He stated that this ritual was intended as an offering to the deceased, as they had passed on from this world and could no longer eat in natural sustenance but could only feel the aroma.

Secondly, following his morning ritual, he proceeded to the first floor and took a bucket of new clean water to replace the water in the Buddha's niche on the offering bowl on chapel hall's third floor. The place consisted of 21 bowls of water, organized into three sections, each with seven bowls of water. To adhere to the clockwise order of the Tibetan Buddhist sutra rotation, he replaced the previous day's water supply with new water, starting from the left to the right. He burned incense once the water was replaced. He usually burned three sticks of incense. Two incense sticks were placed in the incense burner in the chapel hall, while the remaining one was placed in the flower pot in the second-floor gallery.

Finally, finishing these procedures, he would sit on a bench adjacent to a nearby window on the first floor and commence chanting scriptures.

As Matthew Engelke (2012) writes,

"All religion is material religion. All religion has to be understood in relation to the media of its materiality. This necessarily includes a consideration of religious things, and also of actions and words, which are material no matter how quickly they pass from sight or sound or dissipate into the air"(p. 209).

In this sense, the notion that all religion is material in nature can be attributed to its existence and practice being contingent upon the tangible media, including but not limited to physical objects, spaces, and artifacts, as well as the actions, discourses, and bodily sensations that allow the religious practitioner to engage with the material world. Monk LZ believes that paper scriptures serve a sacred meaning, not only as a physical object but also as a spiritual entity. To him, the significance of paper scriptures extends beyond their tangible existence and

encompasses an intangible spiritual presence. Therefore, according to Monk LZ, utilizing paper scriptures in one's spiritual practice can aid in developing a deeper connection with the divine.

Understanding the importance of exploring the mechanisms behind embracing new media formats and technological advancements in religious practices is essential for the evolution and continuation of religious doctrines and rituals (Meyer, 2011). Digital devices have become an integral part of the monastic lifestyle. Despite the monastery's explicit directive that prohibits monks from carrying digital devices while attending chants in the main hall, there are no corresponding restrictions on using such devices during the monks' daily routine. This situation resembles Chinese high school students who are forbidden from having cell phones within school premises but are allowed to use them freely outside. However, unlike students, monks ascribe a certain level of sacredness to paper scriptures, especially in a religious context. While students may view e-books as a modern means of accessing information, monks hold a different perspective, perceiving digital texts as lacking profound spiritual significance.

The comprehension of electronic scriptures poses a significant obstacle to many monks, which lies in the fundamental material issue of digital media. Because digital data is expressed through a simple lingua of bits, ones, and zeros, it can be condensed into magnetic pulses occupying no physical space, transmitted over extended distances, and represent diverse objects, such as sound, images, video, or text (Rosenzweig, 2011). Nonetheless, the binary code constituting digital media essentially lacks inherent meaning. It necessitates the combined support of software and hardware to render it accessible and meaningful to its users (Rosenzweig, 2011). Digital media software and hardware have undeniably enabled the Buddhist scriptures to interact with users and realize their material meanings. Religious scholars have noted that religion requires "multiple media for materializing the sacred" to make the invisible visible and sacred (R. Orsi, 2012;

Rakow, Clark, & Clanton, 2020).

While paper scriptures are tangible and unique in their functionality and sacredness, electronic scriptures produced through digital media have somewhat diminished the sense of sacredness felt. Specifically, in the monastic context, the carriers of electronic scriptures, such as smartphones, tablet computers, and other digital devices, are perceived to possess secular functions that divorce them from the sense of sacredness associated with paper scriptures. This is because these carriers are digitally multifunctional, whereas electronic scriptures are merely one of their many functions and do not possess the same uniqueness. Thus, it can be argued that while the content of electronic scriptures may be the same as that of paper scriptures, their digital carriers are perceived as less sacred.

Smartphones, Interruptions Over the Spiritual Practice

Incorporating digital devices into the monastic lifestyle has significantly altered monks' traditional spiritual practices. In addition to adopting electronic scriptures, digital social media has facilitated a more dynamic and collaborative mode of spiritual practice for monks. Similar to the utilization of electronic scriptures, engaging in involvement and cooperation through social media within monastic communities is subject to the personal choice of the monks. It is important to note that the utilization of social media for certain spiritual practices within monasteries may vary based on personal preferences and not solely due to the rules and regulations of the institution. Based on the monks' narratives, it seems that WeChat groups were utilized within the monastery between approximately 2017 and 2019. It should be noted that the main objective of these WeChat groups was to facilitate the dissemination of monastic notifications, rather than to act as tools for spiritual practice.

Nevertheless, certain monks utilize WeChat as a supplementary tool to enhance their spiritual endeavors. These monks perceive the WeChat app as an instrument to record spiritual practice and connect with a broader community of

like-minded people. In this sense, WeChat is a medium for these monks to reinforce their spiritual growth and establish meaningful connections with others who share similar beliefs and values. But in reality, a significant number of monks hold negative views regarding the utilization of social media. Although employing these platforms could also enhance their spiritual experiences, they tend to be hesitant about expounding on digital social media's various benefits. They are persistent in their conviction that digital devices only serve to interfere with their spiritual practices.

During my last fieldwork in 2021, I observed that certain novice monks and their monastic fellows created WeChat groups as a means of record-keeping, specifically to document their scripture recitations. It is impressive that the practice of recording the amount of chanting via WeChat group is not widely adopted among monks. Most monks still adhere to their spiritual routine, choosing not to engage in the communal aspect of sharing their spiritual practices or their peers. According to the statement made by the monks who have used WeChat groups for record-keeping, this particular approach has presented them with a unique and novel experience. Typically, these monks and their counterparts utilize these groups to share notifications, with little emphasis on engaging in conversation. From time to time, some members disclose how many times they've finished their daily chants as a way to keep track of their spiritual activities. Over time, this approach has been adopted by other group members, resulting in a shared practice among the participating monks.

As Campbell (2012b) stated,

"The Internet serves as a spiritual hub, allowing practitioners to select from the array of resources and experience in order to assemble and personalize their religious behavior and belief. [...] This creates the possibility of creating new hybrids of traditional religions as different forms of knowledge and practice are combined to create individualized patterns of spiritual life" (p. 13-14).

However, despite the potential benefits of integrating digital media into monastic practices, this hybrid approach has seen limited adoption within the monastic community. Instead, digital media primarily serves as a means to offer various spiritual services to secular individuals seeking to engage with the monastic community (See Chapter 6).

Although it may seem repetitive, the monks' ambivalent stance on digital devices can be traced back to the teachings of their spiritual mentors and the strict regulations that govern monastic life. This reluctance to fully embrace technology can be traced back to the traditional values and beliefs infused throughout their comprehensive education. Furthermore, the authoritative structure of the monastic community may impose restrictions on the use of digital devices, reflecting the necessity for discipline and self-restraint in pursuing a higher spiritual calling. Thus, the monks' ambivalence towards digital technology is rooted in a complex interplay of factors. It is closely connected to their religious and cultural background, as well as their commitment to the principles of monastic life.

In 2011, at the age of 11, YJ chose to become a monk. At that time, the monastery was already open to the public as a tourist attraction, but he mentioned that it didn't significantly impact his daily life. He said,

"During the day, when visitors are at the monastery, I stay in my room and don't go out. I study at home. Sometimes I even close the door, so no one comes in".

The fundamental reason is that his master exercises strict control over him. The direction and content of his studies are entirely planned and guided by his master. His master didn't plan for him to learn things like dancing, painting, or playing musical instruments, but instead focused on studying scriptures. He has to study many books, and he gestured with his hand saying,

"There is about half a person's height worth of books".

Moreover, these scriptures need to be memorized. He said,

"My master is strict. Perhaps it's because my master only had two disciples — myself and my fellow disciple. Our days were fully scheduled, leaving little free time. Occasionally, we would go home to visit our parents. Back then, my fellow disciple and I didn't own mobile phones. Only in 2019, when I became the leader chanter, he gave me a simple function cell phone. It was because I needed to call another peer for chanting and convenience. Otherwise, I am not allowed to use it".

His daily routine was characterized by rigorous discipline and over-management, yet his discourses did not indicate unwillingness or hate. He seemed to believe that, as a monk, he was obligated to adhere to the strictures of monastic existence.

"Do you ever feel your master is too tough on you regarding his rules and expectations ?" I asked.

"When I started as a novice monk, I recall feeling a bit daunted by the amount of scripture that I had to study. Plus, there were all these daily tasks - cleaning, cooking, and washing dishes. It was challenging initially, but I got used to it over time," he answered.

"I noticed that the monastery administration doesn't say anything about monks using cell phones, and the rules for the monks don't mention it either. I'm curious. Why does your master care so much about you using cell phones ?" I asked.

"Just like you, your teachers in class don't allow you to play with your phones. Our master is concerned that if we have smartphones, we might get distracted surfing the Internet instead of studying the scriptures," he said with a smile.

"Moreover, while chanting, it's not good to get sidetracked or disrupted by trivial matters. It is disrespectful to the Buddha," he added.

Despite the rigorous and stringent discipline imposed by the master, it was noted that a considerable number of monks secretly in using their digital devices

during my interview. They mentioned that novice monks playing with smartphones is strictly forbidden and must be avoided discover, as the master does not accept such behaviors. If the master catches any of the disciples playing on their smartphones, he will break them or throw them away.

"Have you ever secretly used a smartphone ?" I continued asked.

"Yes! In fact, my fellow and I pooled our money together to buy a second-hand smartphone that we share. We kept it secret from our master and only used it when he wasn't around," he answered.

"How do you typically use your smartphone ?" I asked.

"Because we don't understand too many Chinese characters, but we can understand spoken Chinese. So we watch videos on platforms like Douyin (TikTok) or the video channels within WeChat. My fellow disciple and I use the same account, sometimes he plays, and sometimes I play," he answered.

"Do you try to use WeChat, TikTok, or other applications for any spiritual practices ?" I asked.

"I don't personally do that, but I am aware of it. I have seen many videos of monks posting religious ceremonies on WeChat and TikTok, as well as monks from different places sharing Buddhist teachings on TikTok. My master also has a WeChat group where he teaches Dharma to the followers every week. However, when I am reciting sutras or meditating, I don't carry my phone with me," he answered.

"How do you view the spiritual practice or the propagation of Buddhism on social media ?" I asked.

"I don't know for sure, but I personally feel that it is not appropriate to publish videos of religious ceremonies on social media. Furthermore, I believe engaging in spiritual practices on mobile phones is unsuitable. Spiritual cultivation should be done in a quiet space and is a personal matter that does not need to be shared. Even if there are videos of masters teaching Buddhism classics, the power of

such teachings is not sufficient compared to receiving teachings face to face," he answered.

The day after my conversation with monk YJ, I had the opportunity to meet his master, LRZB, through his introduction. LRZB spent 21 years studying in India and is a well-respected monk who has reached the degree of Geshe. When I arrived at YJ's home, his master and fellow disciple had just returned from outside. LRZB appeared kind and approachable, but not as serious as I had imagined. He invited me to sit in the living room while YJ and his fellow disciple prepared tea. I shared with him the purpose of my visit and expressed my interest in the spiritual practices of Tibetan Buddhist monks in digital social media. He responded,

"I think your research is very important. Nowadays, many monks in our monastery are enthusiastic about digital devices, which is detrimental to their spiritual cultivation. I hope they can understand their responsibilities and obligations as monks". YJ and his fellow disciple stood beside their master, smiling but remaining silent.

"What do you think are the responsibilities and obligations of monks?" I asked.

"Just like you ordinary people, ah! We must learn to be good human beings! Treat our parents and others with kindness! Always remember our monastic identity in our hearts, remember that we are the sons of Buddha, and follow the precepts of Buddhism. We must focus on studying scriptures, understanding gratitude, and cultivating a compassionate heart," he said.

"What is your perspective on monks engaging in spiritual practice through social media ? " I asked.

"Personally, I don't agree with it. Monks' spiritual practice should focus on the mind, letting go of all distractions and external materials. Social media is filled with an abundance of complex content and noisy voices. How can monks truly engage in their spiritual practice amidst such distractions ? I do not allow my

two disciples to use smartphones because I'm concerned that they might become addicted to the internet and neglect their serious study of the scriptures. Today, The internet contains an overwhelming amount of information that can lead people astray, especially considering that many of its contents are unsuitable for monks to see," he answered.

"How do you view the practice of sharing religious ritual videos on WeChat Moments or other social media platforms ?" I asked.

"In the past, outsiders are not allowed to take photos or even watch during our rituals, as the chanting in the main hall is sometimes kept secret. When we chant in the main hall, we have to ensure that all tourists are cleared out, and the doors are closed. Even for monks who want to take photos, there are different levels of permission, and those with lower ranks are not allowed to take pictures.

For certain ceremonies, only when the higher-ranking monks have completed the chanting, those lower-ranking monks can be allowed in. Those novices with low rank are not allowed to listen, because it may have a negative impact on them due to their limited spiritual power.

Nowadays, we don't have too many restrictions. Visitors can snap photos or shoot videos during the ritual, except in the main hall. But I believe there may still be a few rules that need to follow. For ordinary people, it is better not to take photos or record such ritual videos randomly. The situation could still be better if the monks took photos, recorded, or shared such videos. Because monks live in monasteries and don't go to places that are messy or impure, these photos or videos will not negatively impact them," he answered.

"Your disciple YJ told me that you occasionally share Buddhism teachings with the faithful through a WeChat group. Do you consider this to be a new way of spreading the Dharma ?" I continued to ask.

"Yes, I have a WeChat group where I share Buddhism teachings every Sunday. Local people created this WeChat group, and it has already reached 500 members.

Most of the members in this group are local residents, with a few monks as well. My teaching doesn't have a fixed duration. They can be either long or short, depending on how much time I have available. The teachings are given in the local Tibetan language since the group comprises residents from the area.

The content of the teachings starts from basic and gradually deepens, aiming to make it understandable for everyone. This may be considered a new way of spreading the Dharma, but I don't see it as the true essence of propagation. The true spiritual power can only be obtained through face-to-face teachings from a master to disciples. On WeChat, I send voice messages one by one, which sometimes disrupts the flow of the teachings. Moreover, I don't know how many people are actually listening. However, since the faithful have such a demand, I will do my best to meet their needs, teach Buddhist scriptures and Buddhism morals to everyone," he answered.

Regarding whether teaching the Buddhist Dharma on social media is a new way of propagating Buddhism, the living Buddha KS has articulated viewpoints similar to those of Geshe LRZB. The living Buddha KS expressed that

"The transmission of Dharma should occur through face-to-face communication with the spiritual teacher, within a solemn space, where the teacher orally imparts teachings to the disciples, and the disciples should attentively listen to the teachings. On social media platforms such as WeChat Moments, TikTok, Kuaishou, Weibo, and others, many people do not engage with the content seriously. They are all swiftly swiping through the screens of their smartphones. Therefore, it cannot be considered a genuine means of Dharma propagation. Many people are simply seeking entertainment.

Additionally, many novice monks nowadays use smartphones, watch short videos, or play mobile games. Because these activities stem from novelty, as such technological advancements were not available in the past. These novel technologies do not inherently violate Buddhist precepts, so imposing strict

regulations on them is difficult. Although these novice monks may enjoy using smartphones, they dare not engage in such activities in the presence of their own spiritual teachers".

Overall, the monastics with whom I conducted interviews shared a common perspective that smartphones are unsuitable tools for spiritual cultivation and should not be seen as means of spreading the Dharma. According to these Buddhist monks, smartphones primarily serve as devices for communication and entertainment. Their subjective refusal to use smartphones for spiritual practice stems from the belief that such a form compromises the purity and focus of spiritual endeavors to some extent. Furthermore, they perceive social media as lacking the sacredness they associate with spiritual spaces. This viewpoint resonates with Eliade's observation in *The Sacred and the Profane* (1959), where he posits that

"For religious man, space is not homogeneous; he experiences interruptions, breaks in it; some parts of space are qualitatively different from others. [...] This spatial non-homogeneity finds expression in the experience of an opposition between space that is sacred – the only real and really existing space – and all other space, the formless expanse surrounding it"(p. 20).

The advent of digital social media further blurs the distinction between sacred and profane spaces, leading to a profound confusion regarding what is virtual - appearing real but merely a simulation - and what is genuinely authentic (Baym, 2015). As expressed by these monks, the transmission of the Dharma is believed to require face-to-face communication with a spiritual teacher to possess spiritual power and be considered authentic. Face-to-face communication is synchronous and carries clues that make their identities, social context, and natural environment more distinct. Face-to-face conversations cannot be stored, let alone replicated (Baym, 2015). Even if we were to record and playback the content of the conversation, it would lose many contextual elements inherent in face-to-face transmission. For these monks, the use of social media to disseminate the Dharma

is problematic for two main reasons. Firstly, they feel that social media lacks a sacred and solemn space for spiritual teachings. Secondly, they believe that Buddhist teachings conveyed through digital storage, images, or videos lack spiritual power and authenticity. Even so, many of these monks do use social media for religious activities and outreach in practice.

According to my observations, I argue that while smartphones may not reshape spiritual practices, they expand and facilitate the dissemination of religious activities (Alzouma, 2017). After engaging in conversation with Geshe LRZB, we mutually added each other as WeChat friends. Although we do not frequently chat on WeChat, I receive occasional images and videos from him, particularly during Buddhist festivals or specific religious ceremonies held within the monastery. These images usually feature depictions of Buddhas or Bodhisattvas, accompanied by explanations in both Tibetan and Chinese to facilitate my understanding of their meanings. The content of these images conveys Buddhist philosophy, such as encouraging words, ethical teachings, or mantras from Buddhist scriptures. The videos typically show Geshe LRZB and his disciples engaging in religious activities like animal liberation. The content of the video shows them chanting scriptures, and it is enhanced with subtitles that clarify the significance of the practice. This communication via images and videos serves as a means for Geshe LRZB to share aspects of his Buddhist practice, teachings, and the rituals associated with his life.

This practice may seem contradictory to his subjective perspective to some degree. However, what is intriguing is that throughout this process, his involvement is limited to sharing practice without any social interaction. Despite my actions to engage him through messages or greetings in response to the images he shares, his responses are rare. Our interaction has consistently been one-sided and asynchronous. What piques my curiosity is that he periodically shares similar or identical photos, videos, or web news articles with me. His intention in doing

so seemed to remind me not to disregard the teachings conveyed through these Buddhist materials.

From my perspective, his actions can be seen as a compromise to mediate his dedication to the traditional monastic lifestyle with his obligation to spread Buddhist teachings. This balancing act demonstrates a nuanced understanding and adaptation in embarking on the challenges of the digital age and the ever-evolving nature of cultural transmission. As Bernard Faure (2015) stated, Buddhism appears to be better suited than other doctrines or religions to the rapid evolution of modern society. Moreover, Buddhism has harnessed the remarkable potential of the Internet as a means of communication and ideological promotion, including commercial endeavors (Faure, 2015). Although the monks may feel emotional uneasiness and hesitation, they are confronted with the reality that smartphones have become a powerful instrument for disseminating religious teachings and connecting with a broader range of individuals.

To a certain extent, the emergence of smartphones and social media challenges the authority of traditional monastic institutional systems. Many monks are dedicating more time to social media and short video platforms, which, to some degree, have extended their daily schedules. Within the strict routines of the monastery, there is typically no designated leisure time for monks to engage in online browsing. According to Michel Foucault (1977),

"The principle that underlay the time-table in its traditional form was essentially negative it; it was the principle of non-idleness: it was forbidden to waste time, which was counted by God and paid for by men; the time-table was to eliminate the danger of wasting it - a moral offence and economic dishonesty"(p. 154).

Likewise, monks with extensive knowledge express concerns over their disciples devoting excessive time to social media platforms, fearing that it may adversely affect their learning and spiritual development. Consequently, they

impose strict schedules and prohibit the use of smartphones among their disciples.

5.2 Digital Self-expression through WeChat

The Internet and social media pose another significant challenge to the monastic system, which provides monks with increased opportunities and platforms for self-expression, including sharing daily personal experiences and spiritual practices. This newfound freedom lifestyle appears to contradict the strict institutional regulations of the monastery. Digital communication technologies have undeniably facilitated interpersonal social interactions, increasing the frequency and efficiency of human interactions and fostering closer interpersonal connections. In other words, the Internet and mobile devices have provided a "perpetual" mode of interpersonal engagement (Katz & Aakhus, 2002). This technological convenience has enabled monks residing in monastic spaces to engage more extensively with the secular world, particularly in maintaining close contact with their families.

Notably, social media platforms have provided these communities of monks with a means of self-expression. The decentralized nature of social media, characterized by the production and dissemination of media by a growing number of individuals and institutions, has become an essential source for personal expression (Baca, 2006). The convenience of these digital technologies contributes to individual autonomy, fluidity, ephemeral social connections, and self-expression (Flichy & Libbrecht, 2004; Turkle, 2011; Auriemma, Iorio, Roberti, & Morese, 2020).

However, according to sociologists such as Zygmunt Bauman and Ulrich Beck, who adopt a pessimistic perspective, argue that such rapid and transformative forces of development can lead to the loss of individual self, the corrosion of interpersonal relationships, and the rendering of intimate relationships as mundane and fragile (Jamieson, 2013). Bauman (2013b) emphasizes that the central

dilemma of modernity revolves around the fluidity and adaptability of social structures. In the context of a fluid modern society, the impact is most pronounced on the institutions that have managed to endure and continue to offer frameworks for guiding human actions and choices. As established orders, norms, and rules undergo disruption, individuals are confronted with the ongoing imperative to adapt and redefine their positions within an ever-changing landscape. This flux gives rise to a sense of instability and vulnerability in constructing personal identities. He further stated that,

"These days patterns and configurations are no longer 'given', let alone 'self-evident'; there are just too many of them, clashing with one another and contradicting one another's commandments, so that each one has been stripped of a good deal of compelling, coercively constraining powers. And they have changed their nature and have been accordingly reclassified: as items in the inventory of individual tasks. Rather than preceding life-politics and framing its future course, they are to follow it (follow from it), to be shaped and reshaped by its twists and turns. The liquidizing powers have moved from the 'system' to 'society', from politics' to 'life-policies'–or have descended from the 'macro' to the 'micro' level of social cohabitation" (Bauman, 2013b, p. 7).

In other words, a trend toward personalization and privatization is emerging in contemporary societal dynamics. The advancements in information technology and the widespread adoption of global social networks have facilitated individuals' seamless engagement with local and even global news and events. Social networks have awarded individuals the rights and freedoms to express themselves, while also affording them the autonomy to construct and present their self-image. People nowadays engage with social media in diverse ways, including passive consumption, active opinion expression, and occasional contemplation, as they seek information, find comfort, vent dissatisfaction, express their views, participate in social dialogue, and discuss current issues (Skoric & Zhu, 2016).

In our case, WeChat (in Chinese: Weixin) functions as a comprehensive social media platform that combines communication, consumption, sharing, group interactions, and news dissemination, offering users a novel space for expression and presentation. As emphasized by WeChat's promotional slogan, *WeChat is a lifestyle*, it represents a paradigm shift in users' daily lives. WeChat, a mobile application developed and released by Tencent Technology Company Limited in January 2011, experienced significant user growth, surpassing a user base of over one hundred million by the end of March 2012. In 2018, the cumulative monthly active user accounts of Weixin and WeChat surpassed one billion. With its substantial user base and comprehensive range of features, encompassing social networking and convenient payment capabilities, WeChat exerts a nuanced influence on the everyday lives of individuals in present-day China.

It seems apparent that WeChat has wielded a pervasive influence on the everyday lives of the entire Chinese population, including the community of monks residing within temple precincts. Within the monastic context, WeChat assumes an integral medium for disseminating internal notifications and facilitating external communication. However, in my opinion, monks using WeChat primarily revolve around projecting their monastic identities to the broader society.

To a certain extent, this aligns with the technological capabilities and foundational intentions inherent in WeChat. WeChat founder Allen Zhang, Senior Executive Vice President of Tencent, and President of WeChat Business Group, at WeChat's Open Class Pro event on Jan 9th 2019, he explained,

"Posting on Moments is just the process of portraying our desired image and placing it in our friends' minds. For example, everything you post is in hopes of convincing your friends to see you as a certain kind of person. So Moments is a place to portray your image" [3].

For these monks, WeChat goes beyond its role in facilitating internal

[3] https://blog.wechat.com

communication within the monastery. It serves as a means for establishing connections with the external world, precisely the secular society outside the confines of the monastic space.

As expressed by the monk JC, the use of WeChat among monks primarily aims to facilitate communication and establish connections with merchants from outside regions. In their day-to-day lives, the monks tend to prefer using phone calls to contact others. According to the monk JC,

"In recent years, many of my friends from other regions have been people I met at the monastery. They come to visit and tour the temple; we have the fortune of meeting each other. And then, we add each other on WeChat. We use WeChat to stay in touch on various matters. Additionally, I am part of several WeChat groups with friends. Some are for easy communication, while others are focused on monitoring our study and practice of Buddhism, such as daily chanting and spiritual exercises".

Consequently, WeChat serves as a means of communication, particularly for coordinating interactions with outside, while Monk JC personally finds it more convenient to call their family and friends directly.

JC frequently shares Buddhist-related content on his WeChat Moments, primarily emphasizing the importance of maintaining a positive and tranquil outlook on life, cultivating kindness, practicing humility, and exploring the benefits of spiritual self-discipline. Additionally, he highlights various Tibetan Buddhist festivals and observances. Through his WeChat profile (Figure 5.1), encompassing his profile picture, username, personal statement, and shared Moments (Figure 5.2)[4], it is evident that JC identifies himself as a Buddhist monk. Drawing on Goffman's (1978) perspective, JC employs digital social media as a means to present and represent his daily life. It can be argued that JC's online identity and self-expression on social media is a continuum of his offline

[4]I have obscured his account ID for research ethics and the protection of personal privacy. Additionally, the translation in the image is automatically generated by the WeChat system.

identity, reflecting his persona and self-presentation in the digital realm. The continuity observed in JC's self-presentation on WeChat is intricately linked to the fundamental capabilities and expansive functionalities of the platform.

As the previous chapter discussed, WeChat distinguishes itself from other open social media by prioritizing interpersonal relationships among users based on familiarity and trust. Even in cases where users are initially unacquainted, they may establish connections through introductions from mutual contacts and subsequently become WeChat friends. Within the WeChat ecosystem, users can create photo streams documenting their daily lives, and share thoughts, articles, images, personal experiences, product information, music, and games. Furthermore, their friends can share these posts within their social circles, resulting in a cascading dissemination of information across multiple layers of connections. This process exemplifies WeChat's social functionality and represents the digitized manifestation of interpersonal relationships. Notably, WeChat's high credibility has positioned it as a central tool for interpersonal communication in contemporary Chinese society.

Nevertheless, individuals could still opt to present specific aspects of themselves on social media platforms, without necessarily maintaining their offline true identities (Choi & Sung, 2018). This exemplifies one of the diverse modes of expression social media platforms provide. As Goffman (1978) proposes, when individuals interact with others, they aim to shape and project a particular image that influences how others perceive and acquire information about them. Drawing upon his conceptual framework, individuals actively construct a performative self within the digital realm of social media. They elaborately curate and present a projected image in this context, while their physical presence and authentic identities remain hidden behind the screen.

Therefore, individuals actively engage in digital self-expression as a deliberate act of presenting themselves in a particular manner. They carefully

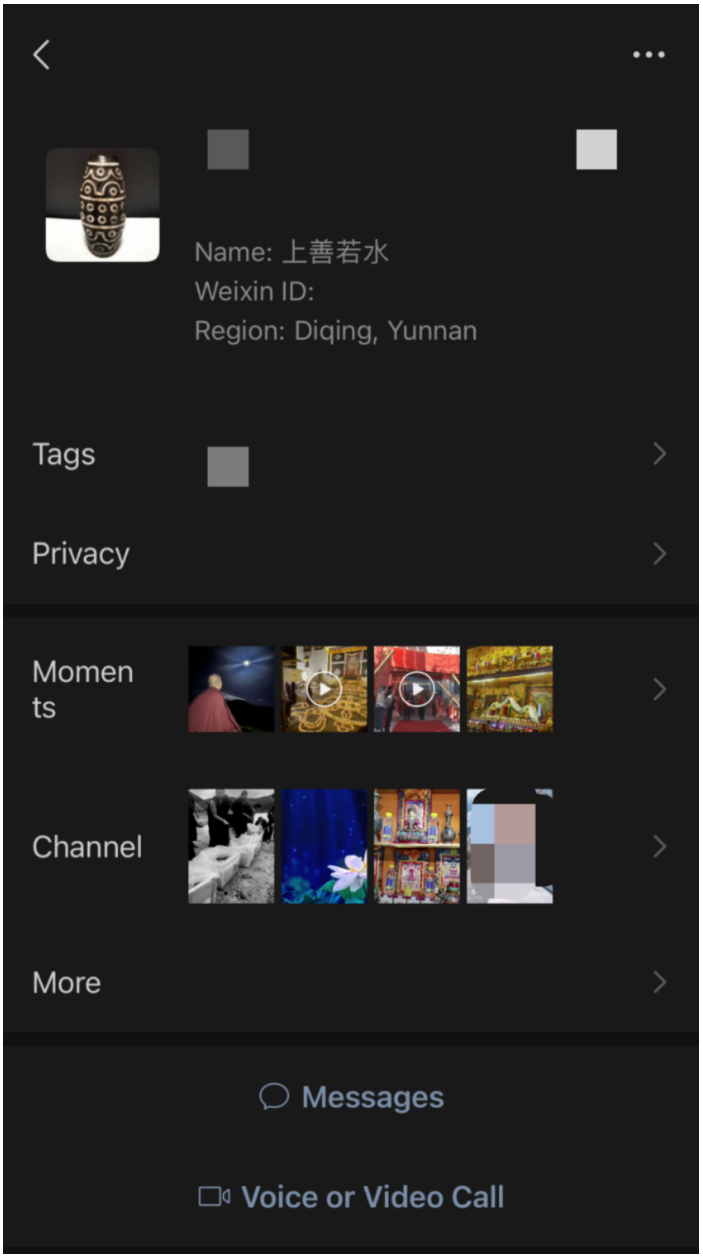


Fig. 5.1 JC's self-presentation in WeChat

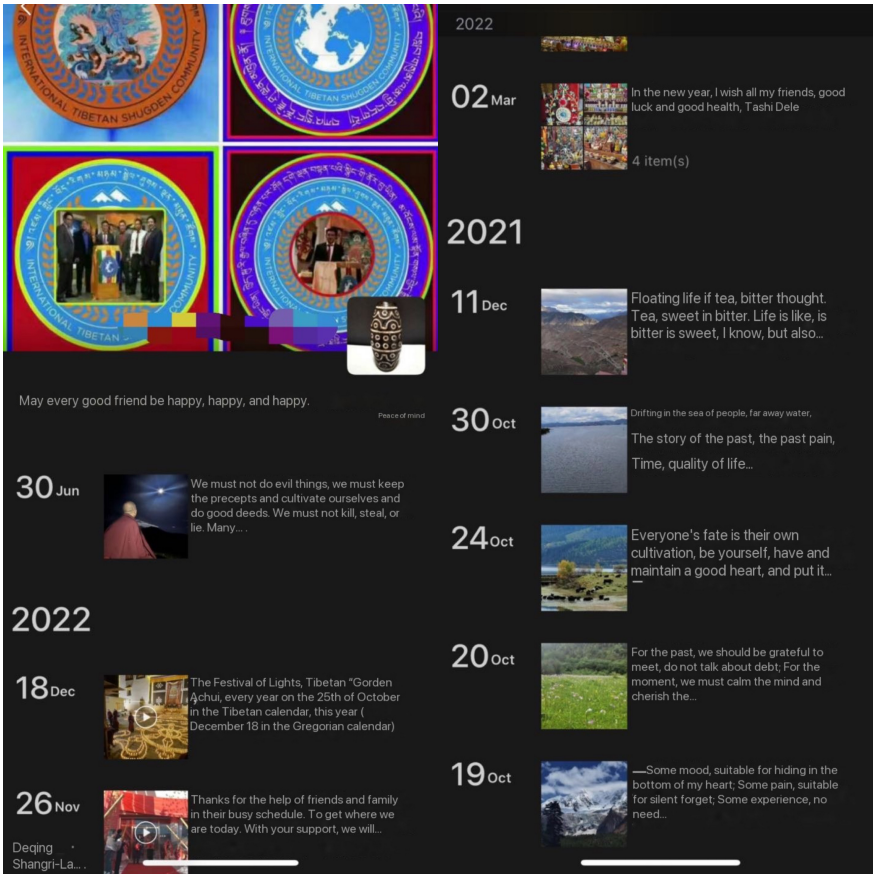


Fig. 5.2 JC's posts in WeChat

construct and curate their virtual personas on social media platforms to align with socially desirable attributes within their community. These intentional self-presentations reflect their idealized or aspirational selves, showcasing aspects of identity that are deemed socially desirable (Manago, Graham, Greenfield, & Salimkhan, 2008; Manago, 2014; S. Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008). Furthermore, the act of self-expression holds profound psychological meaning when it is bestowed with social significance within a given culture (Kim & Sherman, 2007).

In this ethnographic study, the monks actively similarly construct their identity images. I do not question their monk identities. On the one hand, their digital identities and expressions are an extension of their offline identities, and this is undeniable. However, on the other hand, their digital expressions also reinforce their self-identification with the monk identity, bringing them economic benefits and social recognition.

5.2.1 Solid Monastic Identity

The case of JC is not an isolated instance. In fact, most of the monks' profile photos are mainly Buddhist-related images, animated images of monks, rosaries, photos of them wearing monk's clothes, etc (Figure 5.3). They use their Dharma names, written in Tibetan or according to Buddhist vocabulary, as their usernames. Furthermore, they actively utilize individual posts to present religious content and express various aspects of life (Figure 5.4). The subtle information they convey in social networks reveals the monks' sense of identity and expression of faith. Their online discourse, shaped by the precepts governing their daily lives, closely aligns with their everyday experiences.

Monk LR highlights that

"In the present era, becoming a monk has become increasingly challenging compared to the past. The rapid development of society has facilitated the



Fig. 5.3 Monks' self-presentations in WeChat

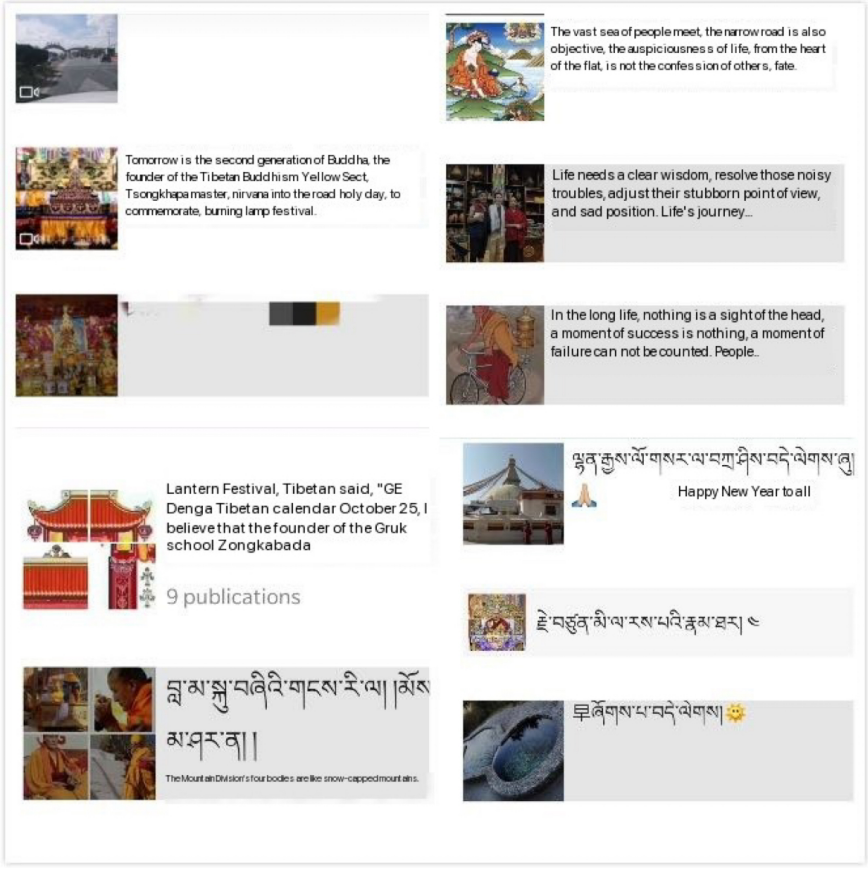


Fig. 5.4 Monks' posts in WeChat

incorporation of new technologies, such as smartphones, within the monastery, enabling monks to establish connections with individuals from the external world. This represents a significant departure from the past's limited opportunities for such interactions. While societal development is generally viewed as beneficial, it is also essential to acknowledge its potential drawbacks".

This conversation occurred in September 2018, where we discussed his conflicting attitude towards integrating new technologies and digital social media into monastic life. While he worried that the general decline in monastery discipline and governance was linked to the rise of Internet usage, he also cited cases where young monks, lured by online and worldly distractions, left their monastic commitments. He anticipates that this trend will continue as external enticements increasingly capture the attention of younger individuals. Despite these concerns, he admitted that modern technologies have significantly enhanced the quality of daily life for monks in ways previously unimaginable. However, this advancement has also instilled anxiety within the monastic community.

He continues remarked, *"In the current era, the self-awareness of monks is more significant than adherence to rules. The rapid pace of societal development poses challenges in upholding many precepts. For instance, it is now common for monks to own and drive cars. According to Buddhist precepts, monks are prohibited from having far-reaching visual perceptions. However, it is inevitable to observe distant surroundings while driving.*

Furthermore, monks were not permitted to wear shoes in the past, but nowadays, it is uncommon to find monks without footwear. These changes in practices have resulted from the progress and development of society.

Nonetheless, we must always remember the fundamental precepts of refraining from killing, stealing, misconduct, intoxication, and false speech. These precepts should be deeply ingrained in our minds regardless of societal transformations. As monks, we should be mindful of our words and actions, even

in the online sphere, as we represent the image of the monastic community".

Building upon his discourse, it can be observed that monks depict and present themselves on digital social media as a means of self-representation. The purpose is to project their monk identity to the external world, thereby protecting the image of the monastic community and strengthening their sense of identity. This demonstrates a proactive endeavor to maintain individual identities. Furthermore, the long-standing institutional life within the monastery also engenders a sense of passive identity protection. In this context, the term "passive" does not imply a negative attitude, but rather refers to the monks who, in contrast to actively posting their own content, primarily engage in sharing and reposting posts.

Another monk, SR, one year younger than LR and born in 1990 from a different Khamsten, expressed his passive endeavor toward identity presentation in WeChat. Like many other monks, it was not until almost a decade after his monastic life that he acquired his first mobile phone. In 2012, he initiated his registration and usage of WeChat. In comparison to his fellow monks, he embraced WeChat at an earlier stage. Nevertheless, due to his limited proficiency in Mandarin, he is not proficient in utilizing the features of WeChat. Similarly, he refrains from using his phone in the presence of his master, and he hesitates to add his master as a WeChat friend. SR appeared somewhat shy during our conversation, which might be attributed to his character. Nonetheless, he earnestly acted to respond thoroughly to my questions. This introverted nature seems to influence his expression on social media platforms indirectly. In his WeChat Moments, he shares reposted content from Buddhist public accounts, but offers limited content about his monastic life. When asked about the content he typically shares, he stated,

"I don't post much myself. Sometimes, I repost when my senior or junior disciples share something. I find it suitable to follow their lead. Additionally, there are some Chinese characters I cannot read, so I cannot post frequently".

A wealth of research has demonstrated a significant relationship between the

content individuals post on social media platforms and their individual personality characteristics (Choi & Sung, 2018). In the digital realm, individuals assume noteworthy agency in shaping and projecting their identities as they sit behind their terminals (Bennett, 2015). To a certain extent, this resonates with Bauman's concept that change is the only permanence, and uncertainty is the sole certainty.

Multifaceted factors of uncertainty shape the construction of identities in the digital space. Liquid modernity is characterized by the dissolution of traditional collective structures and the pursuit of self-identity (Bauman, 2013b). This fluidity underscores the emphasis on individualization, wherein personal identities and identity projects become more malleable, temporary, and subject to continuous transformation as institutions and traditions become liquefied (Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2020). Actually, for Bauman, liquidity is a metaphor. His intention is not to rigidly categorize the notion of liquid modernity as a definitive phase of development that sharply distinguishes it from preceding eras. Instead, his objective is to capture its current state of being tangible and perceptible in the present context (Beilharz, 2010). The concept of fluidity emphasizes the transition of forms, whereby the fragility and fluidity of modern individuals resemble liquid matter that cannot sustain a fixed solid identity over an extended period. This reinforces the temporary nature of social relationship states in this context. This research draws inspiration from his theoretical perspective on the transformative nature of identities within the context of liquid modernity.

However, my theoretical standpoint differs from Bauman's as I propose that Buddhist monks, through the mediating role of identity management, have the capacity to navigate and resist the fluidity of modernity. In other words, they can concurrently embrace both liquid and solid identities by solidifying certain behavioral aspects. These monks exemplify their monastic identity in the digital space through their self-expression. They actively share Buddhist-related content on social media platforms, not only to disseminate Buddhist teachings but also to

showcase and uphold their own identities. As SR expressed,

"I feel obligated to share similar content when I see other senior brothers doing so, even if I don't fully grasp the significance of it in spreading Buddhism".

Furthermore, the observance of the precept of abstaining from false speech is a constant reminder of their monastic identity. Thus, the Buddhist precepts play an another active role in solidifying their sense of self amidst the fluidity of the digital space.

Both LR and SR firmly adhere to the principle that monks should refrain from lying or fabricating information to present themselves. In the case of LR, who actively shares content on his WeChat Moments, he emphasizes,

"I frequently post videos of Buddhist ceremonies and personal photos from my travels. My intention is to authentically portray aspects of my own life, allowing my friends to gain insight into it".

As proposed by Erikson (1968), the journey of identity development, which represents a pivotal task during adolescence, commences as individuals extend their awareness beyond their immediate experiences and contemplate the roles that they will undertake within the broader societal context. Furthermore, Erikson argued that forming one's identity is incomplete until others recognize and affirm it. Drawing upon this line of thought, social scientists argue that identity formation is a complex process shaped by diverse social constructs encompassing various social institutions and contextual factors.

In the specific context of Buddhist monks, establishing and maintaining a stable and cohesive identity is intricately intertwined with the rigorous organizational framework of the monastery and the enduring influence of Buddhist precepts that are instilled from adolescence. The monastic environment serves as a crucial backdrop for identity development, fostering a sense of purpose, belonging, and adherence to the moral and behavioral guidelines that define their roles within the religious community. Through dedication to monastic principles,

monks navigate the intricate interplay between their individual aspirations and the collective expectations placed upon them, cultivating a distinct identity that reflects their commitment to spiritual practice and the embodiment of Buddhist values. As such, the formation of monk identities is a multifaceted process that emerges from a dynamic interplay between personal agency, social norms, and institutional structures within the context of the monastery.

With the advancement of technology and the continuous development of globalization, individuals are increasingly taking on diverse and expansive social roles in different contexts. Many scholars argue that this condition significantly impacts how individuals construct and experience their identities. Specifically, scholars have observed that as individuals move from one social environment to another and assume various roles in different settings, their identities become more multifaceted and fluid (Giddens, 1991; Beck, 2002; Bauman, 2013b). It is indisputable that the digital space offers a rich environment for the plurality and fluidity of identity.

Nonetheless, in-depth academic studies have revealed that digital identities may not exhibit the anticipated diversity, fluidity, or complete detachment from offline contexts as initially presumed (Hardey, 2002; Davis, 2012; Choi & Sung, 2018). This calls for a nuanced understanding of the intricate interplay between digital and offline environments in shaping and manifesting identity. Indeed, scholars in the field of identity argue that a fundamental aspect of identity is establishing a sense of self-coherence, wherein an individual's self-attributes are perceived as integrated and stable (Baumeister & Muraven, 1996; Adams & Marshall, 1996; Giddens, 1991; Simon, 2008). This sense of self-coherence plays a crucial role in providing individuals with a sense of continuity, self-understanding, and stability amidst the complexities of their social interactions and diverse roles.

It can be argued that the monks' profound affiliation with the institutional framework of the monastery and their adherence to the fundamental precepts of

Buddhism establish a foundation for their identity formation. This collective identification engenders a sense of continuity that remains resilient despite external fluxes. Moreover, it empowers them to reinforce and reaffirm their monastic identities within dynamic contexts, facilitating a deeper integration of self-perception and self-expression.

5.2.2 Reconstruction of Digital Identity Hierarchy and Religious Authority

"Monk JC is now the Shifu (mentor)[5] *of many people,"* expressed JC's fellow, LZ.

"What kind of monk can become a Shifu to others ?" I inquired.

"In our monastery, any monk who has been ordained for more than 20 years and has received the higher ordination (Gelong) can serve as a Shifu to others," he explained.

"However, according to my understanding, monk JC has not yet received the Gelong ordination. Why did you say he is a mentor to others ? " I asked.

"For many lay Buddhists, we are all Shifu because we are monastics," he expressed.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, while the monastery has a well-established administrative structure, the hierarchical structure among the monks is not strictly upheld. The lack of strict hierarchical structure among the monks in this monastery does not imply equality in rank among them, but rather that the pursuit of hierarchical promotion holds limited significance for the monks. On the one hand, a living Buddha, considered a reincarnation with pre-existing status, is reserved for a few monks in their present lives. This contrasts with the practice in Chinese Buddhism, which focuses on the Buddhist knowledge and personal

[5]The term "shifu" is a transliteration in Mandarin Chinese, generally referring to an elder who imparts knowledge and provides guidance. "Shi" means teacher, and "fu" means father. In traditional Confucian thought, "shifu" signifies a teacher who is regarded as both a mentor and a paternal figure. Today, many lay practitioners respectfully address monastics as "shifu" (monastic mentors) to show reverence.

cultivation of monastic leaders. On the other hand, even as an ordinary monk, one can obtain a Geshe degree through years of study and have the opportunity to hold important positions or become an abbot within the monastery. However, after serving as an abbot for three years, the monastery does not necessarily transfer the monk to a higher-ranking monastery based only on his performance. Additionally, in this particular monastery, for most monks, titles within the administrative positions of the monastery are naturally acquired with increasing age. Therefore, many monks believe that pursuing hierarchical promotion is unimportant in their monastic careers.

As the monks voice,

"All we have to do as monks is to engage in spiritual practice, recite Buddhist scriptures, and pray for the blessings of all beings".

The monks can choose their level of commitment to their practice. The monastic system provides a sacred space for the monks to follow their values. From this perspective, monastic communities directly embody the vision of the simplest form of individualism and social contract theory, where society is seen non-social as a collection of adult and rational agents. Their unity results from a reasonable decision that their interests and aspirations will be best served (Collins, 1988). A noteworthy aspect pertains to the development of the tourism industry and the extensive utilization of social media platforms, which have played a significant role in strengthening their identification with their monk identity and values. These trends have substantially impacted how monks perceive and express their roles as members of the monastic community.

Outside the monastic context, laypeople harbor various perceptions and imaginings about the lives of monks, particularly among tourists visiting such religious sites. For them, the characterization of monks often centers around their distinct crimson robes rather than their hierarchical roles within the monastery. Although Tibetan Buddhism's living Buddhas evoke fascination and reverence,

the image of ordinary monks remains imbued with curiosity and conjecture in the eyes of observers. Occasionally, I would join tourists to enter the monastery. Visitors generally take tourists bus into the monastery. Upon arrival, tourists usually gather at the main entrance and wait for guided tours, which are scheduled approximately every 15 minutes. These guides are recruited from the surrounding village communities. All of them are young Tibetan males. Their primary role is to introduce the monastery's historical and Tibetan cultural aspects to the visiting tourists. More specifically, these guides emphasize introducing the Tibetan people's devout beliefs, the monks' status within the local, and the monastery's architecture.

Here, I introduce the commentary of one tour guide:

"Welcome to Songzanlin Monastery! I am LS, your guide today, and I am a Tibetan. As you may know, Tibetans are a deeply devout ethnic group with a strong belief in Buddhism. In the past, Tibetan people would walk to monasteries and even embark on pilgrimages to Tibet, covering a journey of approximately 1800 kilometers on foot.

This was not a trivial matter; it was not about merely capturing a few TikTok videos or engaging in casual sightseeing. We now have airplanes and cars, making transportation much more convenient. However, devout Tibetans still prefer not to take vehicles; instead, they perform prostrations during their pilgrimage. They prostrate themselves on the ground every three steps, marking their progress with body imprints. They undertake this pilgrimage without any supervision, yet they strictly adhere to their discipline, and they eat and sleep along the way, carrying their own food. The physical journey inflicts many hardships on them; some have succumbed to cold, hunger, or exhaustion during their pilgrimage, yet they embrace it without any regrets and even do so with a smile. Their pilgrimage is not for fame, as many people nowadays who record videos with their smartphones just for the sake of popularity. Therefore, we Tibetans are the most devout ethnic

group.

OK ! Let me provide you with an overview of this monastery's three main organizational sections. The first significant section comprises three golden pinnacles. Today, our primary focus for visitation will be the highest point, the 'Three Pinnacles Hall.' A well-known saying: 'Nothing is accomplished without ascending the Three Pinnacles Hall', specifically refers to the hall before you. As we ascend 143 steps, we arrive at the first grand hall, the Tsongkhapa Hall. Have you heard of the Tsongkhapa Hall ? Are you familiar with it ? Is the Dalai Lama aware of it ? And what about the Panchen Lama, Erdeni ?

Within the framework of the highest monastic hierarchy in the Tibetan region, the first grand hall accommodates the revered masters of the first generation, Tsongkhapa. He is the teacher of including two eminent Living Buddhas. This esteemed master was born in Qinghai. Have you ever had the opportunity to visit Kumbum Monastery, which was constructed in honor of Tsongkhapa's birth ? For those unfamiliar with Kumbum Monastery, have you had the chance to explore Yonghe Temple in Beijing ? Inside Yonghe Temple, the Buddha statue is dedicated to Tsongkhapa, and visitors seek blessings for the well-being and tranquility of their families.

The second grand hall is the venue for the recent elaborate religious ceremonies. It also functions as an examination hall in the temple's central part. Within this hall, visitors seek blessings for 'health'. The final destination is the Mahavira Hall, which houses the immaculate golden statue of Shakyamuni Buddha, revered by the Red Army of the Chinese Communist Party during the Long March. The Buddha's radiant form is adorned with 108 precious gemstones. The second destination within this hall pays homage to the Eight Great Disciples of Buddha, with particular reverence for the Bodhisattva Manjushri. At this concluding station, individuals seek blessings for their wisdom and professional pursuits, their siblings' academic success, and prospects. This hall is called the

'Three Jewels Hall', honoring the Three Jewels of Buddhism: Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. Remarkably, Tibetan Buddhism does not have a dedicated temple for worshiping the God of Wealth, as Tibetans firmly believe that by seeking peace, health, and wisdom, prosperity naturally follows through genuine efforts. Hence, no separate temple is present for the deity associated with wealth. OK ! Continue !

Certainly ! In the second significant section, we can observe the 'Kangchen', constructed from red bricks. The term 'Kang' refers to the monastic discipline, commonly known as the Vinaya. It governs the code of conduct for the monastic community, emphasizing a life-long commitment to the monastic order and prohibiting marriage or reverting to secular life. Monks are bound by precepts that forbid killing, stealing, smoking, drinking alcohol, and more. The Kangchen served as an administrative office in the past, similar to a local government agency, and later transformed into Buddhist schools, such as the Eight Great Schools after liberation. Inside, they depict the statue of Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva, Shakyamuni Buddha, and Manjushri Bodhisattva.

Moving on to the third section, you can see numerous two and three-store buildings, known as the monks' quarters. These accommodations are exclusively for the monks and not for the general public. The construction of these quarters provides lodging for the monks, ensuring their basic needs are met. The construction of these monks' quarters is contingent upon the monks obtaining a degree. They cannot build such quarters without a degree, even if their family is affluent. Once a monk obtains their degree, the monastery's abbot or living Buddha provides them with a plot of land. This vacant land is bestowed upon them, akin to receiving a certificate of qualification. Subsequently, the monk can build their quarters with support from their parents and siblings. The condition and appearance of these quarters are closely related to the financial status of the monk's family. Some quarters may appear simple and rudimentary, with walls cracked

and rooftops covered in grass, reflecting financial constraints. On the other hand, wealthier families can build more aesthetically pleasing and well-maintained quarters.

When a monk has obtained their degree but their family faces financial constraints, collective contributions from multiple families or villagers may be solicited to fund the construction of the monk's quarters, representing a significant and meritorious endeavor for villagers. Supporting a monk on the snowy plateau is considered an honorable achievement. It is a source of great pride for families with a member who has taken monkhood, even more so if they have a living Buddha or a prominent Tibetan medicine doctor. As a result, monks hold a high status on the snowy plateau and are deeply respected by Tibetans. The act of supporting a monk is done without any regrets. In contrast, in Han Buddism, there are collective canteens where everyone eats together. But here, each monk supports and provides for themselves without a fixed salary.

As you see these quarters now, private property is off-limits to the outside, as it belongs to individual families. In the Tibetan region, it is not unusual for monks to have cars and houses, as they depend on support from their family members for their sustenance and livelihood....”

This constitutes only a portion of the tour guide's commentary. We won't delve into the content's veracity for now; it is evident from the guide's discourse that there is a deliberate effort to shape the image of the monks. I noticed that these narratives captivated most tourists, who frequently showed a nod in agreement. After each brief introduction, the guide allows tourists some time to take photographs. In recent years, many visitors have rented Tibetan costumes while exploring the temple, seeking to capture portraits infused with Tibetan essence. Frequently, they include passing monks in their photographs and occasionally even request the monks to pose alongside them. Numerous tourists are enthusiastic about capturing images of monks as they pass by. When you use

the Douyin application and explore the "Nearby" feature, you can see many videos introducing this temple, including short clips taken by users featuring scenes with monks. The comments on these short videos are often adorned with praying hand emojis.

In digital social media, monks dressed in crimson robes have emerged as significant figures, garnering widespread attention as ideal posts for captivating WeChat moments and advertisements (Figure 5.5)[6]. Furthermore, this affection extends to other social media platforms like Douyin (TikTok) and Kuaishou, where people express profound reverence for these spiritual figures. It appears that the advent of digital space challenges and blurs religious authority. Within the digital space, the traditional hierarchical distinctions among monks seem to fade away, and each monk receives equal respect and admiration. Regardless of their rank or academic degree within the monastic order, they are praised and revered by the online audience. The image shaping and moral reverence from the external world serve as subtle reminders for the monks, influencing their every word and action. Within this dynamic process, their identity constantly strengthens, fostering a more profound sense of self-awareness.

Nevertheless, we can interpret these prayer-related comments and emoticons as expressions of religious emotions by users or followers. It does not imply diminishing religious authority in the digital space. In fact, new forms of religious authority are emerging (H. A. Campbell, 2020). In the realm of digital communication, authority takes on a more fluid nature compared to the traditional offline world. This evolving authority can be perceived in two distinct forms: firstly, through the newfound power vested in moderators; and secondly, through an actor's accumulation of cultural capital within a specific religious domain (Possamai & Turner, 2012). For instance, an individual who lacks authority in the offline world but possesses skills in digital content creation or

[6]Screenshot from a local photography gallery's WeChat Moments.



Fig. 5.5 Monks and Photography in WeChat

expertise in handling digital technologies can attain a position of authority in the digital space, where people grant him influence (H. A. Campbell, 2020, 2012a). Furthermore, someone with extensive knowledge of religious culture and accumulated considerable cultural capital can also significantly impact the digital religious sphere. Similarly, although many monks actively engaged in the digital realm may not hold authoritative positions offline, their prolific production of religious content and involvement in everyday spiritual life confer a certain degree of authority upon them. As such, even though the digital realm seemingly offers space for individual freedom and disrupts traditional authority constructs, it concurrently facilitates the ongoing generation and reconstruction of fluid forms of authority (Possamai & Turner, 2012). To further elaborate, this constant fluidity of authority reminds religious clergy to reflect and maintain their self-identity.

In addition, as I have analyzed in the previous chapters, the monks' identity closely correlates with the strict monastic system and the infusion of Buddhist values. Even though the digital social media space might not overtly display hierarchical differences among the monks, the hierarchical structure seamlessly extends from offline to online, mirroring their individual presentations on these platforms. The profound ideology of Buddhist precepts continues to uphold the orderly framework of the monastic system, even in the digital space. As a tangible cultural aspect, authority remains an integral part of human social existence, deeply embedded within our habitus (Costa, 2006; Possamai & Turner, 2012). For monks, authority becomes an internalized and inherent aspect of their thoughts and behaviors, subconsciously guiding their choices and actions. Even within the expansive digital space, they naturally carry their offline social practices into the online realm, including their reliance on and adherence to authority.

Many young monks avoid chatting with their masters or living Buddhas, and some hesitate to add them as WeChat friends. While one might draw parallels to students being apprehensive about communicating with their teachers, the monks

specifically express their fear of making unintended disrespectful remarks towards their masters. As a result, they opt to approach their masters in person if they need to discuss something, mainly when the masters are present at the temple, instead of resorting to WeChat.

JC expressed his attitude towards contacting his master on WeChat,

"I refrain from engaging in text message conversations with my master through a mobile phone, as I think that is highly disrespectful. When my master is absent, or the matter is not urgent, I prefer to wait until my master's return. I will contact my master through a phone call rather than using WeChat. I introduced my outside friends to my master, and they are now regarded as his disciples, not mine. As a monk, they address me as a 'master' even though I am their senior".

Similarly, the younger monks, SR and YJ, have chosen not to add their masters as WeChat friends. They expressed concerns about their masters discovering that they use their phones, and they feel it would be inappropriate to message them directly. Rather, they choose to make phone calls when necessary. Thus, for these monks, sending WeChat messages to their masters is seen as less formal and respectful. From a particular perspective, the master embodies a symbol of authoritative identity, exemplifying the hierarchical structure within the monastic community. Concurrently, the emotional attachment of the monks to their masters signifies a form of compliance with authority, representing an internalized sentiment.

Thus, despite decentralization being an inherent attribute of the internet (Nottingham, 2023), re-centralization within the digital realm offers new forms of religious authority. In my ethnographic case, I observe three manifestations: 1) Symbolic authority represented by individuals wearing monk attire; 2) Knowledge authority actively participating in social media, consistently sharing Buddhist knowledge, with offline authority not necessarily playing a defining role; 3) Habitus authority through long-term involvement in monastic life.

5.3 Conclusion

In conclusion, the internet and digital social media have inevitably entered monastic life, leading to changes in monks' daily interactions, and even spiritual practices. However, monks hold various attitudes toward digital technology. On the one hand, some perceive the digital network as potentially impacting their spiritual cultivation, expressing concerns that the use of electronic scriptures may weaken the sacredness of physical texts. On the other hand, some monks embrace the presence of digital networks and devices, acknowledging their convenience in facilitating interactions with the outside world and family members. Although digital spiritual practices are becoming a growing trend in the future of religious development, monastic religious authorities maintain a reserved stance. They are seeking ways to preserve traditional spiritual practices and values.

In digital social media, monks tend to exhibit and uphold their monastic identity and image. On the one hand, the principles of Buddhist precepts stress the unity of knowledge and practice, including abstaining from false speech. This expectation extends to their conduct in the digital space, where they must maintain their integrity. On the other hand, as multiple studies (D. Miller, 2011; Baym, 2015; Zani, 2021; Arfini, Botta Parandera, Gazzaniga, Maggioni, & Tacchino, 2021) have suggested, individuals' online identities closely align with their offline personas, indicating a preference for maintaining continuity between their virtual and real-life selves. The idea of a complete self-reconstruction or radical identity transformation on the internet space is often an exaggerated interpretation. In other words, the digital religious identity within the online sphere remains intricately intertwined with the individual's real-life religious identity. Although the internet provides a new realm for shaping personalized spiritual experiences, constructing one's religious identity predominantly draws from traditional offline religious roles rather than fragmented online personas (H. A. Campbell & Teusner, 2011). This observation highlights that religious practices on the internet are, in essence, an

extension and complement to real-world religious practices.

In my ethnographic case study, I observed that monks' expressions on digital social media go beyond merely preserving the continuity between their online and offline identities. These online presentations also play a crucial role in strengthening and solidifying their self-identity. By actively engaging on digital platforms, monks energetically respond to the question of how their online persona aligns with their real-life roles as religious practitioners. Through their digital presence, monks navigate the complex interplay between their traditional roles as spiritual guides in the physical world and their evolving roles as influencers in the digital realm. By embracing digital social platforms, they take new opportunities to disseminate religious knowledge, share religious lives, and engage with a broader audience. In doing so, they reinforce their personal spiritual authority and showcase their knowledge, effectively bridging the gap between the monastic identity and the monastic institution.

It becomes evident that the digital landscape serves as an extension of their spiritual practice, enabling them to connect with both devoted followers and curious seekers beyond the confines of physical temple spaces. The fluidity between their online and offline identities spotlights the profound impact of digital culture on shaping and redefining their self-perception as monks. In this context, integrating digital technologies into religious practices is not perceived as disrupting tradition but rather as a means to adapt and extend their spiritual mission. The transformation of their roles from local spiritual guides to broader influencers does not diminish their authority but rather enhances their capacity to impact and inspire individuals worldwide.

6

Solid Monastic Authority: Digital Indexicality and Digital Consumer Spirituality

6.1 A New Kind of Digital Spiritual Service : WeChat Chanting Scriptures Group

As mentioned in the previous chapter (see Chapter 2.2), the monastery has established a new form of spiritual practice that involves interaction between Tibetan Buddhist monks and Tibetan villagers in the digital space. Indeed, it can be better described as a novel spiritual service rather than just a new kind of

spiritual practice. As previously described in the research methodology, members in WeChat chanting groups express their spiritual needs and show appreciation by sending digital red envelopes (Chinese: hong bao, see 6.1.1) to the group. After fulfilling these spiritual requests for the group members, the monks open these digital red envelopes. Monks act both as practitioners of spiritual practices and providers of spiritual services.

For the monks, utilizing WeChat groups to assist believers in their prayers hasn't added to their workload. As explained by monk LZ,

"Around 2019, we started using WeChat groups to help believers recite scriptures. However, I don't recall who created the group. This chat group belongs to our Khamtsen; the rotating monks on duty manage it as group leaders. Previously, before the existence of the WeChat group, the monks on duty in the Khamtsen hall also recited scriptures every day, regardless of whether there were offerings from the believers or not. The difference now is that having this group is more convenient for the villagers; they don't need to make a long trip to the monastery.

In the chanting group, the most common practice is reciting the 'Peace Mantra', which includes our monastery's seven Dharma Protectors. Chanting it once time, takes approximately 15 minutes, as the text spans around 17 pages (printed on long paper scrolls). Some devotees also request the recitation of the 'Tara Mantra', which is relatively shorter and can be completed in just one minute".

In 2021, Monk SD was assigned as the on-duty monk at the Khamtsen. His responsibilities during this time included maintaining the cleanliness of the Khamtsen Hall, conducting daily chanting practices, and recording the chanting requests received from the devotees. Monk SD rises at 6:30 am each day. He begins his routine by cleaning the main hall and refreshing the water bowls in front of the Buddha statues. Following the morning rituals, he dedicates himself to chanting

scriptures. As the designated monk on duty, he performs two chanting sessions daily, each lasting four hours —one in the morning and the other in the evening. Occasionally, before noon, villagers seek his assistance in chanting. According to local Tibetan customs, requests for monks to recite scriptures or visits to the monastery must be completed before noon (Figure 6.1). In response, he usually records their names and the specific scriptures that they wish to be recited in a notebook. Typically, these villagers have previously visited a living Buddha or a Geshe, and then shared their specific ritual or scripture requests with the on-duty monk. It then becomes his responsibility to organize the subsequent affairs. In gratitude, the villagers often offer butter tea, Khata (ceremonial scarves), or various food items to the monks at Khamtsen. Alternatively, they may offer money placed on the Khata to these monks.



Fig. 6.1 Villagers offering butter lamp in the Khamtsen Hall

Following their responsibilities, each Khamtsen within the monastery administers Buddhist rituals for their respective villages. The monastery is a frequent destination for villagers from nearby areas who come to request scripture

recitations from the monks. However, due to the remote location of the town where monk SD resides, situated approximately 160 kilometers away from the monastery. As a result, relatively few villagers and followers visit their Khamtsen daily to request religious services. According to monk SD,

"Usually, there aren't many villagers who physically come to Khamtsen. They generally visit the monastery while on their way to the town for personal matters, or when they need significant ceremonies conducted at their homes. Additionally, during this month (May in the West calendar / April in the Tibetan lunar calendar), the number of villagers has decreased even further. The majority prefer to visit after September when they have finished their agricultural work. During this period, they will invite the monks to perform ceremonies and recite scriptures for a peaceful year ahead at the monastery or home. However, the advent of the WeChat group has provided a convenient alternative for villagers to request scripture recitations. Especially in the last two years, due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, our monastery has not been open to the public. As a result, villagers have increasingly turned to the WeChat group to request scripture recitations from us".

Created in 2019, the WeChat scripture recitation group was initially an internal chat group of monks from the Dongwang Khamtsen community. It later incorporated villagers, thus evolving into a specialized digital chanting group dedicated to facilitating requests for scripture recitations. Interaction within this digital chat group is notably minimal, focused simply on the performance of scripture recitations and the exchange of digital red envelopes. Participants first submit a digital red envelope and send a voice message request for a specific scripture recitation. Subsequently, the designated monk —who is the group administrator —acknowledges these requests and accepts the accompanying digital red envelopes. Notably, the process reduces many dialogues, and there is no unnecessary conversation.

Moreover, only the group administrator can open digital red envelopes. If

any group member erroneously claims a digital red envelope, the administrator takes a screenshot and requires the member to return the amount promptly. In fact, this digital form essentially acts as an extension of traditional spiritual practices conducted offline. Before the emergence of digital social media, individuals seeking spiritual services would typically physically visit the monastery or communicate their needs via telephone. The monks on duty would then record the details —ranging from the requester's name, desired scriptures for recitation, and the moment —within a notebook.

In contrast to traditional offline spiritual practices, digital spiritual practices integrate an additional layer of intermediary involvement and service-oriented characteristics. Previously, when devotees visited the monastery to request monks to recite scriptures, the monks also fulfilled the role of spiritual service providers during the practice. They would be present to recite scriptures and assist the devotees in their practices. Within digital space, however, the monks perform spiritual rituals such as offering butter lamps, presenting Khata (ceremonial scarves), and burning joss paper for the deceased on behalf of the faithful. To elaborate further, monks assume a more comprehensive role as providers of spiritual services and practices. While devotees function as seekers of spiritual engagement, participating in these activities through monetary transactions. This digital extension of spiritual service exemplifies the evolving nature of spiritual engagement through technology. Such digital spiritual service is based on digital communication and digital consumer spirituality frameworks.

Digital communication not only serves religious functions in an instrumental, strategic, missionary, or pastoral manner, but it also primarily (or additionally) plays a constitutive role by serving as a space for shaping, representing, and reconfiguring religion (Catellani, Servais, & Douyère, 2021). In other words, religious and spiritual practices have effectively adapted and embraced the digital space by employing digital communication forms. Digital consumer spirituality

refers to *"the interrelated practices and processes engaged in when consuming market offerings (products, services, places) that yield spiritual utility* (Husemann & Eckhardt, 2019b, p. 109)." In the context of digital communication and digital spiritual consumption, it becomes evident that both serve functional purposes in facilitating spiritual engagement. Monks effectively employ digital media to partake in their spiritual practices while offering spiritual services to their devotees. As Canada Buddhist scholar Jeff Wilson (2019) underlines that devotees contributing funds to Buddhist monks or temples are regarded as engaging in a merit economy within the traditional Buddhism system. To be more specific, *"This model is the separate but intimately intertwined division of economic and spiritual labor between the monastic sangha and the community of lay patrons, adherents, and participants. The force that drives this model is merit (Sanskrit: puṇya, Pali: puñña, Chinese: 功德, gōng dé)"* (J. Wilson, 2019, p. 89).

However, as spiritual practices service transform, how does this transformation have an impact on the realization of merits ? Furthermore, as digital spiritual practices unfold on screens, how do monks establish and cultivate trust with their followers amidst this technological shift ? These questions underscore the evolving landscape of monastic identities and trust-building dynamics within digital spirituality.

6.1.1 Digital Indexicality in WeChat

Monks perceive digital spiritual services as a modest modification in their daily routines, constituting a mere shift in the modes of daily practice. However, this seemingly minor adaptation profoundly affects their identities and authoritative roles. Within the realm of WeChat chanting groups, where textual content, images, and videos (Figure 6.2) are shared, the responsibility of management falls upon the monk serving as the group administrator. It is crucial to mention that, in most cases, this monk administrator does not hold an authoritative standing within the

monastic structure and functions as an ordinary monk. However, this monk is pivotal in shaping the chat group's norms and dynamics, reflecting their monastic identity and authoritative status in the digital space.

According to monk SD,

"As Buddhist monks, we consistently assume a mediatory role in religious practices. Likewise, we actively participate in the spiritual practices of devotees as they seek our chanting expertise. Although some devotees may recite specific scriptures on their own, they still require our presence for religious rituals. Monks possess the ability to chant complete scriptures, thereby offering essential spiritual potency during these sacred ceremonies.

In the past, daily chanting scriptures was a rarity for villagers. At that time, transportation was inconvenient, and villagers had no surplus financial resources to invite monks to conduct ceremonies in their homes frequently. However, with the passage of technology, this practice has become a familiar and even daily routine for villagers and us, especially for the monks on duty. A simple message in the chat group suffices to request sutra chanting, making it incredibly convenient for the villagers to seek spiritual solace whenever needed. Moreover, villagers also freely choose the money amount of their offerings according to their personal preferences. For us monks, the absence of such offerings from villagers is equally acceptable.

The digital demand for chanting scriptures exponentially among the challenges posed by the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns. The villagers desired solace in the tranquility of our blessing over online social platforms. They often requested us to offer ceremonial scarves or light butter lamps in Khamtsen Hall to enhance their spiritual practice. While we chanted the sacred rhymes, maybe bringing a sense of comfort to them".

In unpacking the phenomenon of digital spiritual practices, the indispensable role of societal practice transformation evoked by technological progress is readily evident. Meanwhile, as the primary discourse facilitator, the monk highlights

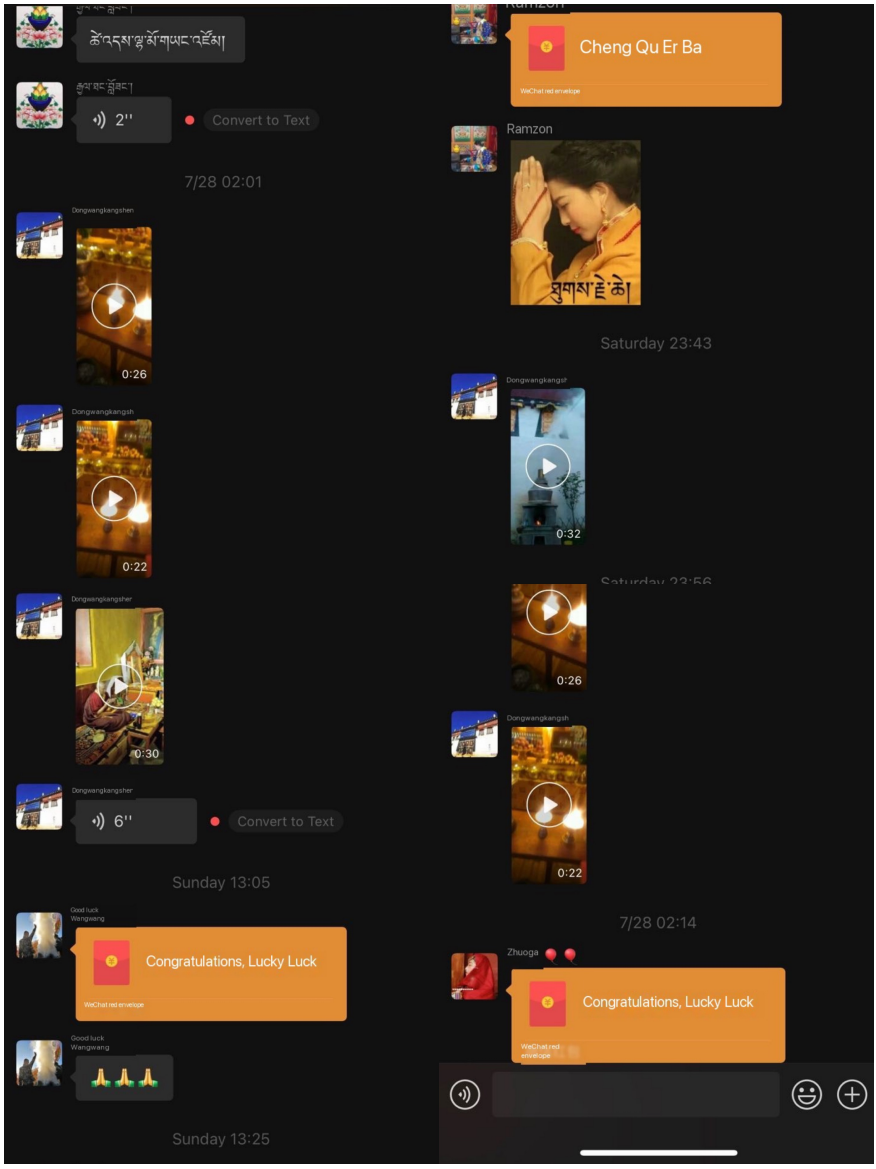


Fig. 6.2 WeChat chanting scriptures group

the legitimacy and influence of their role, reinforcing their position as trusted spiritual guides and representatives in the digital spiritual landscape. For a more nuanced exposition, I will draw upon Tom Boellstorff's (2012) theory of digital indexicality. In a broader context, the societal realities defined by specific spatial and temporal dimensions are no longer confined solely to the physical realm; processes of spatial mobility and the establishment of communal foundations are now concurrently feasible across both online and offline domains (Boellstorff, 2012). Hence, commencing from this standpoint, digital spiritual practices and conventional spiritual practices do not inherently engender conflict; rather, they possess the potential to coexist in a mutually enriching manner.

According to Peirce, *"The index is physically connected with its object; they make an organic pair, but the interpreting mind has nothing to do with this connection, except remarking it, after it is established. The symbol is connected with its object by virtue of idea of the symbol-using mind, without no such connection would exist"* (Peirce & Buchler, 2012, p. 114). It's worth mentioning that symbols and icons, which constitute the other two sign types within Peirce's framework, are extensively present within digital realms (consider the icons that hold a pivotal position in computing cultures) nowadays (Boellstorff, 2012). Moreover, Boellstorff, through the *interactive emergence of the indexical ground* (Hanks, 1992), for rethinking digital anthropology in terms of indexicality. More specifically, *"A basic property of the indexical context of interaction is that it is dynamic. As interactants move through space, shift topics, exchange information, coordinate their respective orientations, and establish common grounds as well as non-commonalities, the indexical framework of reference changes"* (Hanks, 1992, p. 53). We can decode the indices as a visualization strategy beyond symbols and iconic depictions, introducing a third potential to address within our current data-centric viewpoint (Offenhuber & Telhan, 2015). In other words, the index denotes the implicit significance conveyed through symbolic representation within

a specific cultural milieu.

Returning to our ethnographic case, I propose that the interaction between the followers and monks in digital spiritual practices within WeChat groups can be characterized, to some extent, as displaying features of digital indexicality. The WeChat red envelope feature plays a crucial role in facilitating this digital spiritual interaction. The function echoes the traditional Chinese exchange of monetary gifts via red envelopes (especially during the Chinese Spring Festival). In Chinese culture, it's customary for elders to present money enclosed in red paper envelopes (known as "hong bao") to the younger generation during the New Year, symbolizing well wishes and expectations. During the 2014 Chinese New Year, WeChat introduced the digital red envelope feature. Users can place a designated amount of money (up to 200 CNY) inside a red envelope and select the division of these funds into multiple portions (corresponding to the number of recipients). This feature's primary characteristic is its "first-come, first-served" mechanism, with the randomized monetary distribution. This red envelope feature has become a popular social engagement game within almost every Chinese family's internal group during the spring festival. In this way, receiving red envelopes signifies not only traditional culture but also means a kind of luck.

According to Tencent's report in the first quarter's result of 2015 (Tencent, 2015), introducing the WeChat red envelope feature during the Chinese New Year attracted numerous users to embrace mobile payment functionalities. Today, individuals are not confined to distributing red envelopes solely during the Spring Festival; these are now given out during various festivities and even daily. Similar to WeChat Pay, which has become an integral part of everyday life in China. WeChat red envelopes have become a cultural phenomenon extending beyond and enriching the traditional concept of red envelopes (Montag, Becker, & Gan, 2018). In the context of more commonplace daily interactions, people employ modest sums within WeChat red envelopes to convey emotions. For instance, parents

issue red envelopes to their children as a manifestation of encouragement. Leaders within professional groups extend red envelopes to subordinates, embodying both friendship and incentive toward staff members. Freshly joined group members offer symbolic red envelopes as a gesture of goodwill towards other members; commonly, they are self-employed individuals. Overall, WeChat red envelopes function as a form of digital indexicality, signifying distinct cultural meanings within different group settings. Specifically, in WeChat chanting groups, these red envelopes encompass offer monetary patronage to monks and index the request of chanting.

Firstly, within this specific chat group, members have developed a distinct and tacit mode of interaction. When a group member sends a digital red envelope containing the characters "Cheng qu (Figure 6.3)" or conveys a voice message containing the mention of "Cheng qu," they effectively transmit an indexical request to the group administrator. As the monks and the devotees explain, "Cheng qu" refers to a scripture for blessed peace. Given that, apart from the monks, the Tibetan population is not proficient in Tibetan script, "Cheng qu" is transliterated for its phonetic representation. In most instances in chat group, "Cheng qu" is transliterated into Chinese characters, and many examples of homophones with different characters can arise. Given that there isn't a precise Chinese rendering for the name of this scripture through these monks and villagers, I have not emphasized the pursuit of an exact title or transliteration for the scripture, but rather have presented it based on its Chinese phonetic transliteration. Just as indexicality refers to the sign representation of communication between groups based on contextual cues, the focus here is on transmitting information among the community through symbolic representation.

Secondly, upon receiving requests for recitations from group members, the group administrator (monk) responds with a voice message, like *"Okay! Got it!"*. When the administrator shares recitations or ritualistic videos within the

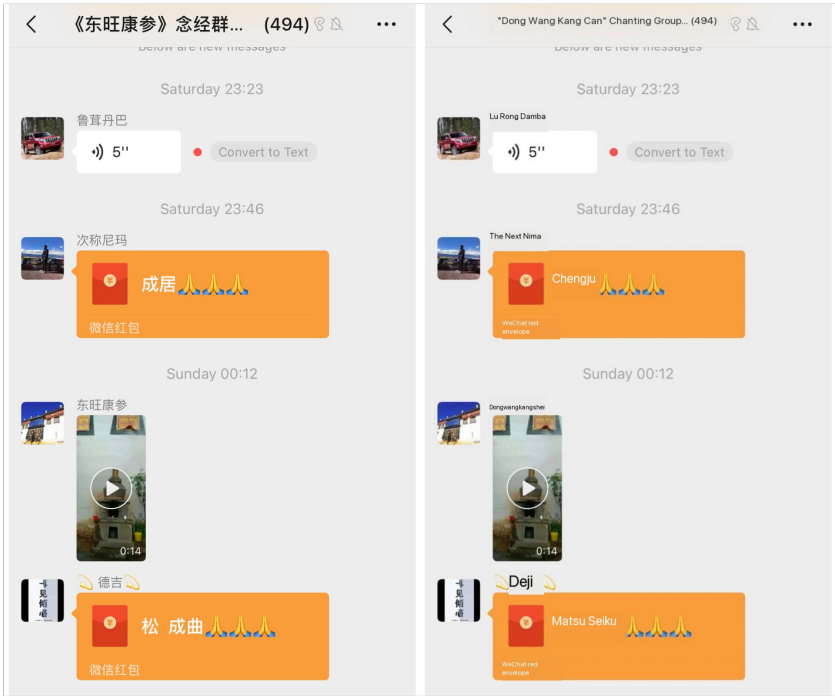


Fig. 6.3 Chengqu Scripture

group, numerous members respond with emoticons representing some "worship" (Figure 6.4) gestures. These gestures signify respect and gratitude towards the monk, acknowledging their assistance facilitating their spiritual practices. These specific symbols and expressions have established a communal language within the group, enhancing the participatory interaction dimension between monastic and lay individuals.



Fig. 6.4 Worship gesture in chat group

Furthermore, we can observe that the monks in this digital space also exhibit authoritative indexicality. As mentioned earlier, when the group administrator notices that other members have claimed the digital red envelopes, they can capture a screenshot and share it within the group, requesting those who opened the envelopes to return them. Through my observations, this screenshot itself bears indexicality. Given the functionality of the WeChat application, digital red envelopes sent within the group can be accepted freely by all members. Many newly joined group members are unaware of the "customs" in this group, and they will automatically accept the red envelopes. The monks do not require redundant verbal expression; the members who take the red envelopes spontaneously return them. As group members open the red envelope, they will discover that within this extensive group of up to 500 people, the sender of the red envelope has allocated only a singular amount (Figure 6.5). That means, in this particular group, there

is an implicit understanding that only the group administrator has the privilege to open these envelopes. This implicit understanding is cultivated through continuous interactions.

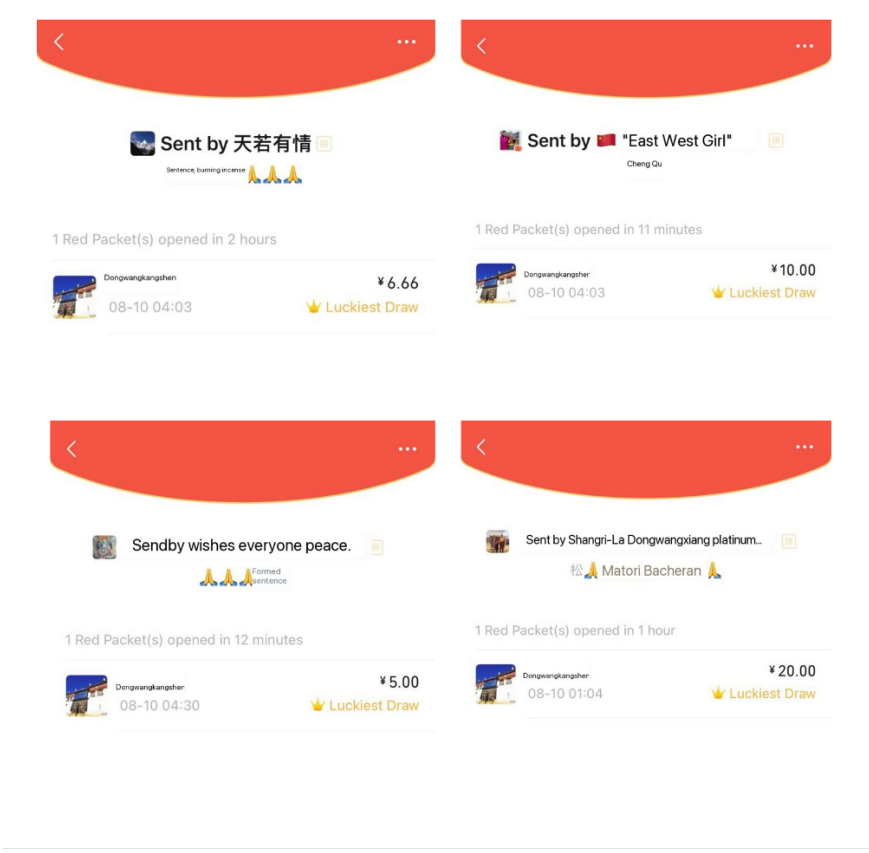


Fig. 6.5 Red envelope

To an extent degree, this way is rooted in the directional focus on spiritual practices associated with these digital red envelopes. The role of monks in handling digital red envelopes within WeChat chanting groups reveals the power dynamics between them and other group members. While monks serve as providers and facilitators of spiritual practices, their authority is embedded in their status

as chat group admin and religious clergy within the institutional framework of the monastery. Their digital monkhood identity itself endures authoritative indexicality.

6.1.2 Solid Monastic Authority in Fluid Digital Space

In the digital realm, there lacks a centralized authority overseeing ritual discourse; nonetheless, within each online discussion forum, a nuanced hierarchical structure emerges that encompasses both authoritative figures and discursive agency (Krüger, 2005). As we already understand, monks hold a specific authoritative role within this specialized chat group. Evidently, group members seem to conscientiously maintain the group's order, displaying a pronounced sense of affiliation. Nevertheless, it is essential to note that this sense of affiliation and authority, experienced by the devotees, is intricately interwoven with the impact of traditional practices and perspectives from their offline existence. These offline relationships shape their perceptions and interactions within the online realm.

Although this chat group consists of nearly 500 participants, most members are already acquainted with each other offline. This group has been established on the foundation of pre-existing offline social connections, with individuals initially inviting their close friends and family into the group. For these villagers, seeking the assistance of monks in this chanting group for spiritual practices holds comparable significance to physically visiting the temple. In fact, they believe that the involvement of the monks in performing these practices on their behalf potentially strengthens the spiritual potency, emphasizing the continuity of spiritual experience.

PG, a member of the chanting scripture group, has been part of this chat group for over a year now. His involvement in the group arises from a relative connection: his cousin, who happens to be a monk, extended the invitation for

PG to join. PG himself is employed as a truck driver, frequently traveling distant routes. Previously, whenever he set out on his journeys, he would make it a point to visit the temple beforehand, lighting incense and requesting the monks to recite a passage from the "Chengqu" on his behalf. In his words, *"Our mountainous roads are challenging, and I believe the Bodhisattva watches over us!"*

However, his practice has transformed since becoming a part of the digital chanting group. Almost every day, he reaches out to the monks within the online group, requesting them to chant. Despite the modest amounts he contributes through red envelope gifts to the monk, usually ranging from 5 yuan(CNY, about 60 cents euro), 6.66 yuan, 8.88 yuan, and occasionally 10 yuan, his intent lies beyond the monetary figures. According to him, these numbers are chosen for auspicious senses for him. His primary spiritual practice motivation is to know that the monks engage in daily recitations and prayers. He speaks, *"I know that the monks recite these prayers daily and offer their blessings to everyone. The monks within this chat group all originate from our village. I know them very well. I find solace in their chanting on my behalf. It brings me a sense of inner peace."*

"Doesn't it feel different to invite monks to chant through mediums like WeChat instead of personally going to the temple ?" I asked.

"Not too much different! It's just a matter of a different form. Yet, if something significant at home requires us to ask a Living Buddha or a Geshe, we still go to the temple personally. I wouldn't dare to contact a Living Buddha through WeChat; it just doesn't feel respectful enough," PG replied.

"However, when you invite monks to chant through this WeChat group, doesn't it also feel like a sense of less respect to them ?" I continued to inquire.

"Not at all! It's different! We hold great respect for all monks; it's deeply rooted in our Tibetan culture. Inviting monks to chant through the WeChat group is because we know they engage in these spiritual practices daily. Moreover, it's a group created by the monks, and we see it as an opportunity to accumulate our

merits," he explained.

PG's narrative exemplifies the amalgamation of digital technology, spiritual practices, and traditional cultures. His transition from seeking personal blessings at a physical monastery to engaging with monks through digital social media reflects the fluidity with which traditional spiritual practices can evolve in the face of modernity. Nevertheless, this transformation in the mode of practice still upholds a dependence on traditional religious authority.

From Bourdieu's (1990) perspective, for these villagers, the sense of authority attributed to the monks within the digital realm comes from the cultural habitual ingrained in their everyday lives. This is grounded in a cultural habitus and spiritual familiarity. The respect they hold for the monks extends beyond the physical or virtual realm; it's a sentiment that flows seamlessly across various contexts. This profound respect is not bound by the monastery's walls or constrained to the digital interface of the chat group. Instead, it's a sentiment interwoven into their daily lives interactions. It's ingrained in their interactions with the monks during temple visits, just as it manifests in prayer gestures when they participate in the online chanting sessions. This respect sense becomes integral to their collective identity, shaping how they perceive and engage with the spiritual realm. As a tangible cultural form, authority has become deeply embedded in habitual practices, with individuals demonstrating a profound reliance on it. For individuals, it represents internalized and innate patterns of thought and behavior, subtly dictating choices and actions in a subconscious manner (Possamai & Turner, 2012). In this sense, the villagers' respect for monks is a conscious and rational inclination, better understood as being intertwined with the broader socio-cultural context.

Therefore, the authority of the monks is not an isolated construct within the digital space. The digital sphere becomes an extension of their lived experiences, where the authority of the monks seamlessly transitions from offline to online, maintaining its significance and influence. In other words, individuals currently

active on the internet have been shaped by their daily experiences in the offline world, leading them to rely upon certain types of authority, particularly those of a relatively formal nature. Even when they consciously attempt to immerse themselves in an environment that lacks traditional authority structures, their ingrained habits tend to evolve as they migrate to this new context (Possamai & Turner, 2012; H. A. Campbell, 2012a). We can argue that spiritual and religious practice structures undergo an intangible and fluctuating shift with the advancement of the internet and digital technology. However, considerations regarding religious authority and monastic identity necessitate the incorporation of distinct sociocultural backgrounds and material environmental factors. This imperceptibly shifting digital-material realm potentially engenders the emergence of a novel paradigm of religious authority (Turner, 2009; H. A. Campbell & Teusner, 2011), concurrently leading to the reconfiguration of the monks' self-identity.

When I inquired about the significance of monks sending videos of religious rituals within the WeChat group and posting photos and videos of Buddhist ceremonies on their WeChat Moments, the monk SD, who was on duty, responded as follows:

"In this digital age, capturing and sharing our chanting sessions in the group has also become commonplace. As we are Buddhist monks, villagers always believe in the sincerity of our intentions. Sometimes, we sent some chant scriptures videos to the group. These videos serve as an assurance for the villagers, reinforcing their trust in our devotion. However, whether we share these moments or not, the villagers remain understanding and accepting. They know that our duty lies in spreading the wisdom of the sutras and offering comfort in times of spiritual need. They have unwavering faith in our dedication to serving them with utmost sincerity and honesty" (Figure 6.6).

In Buddhist temple premises, visitors receive clear instructions not to take

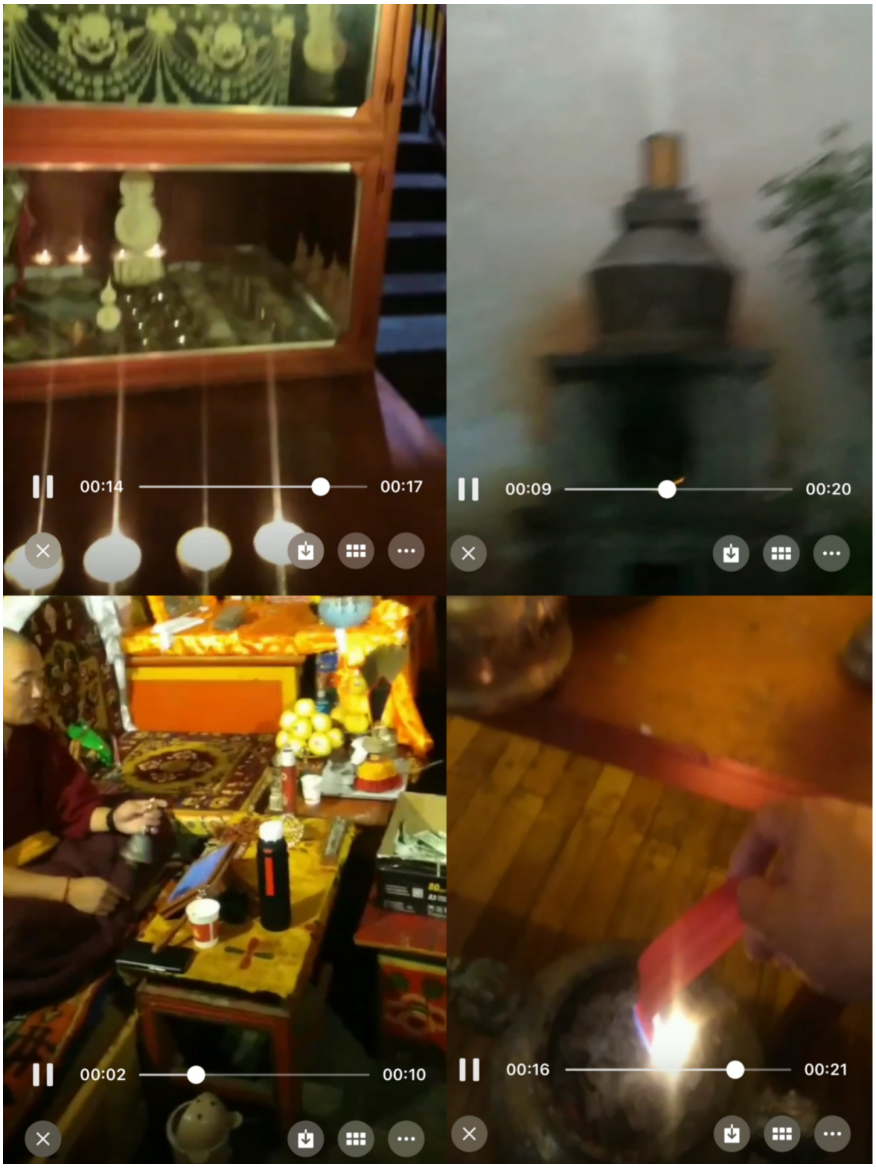


Fig. 6.6 Feedback of WeChat chanting scriptures

photographs in the main hall, and strict prohibitions are in place for photography and video recording during specific religious ceremonies and rituals. The same instruction applies to this particular monastery. However, an intriguing trend has emerged within the monastic community's use of WeChat groups. Monks themselves actively publish videos and photos of their chanting practices, capturing these moments within the sacred confines of the temple's main hall. During significant religious gatherings, the monks willingly share their chanting videos in their WeChat Moments or group chats.

"Why are monks allowed to take photos or record videos of certain religious ceremonies inside the main hall, while tourists and laypeople are not permitted to do so? Moreover, many followers share similar photos and videos within WeChat groups. How do you view this situation ?" I asked monk SD.

"Actually, nobody is allowed to take photos inside the main hall. But now, with temples opening up to tourism, it's hard to stop everyone from doing it. We put up signs at the entrance saying 'No Photography'. Besides, you'll find plenty of such videos on short video apps; it's just how things are these days, you know, with everything evolving !

There's a difference between us monks and the laypeople. We can take photos or record videos because we live in the temple, which is a clean and sacred space. But laypeople don't reside here; their phones may end up in places like bars, internet cafes, and nightclubs, which might not be so orderly and cleanly. If they have Buddha images on their phones in such settings, it wouldn't be respectful, you know. Moreover, laypeople are unfamiliar with what the monks chant during the ritual. Although we monks may not fully comprehend the meanings of these scriptures, we still have a general idea of their content. After all, we know how to recite and are familiar with the procedures of the ceremony," he answered.

Specifically, monk SD differentiates between monks and laypeople by considering variations in their living spaces, daily practices, and knowledge

frameworks. In his perspective, the identity of being a monk fundamentally distinguishes them from laypersons. This demarcation inherently carries a sense of authority linked to knowledge and identity status. Religious organizations frequently attempt to delineate such boundaries, exerting their authority to limit what they deem acceptable individual practice from other practices (McGuire, 2008).

Here, in the context of villagers, the authority of monks is derived from the habitus practices of daily life, remaining unaffected by spatial variations. However, researchers are examining the exploration of "religious authority in the age of the Internet" in distinct ways for religious institutions and clergy (H. A. Campbell & Teusner, 2011). In the context of religious institutes, they are raising questions about how the Internet impacts or disrupts traditional religious hierarchies. Is the internet fostering the emergence of new leaders, whose discourse practices in the digital realm position them as spiritual guides within online communities ? Do they hold similar identity authority in the offline world ?

From monk SD's discourse, it can be argued that the internet or digital social media haven't threatened traditional religious authority. However, when we delve into the hierarchical categorization within the monastic community, we discover that the internet affects individual monks' sense of authority and self-identity. Continuing with the example of monk SD, during the year 2021, at the age of 35, he had completed 24 years since his ordination into the monastic order. Analogous to numerous of his monastic counterparts, monk SD had not had a monastic academic degree. Nonetheless, as an individual who had embraced monasticism for a period exceeding two decades, monk SD indisputably embodied a monk endowed with substantial experiential depth within the monastic milieu.

I asked him, *"How are the monks selected to be on duty at the Khamtsen Hall?"*

"Monks who've been ordained for over ten years take turns on duty. Each of

us gets a chance to be in charge at our own Khamtsen once or twice. It's like being the steward for the Khamtsen hall, handling all sorts of things that come up during the year. And you know, we've got this WeChat group for chanting, just belong to our Khamtsen. Those red envelope offerings from the villagers for the Khamtsen, not us monks on duty. When the year's about to end, us duty monks tally up all the good fortune funds the hall's gathered, then share it equally among ourselves," he expressed.

In this monastery, the advanced age and an extensive monastic period are essential for the many monks without formal monastic degrees. In other words, these two factors could potentially form part of the hierarchical system within the monastery. Serving duty at the Khamtsen Hall does not constitute an administrative position within the monastery; rather, it represents a collective responsibility and obligation for each monk. During their tenure as monks on duty, the frequent and close interactions between monks and villagers further evoke a heightened sense of authority for their own monastic.

In the WeChat chanting group, the designated monks on duty employ usernames reflecting the terminology of the Khamtsen, coupled with profile images featuring depictions of Khamtsen Hall's architectural aspects. Even though these encompassing elements seamlessly channel the focus toward the Khamtsen itself, reducing the emphasis on the individual monks currently on duty. Notably, the stewardship of these accounts is rotated annually among the monks on duty, exemplifying an authority dynamic. Essentially, these monks fulfilling their duty represent not only just the Khamtsen, but also the entire monastic institute. While lacking authoritative positions or formal credentials, the monks on duty shoulder an authoritative role, notably amplified within the digital environment. This role extends beyond the conventional boundaries of their monastic positions, infusing them with a distinctive influence and standing within the online community.

Throughout my fieldwork, I noticed a prevailing enthusiasm among numerous

monks for sharing their everyday experiences on social media platforms. As previously discussed, these monks displayed a certain hesitancy about their active involvement in social networks, concurrently holding contradictory feelings towards digital devices and social media. I'll refrain from revisiting their conflicting stances at this juncture. A more nuanced examination of their online engagements exposes a repeating trend: these monks frequently receive some praying hand or worship emojis in their comments regardless of the content they share. Within the digital realm, features such as their monastic qualifications, journey into ordination, and breadth of knowledge tend to lose prominence, as the spotlight shifts towards their monk identity. Their status as monks imbues them with an intangible air of influence and credibility, elevating their online presence beyond the sum of their individual characteristics. Taking the following story as an example:

I became acquainted with monk DW through the Douyin (TikTok) platform. On Douyin, monk DW consistently posts content related to his personal life, insights into Buddhist culture, and expounds upon positive life values. His profile presentation, wherein his profile picture, username, and bio are inextricably associated with the monastery, unequivocally portrays his monk status. His followers tally up to 6,100, and his content's cumulative number of Likes stands at 100,000 times. In the videos he uploads, he typically wears the vermilion-red monastic dress and presents himself before the camera with a smiling countenance. These short videos tend to range from approximately 20 seconds to 1 minute. Within these visual presentations, he imparts insights into how to confront challenges and vexations inherent in life. Examples of his contents include, *"Guard against permitting external actions to undermine our inner contentment. Let us together welcome lives enriched with a sense of fulfillment"*; *"If a man lacks inner tranquility, various circumstances can lead to the persistence of concerns, restlessness, and feelings of dissatisfaction, regardless of the high level of material*

comfort he enjoys"; *"We don't require grandiose temples. Instead, our minds and attitudes serve as the best place for spiritual practice. Our primary focus is to cultivate a kind and compassionate heart"*, etc. In the comments section of each video he shares, the most repeatedly engaged elements consist of praying hand emojis and flower symbols.

Monk DW was born in 1990, and has been a monk for 20 years. In 2003, he journeyed to Indian monasteries for studies. He returned to his hometown in 2016, later embarking abroad once more to continue his life of learning. As DW puts it, *"I'm still on the path of continuous learning"*. Despite lacking a formal monastic academic degree, his content about Buddhist cultural knowledge has elicited a considerable volume of comments and appreciative reactions. Derived from the substance of these comments, a noticeable sense of esteem toward him becomes evident from laypersons. Notably, a subset of online users conveys their respects through salutations like *"Master, auspicious greetings !"* or *"Good afternoon, venerable Master !"* Concurrently, others inquire in their comments, asking questions like *"Master, how can one rise from the bottom and overcome challenges ? Please enlighten us, Master"*. Fellow users' responses include phrases like *"We express our gratitude, Master !"* or *"We are appreciative of Master's elucidations and discourses"*.

The Tibetan monastery held a prominent position in Tibetan society, often being perceived as wielding moral authority over the Tibetan population. The primary focus centers on the "codes of morality" and social justice concepts upheld by the monastics (Jansen, 2015). Monks endure the responsibility of protecting and transmitting the teachings of the Buddha. They engage in studying Buddhist scriptures, meditation, and attaining profound insights into the essence of reality. From the laity's perspective, Buddhist monks utilize their knowledge and comprehension to offer spiritual guidance to lay Buddhists and fellow monastics. Historian Robert Orsi (2003) emphasized that *"The religious person is the one*

acting on his or her word in the inherited, improvised, found, constructed idioms of his or her religious culture"(p. 173). Consequently, when reconsidering the impact of the internet or digital technology on religious institutions, the focus on digital media highlights the creativity within spiritual practices and the daily experiences of spirituality. This approach has the potential to provide a deeper comprehension of the fluid movement of religious authority within the digital space.

Monk DW's case is not an isolated example; we can discover a multitude of similar cases on social media platforms. Even though these monks might not undertake the conventional role of authoritative scriptural study and scripture teaching, they assume a role as spiritual guides, instilling Buddhist life values. Within this process, netizens do not prioritize considering the traditional hierarchical status of monastic institutions; instead, they follow the words of those monks who wear robes. "Faith factors" constitute the primary impetus for devotees' participation in digital spiritual practices (H. A. Campbell & Teusner, 2011), and the respect and encouragement received from followers bolster these monks' identification with their role. Simply put, digital social media is blurring the conventional hierarchical structure within religious institutions, such as monasteries. Monastic identity in the digital realm is shaping a novel form of authority that may not necessarily hinge on knowledge-based authority, but rather on the foundation of a distinct religious identity built upon faith factors. To elaborate further, on the one hand, within the digital realm of what might be termed a "floating free," where authority can be redefined, localized, eroded, and fragmented based on individual contexts, traditional religious authority habitus continues to exert an influence (Possamai & Turner, 2012). On the other hand, digital social media offers a convenient platform for religious institutions to present religious identities and images. Simultaneously, it blurs the conventional monastic titles tied to hierarchical positions, thus engendering a novel form of symbolic identity authority.

6.2 Digital Consumer Spirituality: Fluid Spiritual Practice and Solid Emotional Trust

We can declare that villagers inviting monks to engage in recitations through WeChat groups signifies a space transition of spiritual practice, concurrently exemplifying a manifestation of digital consumer spirituality. Much like the notion of digital consumer spirituality, which refers to the consumption of online products that offer spiritual benefits, consumers in the virtual realm select items that fulfill their spiritual aspirations (Kale, 2004). As consumers search *"for meaningful encounters with one's inner self or a higher external power"* (Husemann & Eckhardt, 2019b, p. 109), the digital landscape becomes inseparably linked with spiritual pursuits. However, our conceptualization of digital consumer spirituality doesn't preclude the involvement of traditional religious institutions and their religious practices. Instead, religion serves as a conduit through which many individuals are guided toward understanding and expressing their spiritual dimensions (Kale, 2004; Elkins et al., 1988; Santana et al., 2022). This intersection between the digital and the spiritual indicates a contemporary consumer dynamic wherein the virtual sphere is harnessed to foster spiritual connectivity.

In contemporary society, digital social media has established itself as an integral component of societal infrastructure. A growing trend among Buddhist monks involves harnessing these platforms to offer spiritual consolation and facilitate practices for adherents. Significantly, the COVID-19 pandemic heightened the need for spiritual support, accelerating the integration of spiritual aspects into the rapidly advancing technological era. Due to social distancing measures, attending physical places of worship became challenging and impossible. The uncertainties and anxieties arising from the pandemic led to an increasing demand for spiritual support through online platforms (Asgari, Naghavi, & Abedi, 2022). In this context, diverse digital products are intended to facilitate

spiritual cultivation, exemplified by meditation applications, recitation apps, and even virtual incense-burning applications. Concurrently, alternative avenues cater to individuals seeking spiritual consolation via virtual religious rituals within social media or online communities. These include forming WeChat groups, live streaming sessions on platforms such as Douyin, and discourse forums on Weibo.

This intricate array of digital products and virtual spiritual practices has engendered a dispersed market, impacting time-honored religious practices while allowing consumers to engage with faiths beyond their immediate personal affiliations (Kale, 2004). Thus, this dynamic interplay between digital media and spiritual engagement has given rise to diversifying religious expressions, reshaping the traditional religious landscape, and broadening the exploration of faiths among consumers. Jannsen Santana and other scholars (2022) have aggregated existing consumer research on digital consumer spirituality, shedding light on four distinct practices through which consumers engage with spirituality in the digital realm: 1) the exploration of online spiritual communities; 2) the sanctification of brands, products, and services through digital worship; 3) the digitized quest for spiritual insights and 4) the construction of spiritual identities through digital.

Although the digitization of spirituality allows individuals to engage more extensively with their spirituality outside of traditional religious institutions, potentially leading to the rise of personalized spiritual practices (Kaewkitipong, Beaunoyer, Ractham, & Guitton, 2023), it also holds significant social implications. These implications are partly evidenced by the connections formed with others, which demonstrate a shared aspiration for mutual care and support (Delgado, 2005). Likewise, digital spirituality intersects with potential economic gains. The digital conversion of spiritual activities might give rise to innovative "intermediaries," who could potentially charge fees for facilitating virtual interactions between practitioners and religious organizations (Kaewkitipong et al., 2023). Buddhism, a globally influential religion, has a long-standing tradition

where Buddhist institutions and monks have adhered to a path involving economic engagements. This involvement can take both direct and indirect forms within economic activities. The ethical underpinnings of Buddhism provide a condensed representation of secular and non-economic renunciation philosophies (Obadia, 2011). Obadia (2011) argues that the globalization of Buddhism has both extended a particular trend and revealed the emergence of "new" relationships between Asian traditions and capitalist economies in the domains of religious values, behaviors, and organizational structures. He introduces three distinct models: Buddhist economy, Buddhist economics, and the economics of Buddhism. He intends to illustrate that for Buddhism to become a captivating empirical subject and a focal point for methodological exploration within religious economics, this fresh paradigm must effectively tackle epistemological issues arising from the interplay between phenomenological ontology and the metaphors employed to describe them. Specifically, the question of whether religious symbols and practices are economic commodities or whether they are akin to economic items must be addressed.

When religious symbols and practices lack predefined price tags, and believers engage in faith-driven consumption according to their own intentions, it is reasonable to liken these spiritual practices to economic commodities. Although a system of monetary exchange might exist, these practices have not fully transitioned into standardized items within the economic marketplace; instead, they represent a variant of consumption that shares specific characteristics with economic commodities. In the context of Buddhist traditions, practitioners perceive these actions as offerings to the monastic community and Buddhist monks. However, in scenarios where religious symbols and practices carry explicit, discernible prices, they can indeed be categorized as economic commodities, given that such processes involve generating economic exchanges and creating economic value. The dynamic of these economic exchanges and value generation introduces

religious belief symbols and practices into a more expansive economic arena. In the context of ongoing globalization, faith symbols and spiritual practices have become appealing promotional instruments within the commercial market, offering much-needed spiritual comfort to individuals grappling with the uncertainties of modern life.

Indeed, Buddhist establishments frequently maintain a negative disposition towards commodifying religious beliefs. Within the purview of Buddhist congregations and adherents, the commercialization of spirituality is construed as an antidote measure to address the prevailing "spiritual crisis" within post-Maoist China (S. Young, 2014). This phenomenon symbolizes an exertion to provide spiritual solace and imbue significance in an environment increasingly characterized by materialistic orientations. Nevertheless, grasping the meaning behind the commodification of Buddhism in the backdrop of globalization and the digital age remains a complex task. While official establishments criticize and censure the economics of Buddhism (Obadia, 2011), the diverse array of global religions available in the cultural marketplace allows people to opt out of belief altogether, redirecting their focus towards other endeavors such as careers, romantic relationships, and leisure activities. Consequently, all these religions must now engage in unparalleled marketing methods within this evolving marketplace (Mathews, 2002). Smyer Yü (2013) bewails the modern commercialization of Tibetan Buddhist charisma, the recent shift of Tibetan sacred sites into tourist attractions, and the escalating influence of affluent (Chinese) non-clergy patrons over Tibetan lamas. Stuart Young (2014) raises a counterpoint to Smyer Yü's worries, declaring that the profound impacts of burgeoning globalization on the overarching purpose of religious spirituality cannot be disregarded. Still, Young contends that religion has never been exclusively guided by a soteriological orientation, regardless of the time or place. By extrapolating insights from the annals of Tibetan Buddhism, Young proposes the question: Does

only pre-modern Tibetan Buddhism embody a purely spiritual or "soteriological" ethos, with the advent of the modern age potentially showing a corrosive influence of monetary elements ?

Overall, the persistent march of socioeconomic development and technological advancement has paved the way for religious beliefs to interpenetrate the landscape of commodity-driven markets. We have witnessed a considerable body of scholarly inquiry critiquing and scrutinizing the phenomenon of religious commodification, which collectively underscores the transformation of practices and the impact on the significance of believers and converts in the spiritual marketplace within a secular society.

Nevertheless, for the ordinary clerics within religious institutions, such as regular Buddhist monks, what does it mean for them to enter the market of spiritual commodities, whether material or immaterial ? They may not necessarily represent the official discourse of the religious organization but rather engage as individual monks in the broader secular society. What significance do the laity and converts in the material world hold for these monks ? For believers, what is the authenticity of spiritual practices and spiritual consumption conducted in the digital realm ? Throughout this process, how do they cultivate a profound emotional trust in monks or faith constructs through these virtual material practices ? I will use the forthcoming case study to delve deeper into these complexities.

6.2.1 Monastics Involvement in Spiritual Commercial Collaboration: Reasonability and Identity

In June 2021, I had the opportunity to meet a young businessman, SG, from Shandong, in the store of the monk JC. SG specializes in antiques and thangkas (Tibetan Buddhist paintings on cotton or silk). His studio creates and sells various thangkas, collaborating with different monasteries in Tibetan regions. These collaborations are for blessing, a ritual known as "opening the light" (in

Chinese: Kai guang) in Buddhism. In this context, "opening the light" refers to the consecration ceremony performed by senior monks for new thangkas or small statues before sale. According to SG, spiritual items that have undergone this blessing process gain enhanced value and take on a uniquely sacred significance, subsequently commanding higher selling prices.

In March, SG visited the town of Shangri-la as a tourist, but given his business sense, he made a point to explore the monastery, often referred to as the "Little Potala Palace". In the Fawu Liutongchu (a store specializing in Buddhist items belonging to the monastery), he had the chance encounter with monk JC, who spoke Mandarin fluently. As they conversed, SG was pleasantly surprised to discover that monk JC had extensive knowledge about thangkas, agates, corals, amber, and other Buddhist artifacts. Moreover, he learned that monk JC was also engaged in some business related to these items. This piqued SG's interest, leading him to consider it a potential business opportunity.

Following that, SG added monk JC on WeChat to maintain ongoing communication. In May, coinciding with the monastery's blessing ceremony held within the Main Hall, SG, with the assistance of monk JC, arranged for his studio's collection of thangkas and some Buddhist jewelry pieces to be placed within the Hall. These items will be blessed while the monks conduct their collective chanting. SG personally visited the Main Hall to capture photographs and videos, a portion of which he shared with his clientele, garnering favorable responses. Like his collaborations with other monasteries in the Tibetan region, SG aspired to establish official commercial partnerships with the monastery's managerial committee. However, he observed that the organizational structure of this particular monastery differed from others in the region.

Primarily, even though the monastery functions as a tourist attraction, its public facilities, environmental cleanliness, and ticketing are overseen by the management department of the scenic area. However, the internal affairs of the

monastery are under the purview of the monastery's administrative committee. Since becoming a tourist attraction, the traditional departments responsible for managing monastery items and finances have gradually evolved into the current "Fawu Liutongchu", or Buddhist paraphernalia shop within the monastery. Here, visitors can purchase souvenirs, Buddhist jewelry, and thangkas or even request monks to chant and consecrate texts. During my fieldwork, I had the opportunity to learn Tibetan from a senior monk (the monastery steward of that year) within this shop. While I was learning Tibetan, he occasionally shared some insights with me about the responsibilities and tasks involved in serving as the monastery's steward. He remarked,

"The shop's annual income is essentially equivalent to the collective annual income of all the monks in the monastery. Those who work here as stewards earn a daily wage of one yuan(CNY). The monks receive approximately over 10,000 yuan each year, derived from the income of the shop and donations placed in the merit box within the three Main Hall".

The monastery steward is responsible for managing the shop. The steward in charge makes decisions regarding procurement, sales, and financial records for that particular year. Thus, if SG desires to partner with the monastery, his initial step involves negotiating with the current year's monastery steward. However, a challenge arises since the present steward has already collaborated with another merchant responsible for supplying the shop's inventory. SG must identify the monastery's next steward for future collaboration in this situation. On the monastery's organizational front, the monastery's administration exhibits apprehension towards the presence of external commercial entities on their grounds. Their concern is the potential adverse impact on the monastery's esteemed reputation.

However, it's noteworthy that the monastery's attitude toward commercial activities is nuanced. While they may hesitate to embrace full-fledged business

ventures, they are more accommodating when individuals, acting personally, invite monks to conduct various spiritual rituals and ceremonies within the monastery. This includes offerings like lamp lighting, water offerings, flower offerings, and monk offerings. The key criterion is that such activities should not disfigure the monastery's image. Moreover, the extent to which spiritual beliefs and practices become mainly commercialized hinges on the nature and form of the spiritual practice itself. This ambiguity underscores the intricate interplay between commerce and spirituality within the context of the monastery.

In this context, SG initiated a collaborative relationship with monk JC on a personal level. SG said,

"Monk JC speaks Mandarin fluently, is intelligent, and has courage. Moreover, he works in the monastery shop and has a wealth of knowledge. Collaborating with him is a sound choice".

From SG's perspective, his decision was primarily guided by his business sense and the potential benefits he could gain. Regarding his engagement in commercial activities related to Buddhist items and cooperation with the monastery, he remarked,

"People nowadays are often restless, and they desire inner peace. I see this as a significant market opportunity. My primary focus is selling thangkas, not merely marketing faith with empty words. Thangkas represent Buddhist deities, and for convenience, we've created portable miniature thangka decorations that can be worn as necklaces. These thangkas are all consecrated by monks in the monastery and hold auspicious symbolism. People nowadays appreciate purchasing such Buddhist accessories, and I serve as an intermediary. In this way, both consumers and ourselves have our respective needs met. They attain both spiritual and material satisfaction while I gain financial benefits. Additionally, I'm accumulating merit.

On the one hand, I assist monks in earning income and provide significant

monetary offerings during monastery rituals, effectively supporting the monks. In essence, I am offering alms to the monks. On the other hand, the thangkas I sell can also be seen as a means of propagating Buddhist culture, helping many consumers find their preferred Buddhist decorations. Within Buddhist culture, I'm accumulating merit".

In fact, the perspective of businessman SG is far from an isolated case; the commercialization of Buddhism through commodities has become a prevalent phenomenon within the globalization context. For instance, Douglas Padgett's research (2000) on the consumption of meditation cushions sheds light on the interplay between material culture and American Buddhism, illustrating how "spiritual communities" or "elite Buddhists" shape this consumption. In the book *Put in a Price on Zen*, Joshua Irizarry (2015) compares Zen Buddhism in Japan and *consumer Zen* in the United States. He suggests that the term "Zen" holds commercial value because it has been deprived of its religious aura and transformed into a semiotic blank canvas onto which consumers can project desired qualities easily.

In the rapidly evolving socio-economic and religious landscapes, various elements of Buddhist culture, such as images of the Buddha, artifacts, symbols, and rituals, are undergoing secularization and becoming commodified. These commodities are invested with the significance of accumulating merit within Buddhist culture and infused with the idea that purchasing them can lead to personal well-being or aid in spiritual practice for consumers. To a certain degree, businessman SG's commercial endeavors also incorporate the image and influence of the monastic community. The presence and cooperation of monks contribute to the marketability of Buddhist items while maintaining their blessed spirit.

In contrast to the historical, where commercial activities were primarily driven by monastery institutions or elite groups within monastic communities, wielding spiritual authority as a means of control, the contemporary Tibetan Buddhist

regions are witnessing an increasing participation of ordinary monks in business endeavors. This pattern resembles how Tibetan Buddhism expanded efforts into Han Chinese regions in the early 20th century. In that era, the dissolution of the Chinese imperial order brought about a significant shift in dynamics. Both on a national and local level, the traditional model wherein Han Chinese rulers supported Tibetan Buddhist lamas with economic and political resources in exchange for empowerment and symbolic legitimacy began to crumble. In its place, grassroots Buddhist patrons emerged as significant players in Tibetan Buddhism's support network (Jones, 2011). This shift signifies the broadening dissemination of Tibetan Buddhism, no longer confined to specific elite circles. Chinese monks and lay Buddhists increasingly incorporate Tibetan Buddhist teachers, doctrines, and practices into their personal spiritual repertoires (Chen, 2008).

Similarly, within the broader context of globalization and digitization, patrons of Buddhism have expanded to include groups like business people, such as SG, who leverage commercial and digital means to enlarge the Buddhist audience further. Throughout this process, it's not just the living Buddhas or eminent monks of Tibetan Buddhism who are increasingly becoming spiritual guides for urban middle-class individuals or highly educated youth (Jones, 2011); many ordinary Tibetan Buddhist monks are also gradually emerging into the public eye. Alison Denton Jones (2011) states that Tibetan lamas can be seen as spiritual entrepreneurs who disseminate the teachings of Buddha by offering instruction, performing rituals, and providing support to lay Buddhists in their quest for spiritual liberation. Their principal motivations typically revolve around a broad sense that Buddhism's revival in China requires help or a more particular aspiration to propagate Tibetan teaching traditions. However, it cannot be denied that one of the secondary motivations for monks engaging in commercial activities is economic factors (Jones, 2011). On the one hand, with the economic prosperity of urban populations,

the financial support they can provide far exceeds that of local Tibetan devotees. On the other hand, concerning the spiritual consumption of Tibetan Buddhism among Chinese Buddhist netizens, money serves as the primary medium enabling this consumption, and monks may need to make money to perform rituals for their adherents (Yü, 2008).

In my participation in this Tibetan monastery, I have observed that the primary reasons motivating monks to engage in commercial activities can be categorized into three reasons: 1) ensuring their primary present-day livelihood; 2) addressing economic concerns regarding future retirement; 3) aspiring to better integrate into contemporary secular society's development.

Regarding the assurance of their primary livelihood, let's revisit the story of monk JC, as I have previously mentioned in earlier sections. Monk JC did not come from a prosperous family, and his elderly parents, along with his sister and brother-in-law, who were not in the best of health, could not provide substantial economic support for their household. Consequently, as the only son in the family, even after becoming a celibate monk and leaving home, he took on the primary responsibility of providing for his family's economic needs due to emotional reliance and societal moral obligations. Monk JC expressed,

"I had no choice; life was harsh. When I moved out from my master's place, I had little money, and whatever I had, I was sent back home. There were times I couldn't afford a meal in a day. Fortunately, I was in the monastery with my master and fellow monks. They always help me. But I couldn't rely on others all the time. I needed to make money. I initially went to Sichuan with my uncle, the monk you stay with at his house, DZ, to do business with caterpillar fungus. I gradually learned Mandarin and became interested in Buddhist jewelry like prayer beads. That's why I started getting involved with these merchants. Most of my merchant friends, I met at Fawu Liutongchu. Many of them are interested in Buddhism or are Buddhists themselves. While I needed to make money, I had to do it with a clear conscience.

After all, I'm a Buddhist monk".

Monk JC has been a crucial informant in my fieldwork and has also become a close friend. I once asked him if there's no end to making money and whether constantly being involved in business affects his personal spiritual practice. He replied,

"Indeed, there's no end to making money. Actually, I'm not after making a huge fortune. My goal is to renovate my parents' house in my hometown and build my living quarters in the monastery. I hope that by the time I'm 40, I can focus on spiritual practice in my house. So far, my intention is not to disrobe but to remain a monk for life. We monks also have to consider our retirement. Even though we have social medical insurance, we only receive the minimum coverage. Medical expenses would still be quite high if we suffered a severe illness. That's why I want to earn more money while I'm young".

Monk DZ, who is 41 years old, shares a similar concern about future retirement. Two decades ago, he began his business affairs, primarily dealing in caterpillar fungus (a valuable medicinal fungus known as "Cordyceps sinensis"). In his earlier years, he traveled extensively across various Tibetan regions, establishing connections with mainland Chinese merchants, which provided a stable income. Monk DZ is not only monk JC's respected senior but also his uncle and a qualified chant leader of Tibetan Buddhism. Monk DZ seems to embody the monk JC aspires to become.

Over the years, monk DZ's business endeavors have not only helped renovate his family's home, but also enabled him to build his own residence in the monastery ten years ago. He currently shares this residence with his two younger brothers. Unlike his younger days when he frequently traveled for business, he now focuses more on maintaining his existing business networks. Increasingly, his attention is directed towards recitation and conducting prayer rituals at home. During my one-month stay, monk DZ conducted three prayer rituals in his residence. He

remarked,

"Now that I'm 40 years old, I need to start considering retirement and even what happens after I pass away. My house is built, my father has passed away, and there's an elderly mother at home. In recent years, I conducted my business to improve my family's livelihood. As a monk, my personal expenses are modest, and the money I've earned should suffice for my future. Additionally, the monastery provides basic financial support, so as long as I don't suffer from a severe illness, everything will be fine".

While traditionally, there has been no concept of retirement for monks, today, monks who reach a certain age may "retire" (Chinese: 退休, tuixiu), even though they may continue to reside within the monastery. If retired monks live within the monastery, it's currently unclear what retirement entails, apart from no longer being considered fully ordained monks (Kolas & Thowsen, 2011). In 2013, the Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Yunnan Province, China, extended coverage under the New Rural Cooperative Medical Scheme (Chinese: 新农合, Xinnonghe) and the Rural Minimum Living Allowance program (Chinese: 农村最低保障, nongcun zuidi baozhang) to include all Tibetan Buddhist monks, whereas previously only monks and nuns aged 60 and above, as well as disabled monks, were eligible for the minimum living allowance program (Ding, 2014).

In general, the retirement policies for monks are intertwined with the broader national retirement policies in rural China. Various Tibetan regions have recently begun implementing more standardized management practices for Tibetan Buddhist temples. This includes integrating the temples' infrastructure, primary healthcare, minimum living allowances, and housing renovations for monks and nuns into the administrative governance of local governments and various public service sectors (Ding, 2014). These efforts aim to improve Tibetan Buddhist temples' socialization construction and management. According to one middle-aged monk from the monastery,

"I'm not entirely clear on the significance of retirement and paying insurance, but I follow the policies of our village. I've been paying for more than ten years. During July each year, I pay slightly over 200 yuan to our village's manager. As monks, we don't require retirement plans in tradition; our family members will look after us as we age".

A monk who works in the Monastery Management Committee stated,

"There is no concept of retirement for monks. We follow the national policies, and each monk receives a minimum living guarantee. There is a monthly living allowance of around 260 yuan. Currently, approximately 200 monks in our temple are aged 60 and above. They can spend their old age in the temple because many of them have disciples to care for them, or their families take them back home for retirement. In addition to the monthly living allowance, the state provides more than 1,000 yuan at the end of each year to support these elderly monks, and the temple also provides assistance annually. In reality, we monks have always relied on the support of the adherent for our livelihood".

Nevertheless, for many individual monks, the prospect of relying solely on the support of their congregants and family members can evoke a sense of unease. As monk DZ said,

"If I could earn my income, it would alleviate the financial burden on my family. Furthermore, devotees' items and food offerings aren't to be taken for granted; these are their heartfelt gifts. Just because we are monks doesn't mean we should naturally accept the offerings of the faithful. Of course, it's our duty to pray and bless them in return sincerely. I genuinely wish them all the best. However, I also aspire to contribute independently without inconveniencing others. In today's era, my business endeavors aren't aimed at accumulating vast wealth. It mainly provides an improved quality of life for me. I collaborate with numerous mainland Chinese business people, and they understand this. Those who genuinely comprehend Buddhist teachings also recognize that this approach is a form of

merit, a way of offering for monks".

To a certain degree, DZ's words highlight the transformation between tradition and modernity, spirituality and practicality that many monks navigate today. Specifically, he provides a practical justification for monks engaging in commercial activities while underlining the spiritual significance of "accumulating merit" during these affairs. This perspective aligns their economic pursuits with their religious duties. It highlights how monks perceive these activities as contributing positively to both their personal well-being and the broader Buddhist community.

In addition, some monks engage in extensive commercial activities with the motivation of better integrating into contemporary secular society. What surprised me was that this process strengthened their self-identity. As they became more frequent in their interactions with secular society, they felt increasingly "reassured" and "satisfied" with their identity as monks. Based on my field observations and interviews, I argue that in today's highly mobile modern society —whether manifesting as physical mobility or the virtual dynamics of the digital sphere —Buddhist monks have sought a more solid sense of identity. This heightened identification process is deeply intertwined with the backdrop of dramatic societal transformations and global uncertainties. This solidified sense of identity originates from their engagement with monastic life and the contrast between Buddhist principles and the changing dynamics of modern secular society.

During my fieldwork, I frequently encountered two words that many monks would often mention: "Xin (heart/mind)" and "Ziyou (freedom/liberation)". I observed that they frequently use these two words in various contexts. While we might initially suspect it's due to their limited proficiency in Chinese, as my investigation delved deeper, I believe these words derive from their genuine emotions and Buddhist ideologies. An elder monk who taught me Tibetan once shared,

"The heart holds great importance. Before taking any action, one has to consider it within their heart first, carefully think it through in their mind, and then move with practice. A cause-and-effect relationship exists between what resides in the heart and what is eventually put into action. Many actions arise from initial thoughts and intentions within the heart".

Buddhism emphasizes the determinative or volitional intention behind actions, as this aspect generates the seeds and tendencies influencing or determining future states and conditions (Harvey, 2001). This implies that intentions are significant, as they yield consequences. They essentially constitute actions, embodying the concept of "karma", which, in its Buddhist sense, denotes "mental actions" (Carrithers, 2001a). *"It is choice or intention that I call karma - mental work - for having chosen, a man acts by body, speech, and mind"* (Carrithers, 2001b, p. 91). Specifically, the emphasis lies not in the consequences of monks engaging in commercial activities but in their initial intentions for undertaking such works. I do not question these intentions; instead, I raise the inquiry into how the spiritual mental of these monks undergo transformations throughout their participation in these commercial activities and interactions with the contemporary secular world.

A young monk collaborating with businessmen from other provinces on commercial matters expressed,

"People living in secular society set very clear goals for what they do, what needs to be achieved. Most of those who come to pray at our monastery hope that Buddha will grant them a promotion, a good relationship, or good health. I believe this is what most people expect, so we pray for everyone. It's our duty. But we monks don't pray for ourselves. We are free. We don't need to pray for the future. How will we know what will happen tomorrow? We focus on sustaining ourselves today, not the future. If we concentrate on the future, we must consider life after death".

The monk primarily emphasized one's personal pursuit of liberation, with the means being exemplary moral discipline, incidentally benefiting others' interests (Carrithers, 2001a). In the context of Buddhism, the most formidable adversaries on the path to liberation are often identified as attachment and desire. The ultimate goal within this spiritual framework is to attain a state of profound spiritual liberation, transcending the material concerns that tie individuals to suffering and cyclic existence.

For a significant part of the modern era, the concepts of "liberation" and "freedom" have occupied the thoughts of intellectuals. During this era, "liberation" took precedence in political reform agendas, and "freedom" was placed at the forefront, even though it became apparent that achieving it was a slow process. This prioritization of "freedom", even though its arrival might not be wholeheartedly welcomed, underlines its position as a high-priority aspiration on the value list (Bauman, 2013b). Bauman (2013b) offers two types of answers to the complexities surrounding freedom and liberation. The first type suggests that people are often unprepared for or unwilling to accept freedom when it arrives. Although freedom appears to be a universally desirable state, it is, in reality, complex and difficult to manage. The second answer challenges the rationality of pursuing freedom. This viewpoint holds that freedom may come at a high cost and may not necessarily lead to happiness; instead, it might bring more misery. In essence, if freedom has to be pursued, it is inherently unfree. This perspective originates from Thomas Hobbes' core idea that humans hold an innate fear of unrestrained freedom. The assumption underlying its perspective is that a person freed from societal constraints becomes more of a beast than a free individual. This viewpoint can mean that social norms and constraints are not tools of oppression but mechanisms that liberate individuals from their fundamental, internal savagery. As Bauman notes,

"All certainty that comes after the 'original sin' of dismantling the matter-of-fact world full of routine and short of reflection must be a manufactured

certainty, a blatantly and unashamedly 'made-up' certainty burdened with all the inborn vulnerability of human-made decisions" (Bauman, 2013b, p. 37).

As individuals increasingly disengage from the collective entirety, abandoning the hope for a unified society, they enter a fluid, modern world fragmented into irreconcilable pieces (Bauman, 2013b). Within this context, the pursuit of freedom and self-expression often culminates in identity becoming a matter of personal choice and self-construction. People have greater latitude to define who they are and what they aspire to become. However, such hyper-individualized identity formation can engender a sense of instability, as it frequently rests upon ever-changing personal choices and environmental circumstances. Given that the act of choosing inherently fosters ever-expanding desires, individuals are in a perpetual state of dissatisfaction. This engenders an undetermined cycle of anxiety.

As discussed in Section 4.1.2, monks perceive their monastic life as a form of freedom intricately rooted in the institutional norms of the monastery, Buddhist ideology, and the comparative relationship with secular society. With the significant promotion of tourism, monks increasingly find themselves in contact with the outside world, gaining a more direct view of the existential anxieties experienced by people in secular society —anxieties related to academics, career, finances, and marital life, among others. While it is undeniable that monks are dedicated to benefiting others, it is also imperative not to overlook the likelihood that comparative life assessments may influence their self-reflection. Monks in this particular monastery invest considerable time and energy in chanting scriptures; although they may not necessarily achieve ultimate success or liberation, they do not experience anxiety over this. These profoundly ingrained attitudes stand in stark contrast to those commonly found in secular life yet closely align with contemporary Buddhist ideals, leading me to attribute them to the disciplinary environment of the monastery readily (Carrithers, 2001a).

6.2.2 Digital Spiritual Authenticity: A Solid Emotional Trust

In their collaborative affair, businessman SG and monk JC primarily engage in religious business through digital platforms such as WeChat, Douyin (TikTok), and Taobao —China's most popular social media and online shopping platforms. SG assumes the role of a secular Buddhist patron, with his staff using live-streaming technology to explain the spiritual and practical advantages of wearing Buddhist prayer beads and spiritual practice. These network anchors also subtly explore the monastery's historical significance and its monastic monks' daily lives. Simultaneously, the monks act as potent spiritual symbols and intermediaries, aiding consumers in following their spiritual practices.

The collaborative mode between businessman SG and monk JC has formed an integrated monetary model. Initially, SG specialized in distributing Buddhist artifacts such as prayer beads and Thangkas, subjecting these items to ritualistic blessings within the monastic setting. However, as of July 2021, SG diversified his commercial offerings to include spiritual practices, predominantly offering the lighting of butter lamps and hoisting prayer flags. Unlike traditional practices where villagers could freely decide their donation amounts to the monks, these live-streamed spiritual services are offered at a standardized price and include after-sales customer feedback. The clients, in turn, have the capability to write their feedback through the platform's backend, rendering it a comprehensive digital commercial service. Notably, the emergence of these spiritual services coincides with the post-pandemic period, a context in which SG has successfully identified and occupied a specific market niche.

In March 2021, Chinese authorities introduced the *Measures for the Administration of Internet Religious Information Services*, prescribing that any cultural or other services related to religion conducted on the Internet must obtain an Internet Religious Information Service Permit [1]. Additionally, in August 2022,

[1] https://english.www.gov.cn/

the e-commerce platform Taobao updated its list of prohibited content based on these regulations. The updated list specifically includes: a prohibition on the dissemination of products or information that commercialize religious propaganda; and a ban on distributing religious proselytizing materials, such as prayer machines and proselytizing videos [2].

During my ethnographic fieldwork, it became evident that digital spiritual services persist despite regulatory constraints. Here, my attention is not directed toward how these platforms circumvent official policies or the legitimacy of such commercial practices, as such businesses usually find ways to negotiate with various stakeholders. Instead, my primary focus centers on how consumers achieve spiritual fulfillment within these digital virtual practices. Further, I will explore establishing a solid emotional trust between consumers and the assisting monks. I also delve into how monks navigate and self-reflect on their identities within this digital spiritual ecosystem.

Helland (2013) posits a series of fundamental questions in the field of online religious rituals, where individuals engage in religious rituals, spiritual practices, and even virtual pilgrimages. He specifically interrogates that:

"Some of the key questions associated with this new form of online activity are generally focused upon two themes: authenticity and authority. Are online rituals real religious rituals ? Can virtual pilgrimage be a real sacred journey ? Do you need to be bodily present to be a participant in religious rituals ? Do online rituals have efficacy for the faithful or are they too superficial for real spiritual transformations ? Can anyone participate, create, or host an online ritual or do you have to be somehow religiously qualified ? Do the online rituals even count as real ritual within the tradition ? If not, what if people still do them ? Can online ritual engagement provide substantial and deep 'point, click, and surf' their way through cyberspace like virtual tourists, observing but not engage with the religious

[2] https://rulechannel.taobao.com/

activity ?" (Helland, 2013, p. 26)

The question of authenticity in online religious practices remains a highly controversial issue (Han, 2022). Engaging in such religious rituals on the internet inherently entails a detachment from the physical realm of the real world (H. Campbell, 2005a; H. A. Campbell, 2012a). Han (2022) summarized two divergent viewpoints on this matter: one argues that online rituals are not fundamentally different from offline rituals conducted in sacred spaces, and the other contends that online practices are mere substitutes for real-world rituals (Helland, 2013), lacking in sacredness and authentic efficacy (Dawson, 2005). Indeed, within the digital milieu of the internet, any practice is subject to arguments over its virtuality and authenticity. However, when religious rituals or spiritual practices evolve in such a space, their authenticity and sacredness become amplified. In our ethnography, religious rituals and spiritual practices conducted in the digital consumer space, not only mix together these dichotomous viewpoints but also situate such practices within the framework of material consumption. According to Weber, successful religions are based on effectively marketing a form of salvation to mass customers. In this context, salvation is not an ideal or transcendent experience but a commodified salvation good (Weber, 2004). This raises critical questions: Does the authenticity of digital spiritual practices function as a complementary aspect of real-world traditional rituals to reach a more technologically-dependent audience and pose no threat to established religious institutions (Robinson-Neal, 2008)? Alternatively, could the authenticity of digital spiritual practices embody another form of material reality, existing digital indexicality in the virtual space, index and be translatable into tangible materials in the real world that offer authenticity to the audience (D. Miller & Horst, 2012; D. Miller & Slater, 2020; Boellstorff, 2012)? Moreover, when digital spiritual practices are not conducted through individual and immersion but are outsourced to others, the purpose and authenticity of these practices and rituals echo the "ritual

transfer theory" (Miczek, 2008; Helland, 2015). In this context, online rituals creatively reshape pre-existing ritualistic procedures. Religious traditions undergo transformations, inventions, and exclusions of offline conventional routines to maintain such practices and adapt to the digital networking environment (Helland, 2015). The following case will elucidate this point further:

In developing his spiritual practice services, Businessman SG adopted a gradual approach. These spiritual services are typically deactivated in his online store, where the primary focus is selling Thangkas and prayer bead bracelets. Only during live-streaming sessions does he introduce these spiritual practice services. His mainland-based business partner participates in the live streams to narrate the benefits that they have experienced from inviting monks to perform butter lamp offerings and hanging prayer flags. Subsequently, the livestream host informs the viewers that they can act as intermediaries to facilitate these blessings. During the live-streaming session, consumers can make purchases through a designated link. A single butter lamp costs 199 yuan (about 26 euros), three lamps are priced at 597 yuan (77 euros), and five lamps are available for 995 yuan (129 euros). SG offers a one-month duration for these butter lamp offerings, meaning the price encompasses the length of the service.

To assure consumers that their offerings are authentically being practiced, the merchant requests that they fill out a form following their purchase. This form captures details such as the offering's name, location, the number of butter lamps offered, and the wishes they want to bless or fulfill. All this information is then consolidated onto red paper and cut into cards (Figure 6.7). *"Red is formal, and arranging each card neatly in front of the butter lamps will look a grand sight,"* states S.

It is noteworthy that SG was not attached formally to commercial collaboration with the monastery's management committee when these services were provided; instead, he engaged in the ritual offerings as an individual. Despite

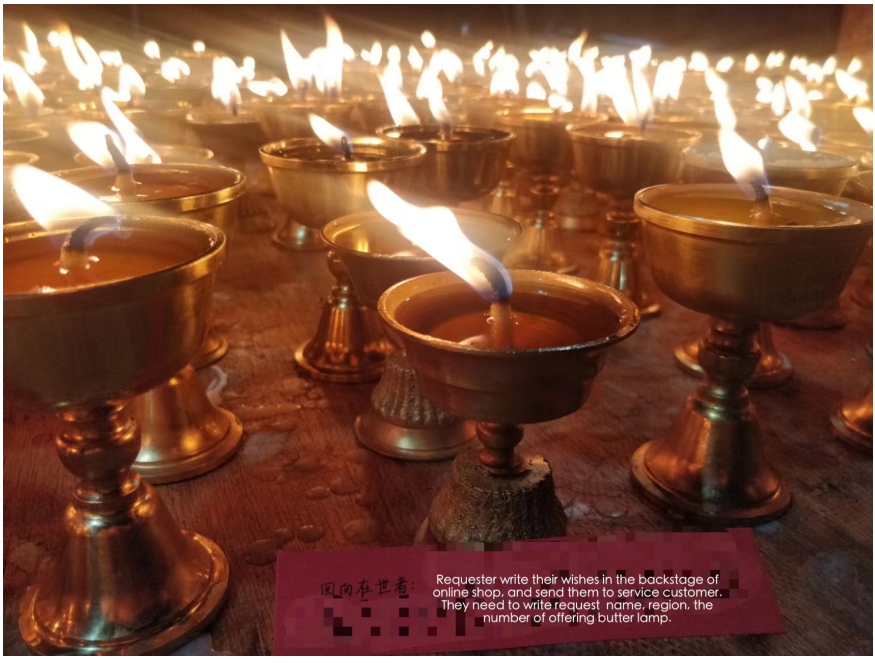


Fig. 6.7 A offering butter lamp

this unofficial status, the monastery authorities and the monastic community exhibited a positive outlook toward SG's works, viewing this sort of practice as beneficial for the monastery. As Helland (2015) has previously declared, from the monastic perspective, the digital sphere is not an artificial or 'virtual' space but an extension of lived reality. In their view, the dichotomy between online and offline activities is not applicable; the emerging digital environment serves as an additional platform for religious practice.

Assuming the role of a lay patron, SG invested in significant quantities of butter, lamp holders, and shelving for lamp display. He meticulously video documented the entire religious offering process—from the monks' crafting of the butter lamps to their cleaning of lamp holders, pinnacling in the ritualistic chanting of scriptures as butter lamps were consecrated before the Buddha. *"I aim for my customers to recognize the authenticity of my services and to understand that each action I commit to is undertaken with seriousness,"* voiced SG.

These procedures signify not just the service guarantees provided by the online store, but also illustrate the transformative and adaptive aspects of religious and spiritual practices in digital environments. It could be argued that service-oriented religious or spiritual practices can coexist harmoniously in physical and digital realms. While devotees or consumers may not physically participate in these religious rituals, they manifest a vicarious sense of engagement through ongoing digital updates. SG typically selects auspicious dates on the Tibetan lunar calendar or synchronizes offerings with periods when the monks conduct religious ceremonies in the monastery. His clients receive a meticulously prepared prayer receipt outlining the name of the monastery, the number of butter lamps offered, and the duration of the offering (Figure 6.8). The receipt in question resembles a standard envelope but is distinguished by its overall yellow background, which symbolizes the Gelug school of the Yellow Hat tradition. The expression, *Strong beliefs will guard your insistence*, is written in red on the yellow envelope, while

the temple's name is printed at the bottom (Figure 6.9).

This design not only serves as a physical commitment to the spiritual service provided but also infuses the exchange with a specific spiritual and monastic culture, thereby contributing to the perceived authenticity of the digital spiritual practice. Furthermore, SG provides clients with photographic proof of monks engaged in scriptural recitations, contingent upon client request (Figure 6.10).

All these digital photographs and tangible feedback permit the consumers to trust that the spiritual practices they have commissioned are truly authentic. Consumers' feedback is often embodied in the backend, showing their perceptions (Figure 6.11). For example, comments such as, *"Thank you for helping me to offer a lamonksmp for my late father. I'm grateful!"* or *"Excellent service with a receipt! They even sent photos; seeing my offering gives me peace of mind. Blessings!"* or *"Thank you for helping me with my prayers, I'm grateful!"* as testimonials to the effectiveness and credibility of the service offered. These comments affirm the perceived material and spiritual value of the service. When individuals acknowledge the authenticity and efficacy of these ritual activities, it implies that the process of ritual transfer has been successful (Helland, 2015). Given that these transformations and adaptations occur online and are perceived within an acceptable measure; thus, the participants believe that online rituals retain their authenticity (Helland, 2013).

In addition to affirming authenticity through post-sale service and ritual transfer, SG enhances the authentic experience by video-calling his business partner during the live broadcast, setting himself on-site where the religious rituals are taking place. In the spatial domain where SG is located, monks are seen engaged in various religious activities—from chanting scriptures to lighting butter lamps and hanging prayer flags. Meanwhile, SG's business partners occupy a different spatial domain, namely their professional workspaces, while their customers exist within an even broader spatial context. Yet, all participants resound



Fig. 6.8 a. The receipt



Fig. 6.9 b. The receipt



Fig. 6.10 Monks engage in scriptural recitations



Fig. 6.11 Consumers’ feedback

with the ongoing religious practices conducted by the monks, particularly those consumers who seek spiritual practice services. Significantly, the authenticity of these spiritual practices is not compromised due to the diversity of spaces in which they are located. Connie Hill-Smith (2009) stated that,

"This phenomenon of co-location can be seen as a mutualising of spiritual practice between physically separate spaces: i.e., various participants' homes, or between a cyberpilgrim's home and a cyberpilgrimage site (if need this is 'space', a discussion for elsewhere). Entreating participants to physicalise rituals(etc.) may encourage them to gain or be aware of a sense that this phenomenon is occurring, but it is necessary to distinguish that sense from the phenomenon itself: co-location is what really occurs, not the abstract sense of its occurrence" (Hill-Smith, 2009, p. 4).

In the case under our ethnographic, co-location is initially established through a live-streaming shopping space constructed over the digital network. Subsequently, the atmosphere in the live-streaming room is directed towards collective prayer and authentic individual experiences through the anchor's explanation of monastic life and basic Buddhist knowledge. In this process, the monks play an indispensable role. They are not merely the visual symbols of Tibetan tradition and identity (Helland, 2015), and they act as guides facilitating such spiritual practices. In this digital spiritual practice, the identity of the monks manifests a sense of sacredness and a certain level of authority. Importantly, this authority is not structured within the traditional monastic institution but is configured within the digital network. For consumers engaged in digital spiritual practices, the hierarchical status of monks within their monastic communities is less significant than their role as practice facilitators. These facilitators cannot only perform the ritualistic elements of spiritual practice but also invest these rituals with a blessed meaning.

In summary, through these emerging digital forms of spiritual practice,

monastic communities are either reshaping themselves or being socially reshaped to present spirituality in more dynamic and diverse forms. While the authenticity of digital spiritual practices is constructed through a collection of tangible elements —both digital code and actual physical material—the core sense of authenticity and emotional trust is eventually rooted in individual cognition. Just like scholar Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1990) pointed that,

"Religion is privatized and internalized: the truly significant is not what takes place at a public celebration or in ritual, but what happens inside one's own mind or soul. At the same time religion is universalized: its injuctions apply to everyone at all times and in all contexts" (Gombrich et al., 1990, p. 216).

6.3 Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter further examines how monks strengthen their sense of monastic identity in their interactions with devotees in digital spaces. It also explores how believers engage in virtual spiritual practices through digital consumption, attaining a level of authenticity and emotional trust equivalent to offline spiritual practices. Specifically, I begin by illustrating through ethnographic case studies that, for monks, the spiritual practices occurring in digital spaces often manifest as a form of "digital spiritual service". Utilizing theories of digital indexicality, I analyze how WeChat's "red envelopes" serve as an indexical digital sign in spiritual practice, revealing a dynamic form of authority within monastic communities.

Afterward, I discuss how monastic identities are being reconfigured in new authoritative ways in the fluid environment of digital spaces. This new form of authority arises partly from universally recognized cultural habitus, and partly from the digital social media platforms provide for religious institutions to express their religious identities and cultures. In this process, traditional monastic hierarchies are relatively weakened, giving rise to a novel form of symbolic authoritative identity.

Finally, I categorize spiritual practices carried out on digital social media as "digital consumer spirituality". Taking the example of ordinary monks engaging in commercial activities, I discuss the reality and reasonability behind their affairs. Years of monastic life and Buddhist teachings have shaped these monks' spiritual value systems. Broader contact with the ever-changing secular world, including commercial activities, offers a new perspective to solidify their monastic identities. For consumers participating in digital spiritual practices, online rituals' authenticity is constructed through tangible offerings and feedback from digital platforms. This sense of authenticity is coherent throughout each link in the digital interactive chain, underlining the significance of practice in authentic spiritual engagement.

7

Conclusion

In today's world, digital technology has become ubiquitous, influencing all aspects of daily life. It can be said that in future generations, the current advancements in digital technology will also become a pivotal historical stage in the development of human society. In light of the rapid technological transformations characterizing contemporary society, Zygmunt Bauman (2013b) has conceptualized the notion *Liquid Modernity*. This notion articulates a state in which traditional social structures and relationships are becoming increasingly ambiguous and unstable. Within such a social environment, individuals are increasingly dependent on the ever-changing landscape of technology and consumer goods to seek stability and a sense of security. Bauman employs the metaphor of the "electronic mole" to vividly summarize the living conditions of people in this liquid modern society. Analogous to the constant search for power outlets by this "electronic mole", modern individuals are engrossed in a constant quest for immediate sources of connection, whether through digital social media,

instant messaging or various social applications. The acceleration of mobility and the increasing rate of technological advancement, associated with the advent of increasingly efficient and rapid means of transportation, are emerging as primary tools of power and control in contemporary society.

In the context of such a rapidly changing social environment, individual identity and interpersonal relationships are confronting a myriad of challenges. People are increasingly relying on digital social media and material consumption to construct and comprehend their own identities, transforming identity into a continual, unending pursuit that seldom reaches a stable state. This evolving condition has implications for individual self-identity and how we engage with others and society at large. This study is conducted within such a social dynamic context and theoretical framework. Overall, this study draws upon Zygmunt Bauman's theory of *Liquid Modernity*. Employing ethnographic research methods, it analyzes the fluidity of digital spiritual practice among Tibetan Buddhist monks in the southwestern region of China, as well as the transformation of monastic life in this area. Centering on the impact of digital technology on the daily and spiritual practices of Tibetan Buddhist monks, the study further delves into how they construct and understand their monastic identities from offline to online. Concurrently, the research explores the building of emotional trust between monks and devotees in digital spaces, the authenticity of digital spiritual practices, and spiritual consumption.

Rather than serving as a critique and validation of the theory of *Liquid Modernity*, this research represents the rethinking and extension of the theory. As I have demonstrated in Chapter 4, Tibetan Buddhist monks live under the structured order of monastic institutions within a traditional societal framework, even as this system continually evolves with the development of modern society. Fundamentally, the comprehensive monastic institution, combined with the normative constraints and inculcation of Buddhist values, constructs a steadfast

identity for these monks. Using Scott's (2013) institutional theory, which comprises regulative, normative, and cognitive-cultural elements, I discussed how monks construct their offline identities. Within the regulatory and normative confines of the monastic system, monks develop a relatively stable identity, influenced by religious norms, societal expectations, and cultural cognition. More specifically, their everyday practices and monastic experiences shape their perceptions of identity. Unlike modern individuals in secular society, who pursue freedom and face fluidity and uncertainty, Buddhist monks have a stable and continuous sense of self-identity. Once an individual chooses to abandon secular life and vows celibacy, entering monastic life signifies a transformation of identity. For these monks, uncertainty lies more in the ever-changing external conditions of life, rather than in facing the ambiguities associated with individual identity choices.

The advent of the internet and digital social media has inevitably floated through monastic life. However, Buddhist monks have successfully found a path to maintain a continuity of identity through these transformations in their spiritual practices and daily routines. To some extent, the internet provides an additional layer of stability to their sense of self. As guardians of Buddhist principles, these monks bear the responsibility of embodying a unity of knowledge and action. This moral precept seamlessly extends into the virtual digital space, requiring them to hold a persona congruent with their offline identities. Moreover, with the growing digital engagement of monastic groups on social media platforms, a broader audience is consequently forming ethical expectations about these monastic communities. In a reciprocal manner, secular views further shape and consolidate the public persona of these monastic entities.

Indeed, the revival and decline of Tibetan Buddhism across various regions correlate closely with China's broader political trajectory. Following the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976 and the beginning of China's policy of Reform and

opening up, there was pronounced governmental support for the revival of religious practices in areas populated by ethnic minorities. This had a beneficial impact on both the religious and economic processes and growth in these regions. During the closing decades of the 20th century, especially in the 1990s, religious traditions such as Buddhism started to rebuild themselves in urban areas (Jones, 2011). The teachings, rituals, and principles of Tibetan Buddhism, led by living Buddhas, began disseminating into many other urban provinces of China (Yü, 2008). It's imperative to highlight that, aside from the specific sensitivities linked to Tibetan Buddhism, all the religious traditions in contemporary China are under a political lens, necessitating that places of worship obtain official permission to undertake religious events.

Taking Tibetan Buddhism as a case in point, it remains vibrant and continues to gain followers even amidst a host of official constraints on religious practices. For Buddhist practitioners in China, spiritual power often correlates with moral purity: the adherence to vows by Buddhist monks is perceived as a primary source of spiritual merit and power (Jones, 2011). As the Chinese authorities ardently promote tourism in ethnic regions, numerous Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, such as the Ganden Sumtseling Monastery, have been transformed into unique tourist destinations. The promotion of these sites, emphasizing their rich history and the virtuous lives of their monks, has revitalized the image and propagation of Tibetan Buddhism. Fundamentally, such cultural narratives are constructed on the anxieties generated by economic considerations and the fluid societal contexts of the contemporary era.

During the three years of the COVID-19 pandemic, digital spiritual practices, such as online meditation, chanting, and religious ceremonies, have emerged as pivotal means for both believers and non-believers to relieve their existential anxieties. Contemporary Chinese society has witnessed a series of notable trends: a significant number of young individuals are turning to social media platforms,

fervently exploring spiritual activities related to fortune-telling, tarot card readings, and electronic mokugyo chanting, seeking insights into their future and solace for their present challenges. While many of these young individuals may not fully adhere to a specific religion, a popular expression on social media encapsulates their sentiment: *"I disdain feudal superstitions, but before the God of Wealth, I kneel incessantly"* (in Chinese: 封建迷信我嗤之以鼻，财神殿里我长跪不起). With uncertainties in daily life driving people towards these digital spiritual practices, Buddhist monks, who act as disseminators and practitioners of Buddhism, are gradually recognized as a new symbolic authority in the digital realm. As I previously illustrated (Chapter 5 and Chapter 6), the active presence of Tibetan Buddhist monks on digital social platforms has, to some extent, diminished the traditional hierarchical structure of monasteries, elevating the monk's image itself to a symbolic authority. This digital spiritual engagement intertwines closely with commercial consumption. For followers, it performs as a means of spiritual solace and a manifestation of accruing merit. They are deeply convinced that monks' images represent the essence of moral purity and religious commitment. The authenticity of digital spiritual practices lies in participation and performance rather than merely in their inherent meanings.

Whether through historical records, literary depictions, or the accumulation of personal experiences, we have acquired a foundational understanding and recognition of the identity or role of "Buddhist monks". Yet, when we reverse this perspective, what significance do we hold for these Buddhist monks ? This also is precisely the central focus of this study. Is it that technological advancements have transformed monastic life, or has monastic life adaptively integrated with modern technology ? As I previously concluded, the prolonged monastic life combined with the teachings of Buddhist ideology have together shaped the spiritual values of the monks. Their frequent interactions with the rapidly evolving secular world, including commercial activities, offer them a fresh perspective to reflect upon

and reinforce their unique identity. A bolder view of this research suggests that, while monks are constrained by the monastic system and Buddhist precepts, which might be perceived as a form of "unfreedom" by the outside world, their closer engagements with secular society have allowed them to observe many individuals grappling with anxieties and confusions arising from pursuits in education, career, family, and wealth. This, in turn, has deepened their identification and recognition of their distinct roles and values as monks. Could this kind of "unfreedom" also represent a form of "freedom" ? Is a solid identity constructed under a more fluid societal space ?

Italo Calvino's *The Baron in the Trees* (2019) tells the tale of Baron Cosimo, who, as a young boy, decided never to set foot on the ground again and chose to spend the remainder of his life amidst the trees. This decision gave him unique freedom, allowing him to view the world from a high and distant natural perspective, while simultaneously avoiding the traditional responsibilities and constraints of society and family. As a representation of eternal emancipation in literature, this is Cosimo's liberty. In the context of a fluid social framework, as we reexamine or deconstruct traditional societal structures and norms, the daily practices and spiritual values of Tibetan Buddhist monks present us with a vivid narrative about the pieces of certainty and uncertainty.

However, the study is not without its limitations. Firstly, the field site selected for this study is a multi-ethnic settlement area that also thrives in tourism. Although Tibetans are the dominant ethnic group in this region and strive to preserve their cultural traditions, they inevitably experience influences from other ethnicities and external cultures. Consequently, in my analysis, these Tibetan monks exhibit a contradictory mindset as they confront the evolving external environment, actively rationalizing these contradictions. While such analysis may be applicable to regions with similar contexts, it might not suit more traditional, remote areas. I believe that future research on monks should focus more on

traditional communities to provide a broader and more comprehensive comparison and understanding.

Secondly, the ethnographic approach, while providing depth and detailed understanding, may limit the generalizability of the findings across different regions or religious practices. The interpretive nature of ethnographic studies also raises concerns about subjective bias, especially in analyzing complex concepts such as identity and spirituality. It is important to underscore that in this study, digital ethnography was employed as the main research methodology, integrating principles and methods from traditional ethnography. Focusing predominantly on the participatory practices of monks in the region on digital social media platforms, and relying on the interpersonal relationship principles inherent in traditional ethnography, this approach may lead to underrepresentation of certain perspectives or experiences, thus limiting the generalizability of the findings to a broader digital context. Additionally, the research's focus on a specific group might lack a broader perspective on diverse digital spiritual practices.

Thirdly, this study was conducted under the framework of digital consumerism, guided by Zygmunt Bauman's *liquid modernity* theory. I particularly focused on the concepts of liquidity and solidity, which provided potent analytical tools for examining the changes in the daily lives and identities of the monks in this study. However, the theory of *liquid modernity* is primarily based on the context of Western society and culture, emphasizing individual identity and experience, and thus may not adequately capture the importance of collective spiritual practices and shared experiences within the monastic community. Therefore, in my analysis and discussion, I also contrast traditional monastic mechanisms and monastic life with the contemporary fluid social landscape, to provide a more comprehensive understanding.

In summary, applying a theory predominantly developed for Western societal development to the context of Buddhist monastic life in the Eastern world

represents an experimental extension and validation. Faced with rapidly evolving science and technology, as well as socio-economic changes, the challenges encountered are not just individual issues but extend to every individual globally. Buddhist monks, as practitioners and disseminators of Buddhism, appear to live in monastic communities distinct from secular society, yet it is evident that their lives are intimately connected with the secular world. With the advancement and integration of digital technology into daily life, focusing on the impact of emerging technologies such as virtual reality and artificial intelligence on spiritual practices and life in future research may be a trend.

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