JOURNAL OF DIGITAL SOCIAL RESEARCH

JDSR 7(1) (2025) 46-65

10.33621/jdsr.v7i154877

Using Buddhist skillful means

Conducting digital ethnography in diasporic digital Chinese Buddhist communities in Canada[1]

Xiao Han

Université du Québec à Montréal, Canada

✉ han.xiao@courrier.uqam.ca

Abstract

This study addresses the growing call from scholars, such as Heidi Campbell, for a deeper reflection of methodological approaches to digital ethnography within various religious traditions and communities. In this article, I examine how I utilize a collection of "skillful means" informed by Buddhism, namely a mixed set of digital research methods encompassing reflexive choices and decisions, positioning, and creativities. This set of tools is situationally tailored for and derived from interacting with Chinese Buddhist diasporas in French Canada in the context of digital social media throughout my digital fieldwork. I use ethnographic vignettes to illustrate how these practices, afforded by the Buddhist ideas, digital possibilities, and ethnographic reflexivity, are crucial to constantly navigate, negotiate, and devise new strategies for exploring diverse networked digital field sites through *interconnectivity, fluidity, immediacy* and *disruption* and conducting multi-modal participant observation. By presenting the complexity and intricacy of the insider-outsider conundrum, I highlight key digital features of social media platforms such as WeChat, which can be strategically leveraged by a Buddhist researcher and practitioner to actively shape and present their digital image and voice within the communities they studies. I further reflect on how these dynamics can uniquely influence both the individuals and the communities being researched. Finally, I address the caveats and potential pitfalls this approach could potentially bring about.

Keywords: reflexivity, positionality, Canadian Chinese Buddhism, digital ethnography, WeChat ethnography

1. Introduction

On the morning of August 8, 2021, I opened my WeChat and YouTube and was greeted by an ocean of dazzling messages from various Buddhist communities: on YouTube, the Venerable Master Ru Zhong of Montreal Fo Guang Shan was holding an online filial ceremony[2]; on Telegram, members of the Khenpo Sodargye' Tibetan Buddhism study group were called upon to practice a guru yoga on Zoom. In the WeChat group, the abbot of Cheng Shui Temple thanked the volunteers who offered sugar cane juice to the temple. The guys in the Dharma Art group posted a Bodhisattva emoji that their team just designed

[1] This research has been approved by the ethics review committee involving human subjects (CIEREH) at Université du Québec à Montréal.
[2] A kind of Chinese ritual honouring one's parents and ancestors (influenced by Confucian ideas).

for other group members. The Montreal Prayer Group was making a weekly schedule for the group members who will be on duty next week to host the sutra chanting ritual dedicated to the deceased who died from COVID-19. The Pure Land Sutra Chanting WeChat Group was sharing China's Master Da'an's Dharma Talks video on YouTube about how to chant the name of the Buddha. This is how my everyday online Buddhist life has unfolded since the outset of COVID (fieldnote, 8th August 2021).

During the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020, like many others, I was thrown into self-isolation, an experience that drastically disrupted my usual social connections. This isolation deepened my desire to connect with a community that could offer spiritual solace. As a researcher in the field of Buddhist studies, and at the same time, a female first-generation immigrant and Chinese Buddhist practitioner based in Montreal, I sought to engage with local Han Chinese[3] Buddhist communities to provide spiritual comfort for myself and engage in a community promoting resilience in times of crisis. Concurrently, as a researcher studying Chinese Buddhist diasporas in Canada, I was curious to explore their beliefs, practices, and stories within the digital space. My spiritual and intellectual seeking eventually guided me to establish connection with and subsequently join these six of Han-Chinese Buddhist communities, which thus became the subjects of my research project: 1) WeChat[4] Group of Fo Guang Shan Hua Yan Temple (I.B.P.S. of Montreal) affiliated to Fo Guang Shan, a globally well-known Chinese Mahayana Buddhist organization headquartered in Taiwan; 2) WeChat Group of "The Joy of Chan as Diet", affiliated to Cheng Shui Temple, affiliated to a Montreal Chinese and Vietnamese temple led by Chinese-Vietnamese nuns and attended by mostly ethnic Chinese devotees, catering for the general public who regularly consume vegetarian food; 3) Telegram group of Bodhi Study Society community, founded by Khenpo Sodargye who is affiliated to the Serta Larung Five Science Buddhist Academy in China, one of the largest Tibetan Buddhist academies in in contemporary world; 4) WeChat Montreal Prayer Group, created in memory of a deceased Chinese immigrant BBQ owner, includes reciting Buddhist classics by group members on Zoom on a daily basis for the deceased in Montreal;5)WeChat Group of Pure Land Sutra Chanting community, connected to Pure Land Buddhism tradition in mainland China's Donglin Temple; 6) WeChat Group of "Zen Tea Flavor - Kagyu Center", affiliated to Rigpe Dorje Centre (Montreal), founded in 1987 as the first of many centers to be established by the 3rd Jamgon Kongtrul Rinpoche Lodro Chokyi Senge (Jamg Kongtrul Rinpoche lineage) in North America. It is crucial to underscore that while some of these communities do not only exist online but also have physical entities based in Montreal prior to COVID-19 such as Fo Guang Shan Hua Yan Temple, Cheng Shui Temple and Kagyu Center. The number of members of each group ranges from several dozen to more than 200 individuals. The digital communities are not exclusively reliant on digital platforms such as WeChat, or Telegram, which primarily serve as their community interaction hubs. They also utilize video communication software like Zoom, alongside an array of websites and social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram. These additional channels offer a multiplicity of interaction levels and further avenues for community engagement[5].

[3] Han Chinese refers to the majority ethnic population in Mainland China.

[4] The most popular Chinese messaging app, widely used among diasporic ethnic Chinese, combines features similar to those of Facebook and Messenger, which will be discussed later.

[5] The members of these different communities are primarily first-generation Han Chinese immigrants, mostly from mainland China, with a smaller portion being ethnic Chinese diasporas from other Asian regions and countries such as Vietnam, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Most of them speak Mandarin, while only a few speak Cantonese. In general, many participants in these groups have obtained Canadian citizenship, and some hold permanent residency in Canada. As the largest international Buddhist organization among the groups I participated in, Fo Guang Shan is highly inclusive and diverse in terms of gender, age, socio-economic status, and educational backgrounds. The predominant participants are ethnic Chinese, with a very small group of local Quebecois. Cheng Shui Temple, known for selling Chinese-Vietnamese food, has attracted mostly mainland Chinese, Chinese Vietnamese, and Cantonese participants at the temple. However, their WeChat group primarily consists of immigrants, international students, and temporary residents from mainland China. At the Kagyu Center, membership is split between Quebecois and mainland Chinese immigrants, but their WeChat group consists solely of Chinese participants, many of whom are younger immigrants in their thirties with stable jobs and decent incomes. Other semi-closed groups, such as the Pure Land Group, Bodhi Study Society, and Montreal Prayer Group, are more homogenous in demographics. They consist mainly of middle-aged, middle- to upper-class immigrant professionals and intellectuals from mainland China, including engineers, professors, and doctors. These members are financially well-off and familiar with up-to-date digital technology.

https://doi.org/10.33621/jdsr.v7i154877

Their Buddhist practices and understanding of Buddhism also varied due to sectarian differences between Tibetan Mahayana and Han Chinese Buddhist traditions. Except for the WeChat Group of Fo Guang Shan Hua Yan Temple and Kagyu Center, other groups consist of solely lay-led Buddhist practitioner communities, lacking direct monastic involvement in these digital communities. Even though there is no monastic presence in these digital communities, some groups maintain the ability to connect with their Buddhist leaders and teachers in China through digital platforms. Members from these groups have been immersed in Buddhism for many years and have a relatively deep and intricate understanding of nuanced practices, Buddhist philosophies and scriptures[6].

The increasingly entangled relationship between religion and digital media, as illustrated in the opening vignette and the introduction of the six communities, has been extensively researched by scholars over the past decade. Heidi Campbell introduced the essential framework of "digital religion" to understand what it means to be "a religion that is constituted in new ways through digital media and cultures" (Campbell, 2013a: 3-4). Specifically, the profound transformation of religious structures and practices has been deeply reflected in the reality that the global Buddhist world is becoming increasingly digital. Gregory Grieve (2017:6) proposed the concept of "digital Dharma" or "digital Buddhism," referring to "the Buddhism that users encounter on the screen." Drawing on his "Buddhist-informed" ethnographic work on a Zen community in Second Life's digital spaces, Grieve demonstrated how digital media shapes and sometimes challenges conventional understandings of Buddhist identity, community, and practices, and even the authenticity of the Dharma (2017). Alongside Daniel Veidlinger, Grieve (2018) co-edited another key piece of literature-the first volume solely dedicated to Buddhism and digital media, *The Pixel in the Lotus: Buddhism, the Internet, and Digital Media*. This volume explores Buddhist practice and teachings in an increasingly digitalized world. Through various methods, including case studies, ethnographic work, content analysis, and interviews with practitioners and cyber-communities, the contributors examined how contemporary global Buddhism is manifested in digital media. The volume covers digital fields such as virtual worlds, social media, and mobile devices.

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted more research related to online Buddhism and its response to the crisis. Scholars have documented how global Buddhist communities in Canada, the U.S., and Australia responded to the COVID-19 crisis with resilience by transitioning to virtual programs, conveyed through digital platforms such as Zoom, YouTube, and Facebook for sutra chanting and donations (Wilson, 2020; Tseng, 2020; Sang, 2021). While the COVID-19 situation drew significant scholarly attention to global online Buddhist practices and communities, the digitalization of global Buddhism had long been taking place. It is thus critical to recognize that COVID-19 itself did not bring about the burgeoning of digital Buddhism worldwide but rather catalyzed it.

In line with these pioneering research approaches, many researchers working on Chinese-speaking Buddhist communities have added more context and invaluable ethnographic data, making Chinese digital Buddhist communities more visible within the academic horizon. To cite a few, Stefania Travagnin (2019) examined how government involvement in China shapes mainland China's digital Buddhist ritual practices in the temple-developed online platform. She further discussed how a Chinese famous temple used a robot monk to engage with its followers (2020). Weishan Huang (2017) demonstrated how Chinese social media, such as WeChat, facilitates the construction of Buddhist communities and creates a digital sacred space at both global and local levels through the case study of the Tzu Chi Buddhist organization in Shanghai. Yanshuang Zhang(2017) conducted a comparative analysis of how Buddhist and Christian communities in China use Sina Weibo, a major Chinese social media platform, to interact with

[6] Despite the prominent and significant presence of male participants in all six groups, the gender ratio is predominantly female, which strongly suggests that ethnic Chinese women are playing an increasingly substantial role in Buddhist communities in Canada. However, for the sake of focus, I do not intend to explore the gender dimension in this article. It is important to note that my ethnicity, gender, and religious background as a Chinese-origin, female, immigrant Buddhist practitioner have significantly facilitated my interactions with participants. These aspects allow me to communicate freely without the need for an interpreter, build trust and rapport-particularly with female participants-with relative ease, and engage in and observe all relevant activities in greater depth. Further reflections on my positionality and reflexivity will be discussed in detail in the following sections.

https://doi.org/10.33621/jdsr.v7i154877

participants, building religious communities as well as forming religious identities. Francesca Tarocco (2017) explored how digital technologies, including Weibo[7] and WeChat, influence the dynamics between devotees and Buddhist monastics. These works of literature highlight how Chinese Buddhist communities are influenced and reshaped by advanced technologies and digital platforms.

The COVID-19 pandemic saw a rapid growth in Chinese digital Buddhist practices and transnational communities that are globally networked in a digital world, triggering more related research. For example, Xiao Han's (2022) study focuses on how a Thailand-affiliated Chinese Theravada Buddhist group based in Beijing used WeChat to perform online-offline synchronized meditations to accumulate digital merit in response to COVID-19. Kai Shmushko explores how Tibetan Buddhist communities physically based in Shanghai responded to the COVID-19 pandemic by linking mask-wearing and commercial activities to Buddhist merit, leveraging digital social media and the internet. In more recent work, Shmushko (2021) reviews methodological developments and challenges in the ethnographic study of digital Buddhism in both the PRC and Taiwan, highlighting the significance of including religion, technology, and the market economy in studying Chinese cyber-Buddhism.

Nevertheless, while the aforementioned pioneering research is extremely helpful and instrumental in understanding current digital Chinese Buddhist landscapes, it primarily echoes, and arguably falls into, the essential conceptual framework that Campbell (2013b) pointed out when studying online religious groups-namely, authenticity, community, identity, ritual, and authority. In other words, current scholarship on digital Buddhism mostly focuses on presenting, conceptualizing, and theorizing emerging phenomena and researched subjects, rather than offering down-to-earth ethnographic reflections on how to engage with religious Buddhist individuals encountered on various digital platforms and the impact of the researcher on the digital groups being studied.

More specifically, as I began to explore the study of Chinese sangha on digital platforms, I encountered significant methodological challenges rooted in the everyday practice of digital ethnographic fieldwork, which has rarely been addressed in previous scholarly discussions. These challenges soon evolved into research questions guiding this study: On the one hand, how can I make sound judgments and informed decisions when selecting digital field sites, gaining access, and fostering acceptance? What is the most appropriate approach to conducting participant observation with digital Chinese immigrant Buddhist groups, often organized as membership-based or semi-public networks, with their own distinct discourse, social codes, and preferred forms of digital Buddhist practice? On the other hand, how should I navigate the intricacies of my entry into, engagement with, or even disengagement from digital fieldwork, especially when dealing with the projections, scrutiny, and suspicions from Chinese and Buddhist communities? Moreover, how should I position myself as a lay Buddhist practitioner (insider) and an academic researcher (outsider) as well as a newcomer to their groups?

Unfortunately, although desperately needed, no scholarly attempts have been made so far to engage in methodological reflexivity on how to research diasporic Han-Chinese Buddhist communities in a digital setting, let alone providing comprehensive reflections on how to handle dual positionality as a researcher (outsider) and practitioner (insider) in this context. This methodological predicament has prompted me to respond to the significant emerging appeal for deeper methodological reflections and explorations in digital ethnography to suit the dazzling change in the field. This call—openly made by a group of leading scholars of digital religion, such as Campbell in the *Religion and Digital Media* panel at the AAR conference in San Antonio in November 2023—is a timely response to the rapid growth of AI and algorithms that are increasingly shaping how religious individuals practice and express their faith in digital settings. Therefore, we researchers urgently need to upgrade our methodological tools and reconsider how to navigate these digital religious communities, especially when approaching specific non-Western religious groups that stretch across different cultures, traditions, ethnicities, and geographical regions.

[7] Chinese Weibo (微博) is a popular microblogging platform in China, a Chinese version of Twitter.

https://doi.org/10.33621/jdsr.v7i154877

To address this methodological gap, I draw on a key Mahayana Buddhist concept, *Upaya* (方便, *fangbian*), meaning "expedients," "stratagem," or "skillful means" (hereafter), which is highly emphasized in one of the key Mahayana Pure Land Buddhist scriptures, the *Lotus Sutra*[8] (Williams, 2008). This concept refers to the Buddha's pedagogical flexibility and wisdom in adapting the teachings to suit changing circumstances when teaching the Dharma to various recipients from diverse geographical, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds, using different similes, parables, or referencing the audience's rituals and traditions, ultimately leading them to understand the Buddhist truth (Keown, 2005:18). Beyond its pedagogical applications, the concept of skillful means is also interpreted from an ethical perspective to encompass any behavior performed by the Buddha, Bodhisattvas, or even all Buddhist practitioners out of compassion, wisdom, and a willingness to benefit others (Williams, 2008:15; Keown, 2005:18). Furthermore, from the perspective of daily practices and moral evaluation, skillful means encourages Buddhist practitioners to act in accordance with the spirit of the Dharma rather than adhering to fixed, predetermined principles and precepts when it comes to lived Buddhist praxis (Keown, 2005:18; Schroeder, 2004:150).

I also draw on the key anthropological method of reflexivity. Since the 1980s, scholars in Religious Studies have begun to integrate the principles of reflexive anthropology, a paradigm that challenges the traditional notion that anthropologists can create objective knowledge about the participants they research. In *Writing Culture*, a seminal work by Marcus and Clifford (1986), the authors acknowledged the influence of anthropologists' own backgrounds, perspectives, and stances on the knowledge they construct, illustrating that reflexivity is essential and integral to the role of anthropologists. This incorporation of reflexivity naturally led to an examination of the boundaries of truth claims. I thus argue that ethnographic reflexivity is closely associated with skillful means when examining Buddhist communities, as it deeply embodies adaptability, ethical sensitivity, and recognition of the diversity of participants, and it naturally resonates with the core ideas of skillful means.

Therefore, aside from its soteriological aim of tailoring teachings to help sentient beings attain enlightenment, I regard skillful means as a Buddhist-informed model guiding my entire fieldwork-a model comprised of a collection of ethnographic practices, shaped by a set of reflexive choices and decisions. The guiding spirit of this model, much like skillful means, is driven by Buddhist insights such as compassion and a Buddhist-informed sense of responsibility. This approach is rooted in my dual role as both a Buddhist practitioner and an academic. As a practitioner, I aim to practice Buddhism with a soteriological pursuit, while using my academic work to benefit Buddhist communities by increasing their visibility in the Western academic world. As an academic, my fieldwork is grounded in a dynamic, ever-changing digital field, which demands a highly adaptable, strategic approach, along with exceptional ethnographic sensitivity, reflexivity, and creativity. In light of my dual roles, the advantage of this model is that it has led me to engage with communities that embody the very teachings of my guiding model in their daily lives.

As a result, rather than attempting to create a new set of methods for digital ethnography, this article aims to reflect on the situational, tailored, and constantly responsive methodological decisions, choices, and inspirations associated with ethnographic conundrums when conducting digital ethnography with Chinese diasporic Buddhists in Western countries such as Canada. Specifically, I aim to investigate how the researcher's role and voice are shaped by cultural, social, and religious nuances and distinctions when studying Chinese Buddhist immigrant communities through digital ethnographic fieldwork. I further aim to demonstrate that conducting digital ethnographic work with Chinese Buddhist communities requires not only leveraging reflexivity and positionality to effectively engage in fieldwork within a digital,

[8] The Lotus Sutra is one of the key Mahayana Buddhist texts. It is well-known for its inclusive teachings on the universality of Buddha-nature, the potential for all sentient beings to attain Buddhahood, as well as its emphasis on skillful means in teaching different audiences to lead them to the ultimate truth.

https://doi.org/10.33621/jdsr.v7i154877

diasporic context, but also an understanding of how the social and cultural perspectives and standings of both the participants and the researcher can intersect and shape the fieldwork process.

Furthermore, it is critical to reflect on how these dynamics can specifically influence the researched individuals and communities in a distinctive manner unique to the digital setting. Following these reflections, I argue that my positionality in the digital field extends beyond merely being a fellow Buddhist participant among community members; instead, I have actively established my researcher's visibility and voice using digital affordances, positioning, and creativities that are situationally tailored for and derived from interacting with Chinese Buddhist diasporas in Canada in the context of the digital realm throughout my digital fieldwork.

This paper draws on skillful means, along with anthropological reflexivity, as the guiding ethnographic model for my ongoing digital fieldwork on six communities from the beginning of COVID-19 in 2020 until early 2023. Employing brief ethnographic vignettes, the following will be a mixed presentation of ethnographic reflections and fieldwork data. I will first explore how I practice ethnographic reflexivity and skillful means to identify six digital field sites and how specific digital participant observation was conducted through alternating modes. I will then explore how I skillfully navigate beyond the dichotomous roles of researcher (outsider) and lay practitioner (insider) in the digital Buddhist communities. Moreover, I will delve into how I leverage my "researcher voice," or the visibility of my academic expertise within the groups (a term to be developed and explained later), to engage with and impact the communities I study. Lastly, I will discuss how my status as a Buddhist academic projects misconceptions and presents caveats during digital fieldwork.

2. Following the flows of digital Buddhist communities - Navigating the fields

The digital field significantly requires skillful means to navigate effectively and seamlessly. Regarding how to define the digital field itself, I draw on Hine's (2015) arguments on using reflexivity in choosing field sites when conducting digital ethnography. She advocates for an ethnographer's ability to exercise discerning judgment in selecting field sites within the mutable and interconnected digital environment. It is vital that this agency is reflected in the narratives the ethnographer constructs regarding the participants and the field. Additionally, Hine emphasizes the importance of the ethnographer's reflexivity in evaluating how their involvement shapes the field, as well as the impact of their own subjectivity on the relationships with those under study. With this in mind, throughout my research, I have actively adopted reflexivity in each interaction within my research communities, from the choices of the digital field to the modalities of participant observation, as discussed in what follows.

2.1 Where is the field?

The first aspect of this skillful-means-guided reflexive journey pertains to my identification of digital field sites, which was driven by a dynamic and purposeful choice. By dynamic, I mean that the selection was adaptable and changed as required, and by purposive, I mean that it was intentional and based on prescribed objectives in terms of the nature of groups such as their ethnicity (ethnic Han Chinese), sectarian practices (Tibetan Nyingma Buddhism, Humanistic Buddhism, Pure Land Buddhism in Chinese Mahayana traditions) and their geographic locations (physically based in Montreal) as well as their predominant digital presence. In general, my choice of field sites is guided by the principle that ethnography should be purposive rather than passive, as argued by Hine (2015). According to Hine, ethnographers should not simply follow what the field dictates or stick to predetermined subjects. Instead, we should recognize that "the shape of the field is the upshot rather than the starting point and is the product of an active ethnographer strategically engaging with the field, rather than a passive mapping of a pre-existing territory or cultural unit" (Hine, 2015: 54).

https://doi.org/10.33621/jdsr.v7i154877

Guided by this principle, in my fieldwork, I identified four factors associated with the nature of the digital world that shaped my group choices in the field, which I term: *interconnectivity, fluidity, immediacy*, and *disruption*. I will briefly introduce and illustrate these terms with ethnographic data as follows. *Interconnectivity* means different communities across various digital platforms can be fluidly interconnected, which "mirrors the experiences of navigating through a connected world" (Hine, 2015: 122). Buddhist practitioners belong to different Buddhist digital groups, which can serve as linking nodes to invite each other to a new group - it is not surprising to find that the same group of members in one group also dwell in another group. Therefore, by harnessing the connectivity of people on social media, I serendipitously and gradually discovered other, more relevant field sites that warranted more in-depth research. For example, I discovered and then became a participant in the Pure Land Chanting Group simply because one participant from that group posted an announcement in the Cheng Shui Temple WeChat Group, looking for individuals interested in chanting Pure Land sutras together on Zoom. Following this, I added him to join the WeChat group. *Fluidity* indicates that the digital Buddhist communities I researched are highly fluid and constantly in the making, with individuals moving in and out, or becoming completely dormant after a period of active interaction, and then suddenly returning to bustling engagement again, especially in some lay-led communities with loose regulations, such as the Montreal Prayer Group. For example, after a peak of prayer rituals dedicated to COVID deaths, as the death rate significantly decreased, the prayer group became so quiet that it seemed to be a "dead group." During its dormant phase, I simply stopped participating, as it did not generate data at that time.

Immediacy illustrates situations where a significant event demands immediate attention, prompting an investigation into an unfamiliar digital platform that typically falls outside the scope of my regular exploration, or even the creation of new groups merging familiar participants from various communities, like water flooding in. For example, I saw someone post a WeChat group QR code and promote photos of an upcoming group's offline Meditation Tea event at the Kagyu Center in multiple Chinese immigrant WeChat groups on Chinese New Year's Eve 2023. After I joined the group, I found that the number of members in this newly created WeChat group increased dramatically from a mere dozen to over a hundred in a week and it subsequently became one of my regular field sites. Finally, the *disruption* or unexpectedness of the digital field sometimes caught me off guard, leaving me with no choices—the field suddenly disappeared overnight without any warning or explanation, which is usually hard to imagine in an offline context. Sometimes the technical affordances of the digital environment create unique "surprises" in the online world. This was reflected in my personal experience when a subgroup of the Bodhi Study Society on Telegram was removed and disbanded by the organizers in two hours, as a preemptive strategy after a digital scam emergency (presumably due to political infiltration). Similarly, I also experienced the behaviour of a gatekeeper who initially displayed considerable kindness and enthusiasm towards me, but later mysteriously changed her demeanour and removed me from the WeChat group where I intended to conduct my field research.

2.2 No longer familiar strangers anymore - Online-offline connection

This is the second aspect concerning navigating the digital field. Much like navigating digital field sites demands adaptability to a constantly shifting environment, the digital interactions likewise increasingly blur the once-clear boundaries between online and offline religious experiences and thus mandate a mindset that avoids viewing the online and offline with fixed boundaries. Hine (2015) highlighted the importance of studying the Internet experience that is integrated into people's everyday lives, indicating that the researcher may engage with the field through various means, including mediated interactions online or face-to-face engagements offline, or a combination of both. Heidi Campbell (2012) argued that one cannot ignore the offline aspects when exploring online communities because, in fact, there are no fixed boundaries between the two realms, and they are occasionally convergent at some points. With

https://doi.org/10.33621/jdsr.v7i154877

these insights in mind, I emphasize that offline engagement is pivotal in achieving a multidimensional or multi-layer understanding of online researched individuals or communities for the following reasons.

First, the transition from online to offline is inevitable. Although most of my fieldwork was done in the digital space, the communities I am looking at have a physical base or at least had one before in Montreal. As lockdown restrictions were lifted and people started to engage in offline gatherings, there was a transition from digital to in-person events. These included welcoming new members, vegetarian food sales, Mid-Autumn Day Mountain pilgrimages, and regular practices such as communal "Eight Precepts Retreats" and Buddhist etiquette courses. These events naturally yielded significant ethnographic data through offline participant observation. Second, by being seen as a real participant person by others and being physically present, I further validate my membership and build trust in the group. Third, offline engagement significantly bolstered my rapport with certain members of the community who I had previously known only as "familiar strangers" through online interactions. Some of the online gatherings within groups such as Bodhi Study Group do not involve any cameras but only voice communications due to the fear of political persecution associated with participation in Tibetan Buddhism, as its global Buddhist leader such as Dalai Lama in China is portrayed by CCP as being involved in separatism[9]. Being able to associate faces with the voices and build new connections with previously unknown participants proved to be immensely beneficial. Moreover, it enables a more introspective approach, allowing me to reflect on how individuals in the network portray their Buddhist identities online and to explore the tensions this may create with their offline identities (Bluteau, 2021). Last but not least, the bonus of offline participant observation often featured unexpected, interesting incidents and nuanced stories, which enriches my analysis and interpretations of the Chinese Buddhist digital sangha.

2.3 Multi-modal digital participant observation

A third characteristic of the digital field entails responsive and situational multi-dimensional participation. Throughout my online and offline fieldwork, from late 2020 to March 2023, I actively participated in a diverse range of activities within the researched groups. These activities included, but were not limited to weekly online Dharma services, chanting, Buddhist ceremonies, Buddhist lectures, conferences, daily practices like visualizations and meditations, and weekly seminars as a regular member. However, given the predominant online nature of my fieldwork, it is important to highlight the everyday participant observation modes that characterized my digital research experience. The modes of digital participation I employed included active participation, engaging with one another, using various mediums such as online text, audio, and video, and interactive social media features to enhance visibility. Additionally, they encompass more subtle forms of presence like dwelling, as well as less noticeable strategies like "lurking" (will be defined later), or salient participation.

In my fieldwork, active participation did not only entail investing significant time and energy in attending important events, it also involved actively engaging with specific informants who were eager to discuss and share their Buddhist experiences online. This required consistent and attentive engagement on a daily basis. This included regularly following their online activities, liking their posts, commenting, or forwarding them, in order to create a sense of "being there" and maintain a continuous presence, ideally in a prompt way to capture the potentially fleeting attention of participants by promptly responding to their posts, signaling my interest and engagement with their content. Dwelling serves as a means to

[9] Buddhism in cyberspace plays an important role in what Chinese-French Buddhist scholar Zhe Ji referred to as a "social force" in China in terms of social mobilization (Kai, 2023; Ji, 2012), which is deemed a substantial threat to the CCP leadership, despite "its perceived docility and its lack of association with foreign imperialism" (Poceski, 2016: 91). This concern is particularly acute when "Buddhism obviously became a means of protest against the rule of the Chinese state," especially when "Tibetan nationalism was loudly pronounced by the political activities of Tibetan monks and nuns" (Yu, 2013, p. 4). The founder of the Bodhi Study Group, Khenpo Sodargye, suddenly disbanded the branches of the Global Bodhi Study Society on December 31, 2019. It later went underground, renamed and rebranded as a novel community in which I participated. Most participants believed that Sodargye, as a Tibetan monk, must have faced considerable political pressure from the government due to his increasingly expansive religious influence among mainland and international Chinese.

https://doi.org/10.33621/jdsr.v7i154877

establish a subtle presence in the digital world, facilitating identity establishment and conducting interviews (Boellstorff et al., 2012: 76). While not obligatory, it can signal long-term commitment and generate favor within the community (*ibid*.). For me, dwelling represents a minimum level of occasional participation. By appearing during major events and engaging in activities, like expressing condolences or sharing greetings on Chinese New Year's Eve, I let community members know of my presence and lay the foundation for further interaction.

In my research, I treated lurking as an alternative mode of silent participation. Lurking, as highlighted by De Seta (2020: 85), is a customary and widely accepted approach to engaging with the digital world, applicable to both researchers and everyday users. Lurking is seen as "a possibility alongside practices such as ignoring, reading, liking, commenting, sharing, editing, and linking" (De Seta, 2020: 86). I use lurking mode for two main reasons. Firstly, in certain Buddhist communities where restraint and mindful speech are encouraged, lurking becomes particularly significant and dominant. It aligns with the expectation for individuals to always be mindful of their body, speech, and mind, according to the Buddhist idea, of following the community's norms by minimizing engagement. Secondly, in larger communities with more than 50 members, the general code for newcomers is to silently participate before actively engaging. This allows individuals to understand and learn "the community's social codes" (De Seta, 2020), internalizing social norms over time, which is also a form of participation. Meanwhile, dwelling typically occurs in smaller groups where a relationship has already been established or where community members are aware of my presence through occasional participation or the presence of my profile avatar. To embody a subtle presence, I carefully chose and crafted my profile avatar, which serves as a manifestation of my identity, passion, inner world, humour, irony, hobby, and social life.

The modes of participation in my research are not mutually exclusive and can adapt as situations evolve. When joining tight-knit communities, I initially observe the atmosphere and follow established decorum. Upon joining the group, introducing myself as a "Buddhist practitioner" and "researcher" serves as a rite of passage of my acceptance in the group, often accompanied by warm welcomes and pleasantries, exemplifying active participation. However, as time progresses, I strike a balance to avoid becoming overly engrossed. I strategically transition into dwelling or lurking modes, maintaining a presence while allowing for measured observation and reflection. These different modes of participation are not entirely contrived as research methods; rather, I argue, part of them are spontaneous responses to the dynamics of the digital community, mirroring the practices of other community members.

2.4 Gradual disengagement

Saying goodbye to fellow digital participants is the most challenging part, demanding an exceptional degree of care and empathy. While disengagement from the field is crucial for further critical and analytical reflection, I regard it as an ethical imperative for a researcher, especially one who is also a Buddhist insider, to assist informants in processing this disengagement. A proper disengagement, with reflexivity and sensitivity, is associated with the "careful consideration of responsibilities and obligations" to the research subjects (Labaree, 2002: 115). The sudden intensive appearance in people's lives for a few years, followed by an abrupt disappearance, can make people feel exploited or betrayed (Zayed, 2021). This is also due to the fact that some of my informants became real friends over time, making it even harder to abruptly sever ties with them.

To address this, I skillfully leverage digital settings by adopting a more gradual approach to disengagement. I maintain loose connections with the field and selectively participate in events that require the presence of all community members (e.g., a New Year gala on Zoom). Furthermore, I use my digital visibility by sharing aspects of my daily life, such as zoo visits or ceramic painting workshops, giving the community a sense that I am still present. This practice of maintaining visibility, which I previously discussed as labour (in the positionality section), began to feel less like a task and more akin to forming bonds of kinship (Abidin, 2020: 67).

https://doi.org/10.33621/jdsr.v7i154877

3. Beyond the "insider illusion" in digital diasporic Chinese Buddhist communities

Navigating the boundary between being an insider and outsider within a Buddhist community is another excellent example of how skillful means can be applied. Traditionally, anthropologists have employed the study of boundaries as a valuable tool "for discovering who is and what it takes to be accepted as an insider, and to see how, and how strictly, these boundaries are formed and maintained" (Bowie, 2019: 114). However, the incorporation of reflexivity in Religious Studies raised issues such as "the insider/outsider dichotomy [that] does not work precisely because there are no stable categories" (Katie et al., 2015), given that individuals within religious communities are in a constant state of flux across boundaries, and researchers themselves might be practitioners of a particular religious tradition, which grants them a degree of insider status. Additionally, conducting research on religious individuals may lead to instances where participants contest the researcher's interpretations of their practices and beliefs, which "raises questions about representation, and power" (*ibid*.), thereby adding a layer of complexity to the demarcation between insiders and outsiders.

Aside from charting digital field sites, I also realized that ethnographic positionality presents another significant challenge in digital ethnographic work, where the dichotomous distinction between "outsider" and "insider" within a particular digital religious community can sometimes blur or even become irrelevant, requiring more delicate positioning. This is primarily because, under certain circumstances, maintaining an outsider's perspective can become unfeasible. This mirrors Christine Hine's assertion (2015: 85) that "ethnographic research carried out in and of and through mediated communications is always to some extent 'insider research,' since the ethnographer is employing the very means of communication that are simultaneously the object of study."

In my study, this is particularly true because almost every digital group — though exceptions exist — or communities of Chinese Buddhists on social media platforms has certain forms of gatekeepers. It is virtually impossible for someone to gain entry into these digital communities without a certain degree of familiarity with or belief in Buddhism or Buddhist friends or family members. Without this prior knowledge or faith, individuals are often viewed with suspicion, perceived as engaging in religious voyeurism, and their motivations for wanting to join are questioned, if they somehow manage to join one Chinese Buddhist group. Moreover, the political sensitivities surrounding religion in China mentioned previously, especially in the context of Tibetan Buddhism, coupled with a pervasive sense of insecurity stemming from fears of being targeted by China's government due to involvement with Tibetan Buddhism and controversial Tibetan Buddhist figures such as Khenpo Sodargye, only serve to fortify the barriers constructed by these gatekeepers. Thus, in this context, some degree of "insider" positioning is practically a prerequisite for conducting this type of research.

However, I also recognized the "insider illusion", namely I automatically assume the role of a well-accepted insider to a group due to frequent pleasant interactions with community members on social media, does not always work and can suddenly shift in more nuanced contexts. This realization echoes Aston Katie's contention that "the dichotomy of insider/outsider presumes a fixed personhood, an unrealistic assumption that does not account for personal growth or situated experience" (Katie, 2015: 10). Under these circumstances, the implications of an "outsider" could be multifaceted and multi-layered. While my status of being a Buddhist practitioner, a Chinese immigrant, and a Mandarin speaker may generally mean an insider to them, but on a deeper level, my access, belonging and even my pedigree were being scrutinized and seen as an "outsider", and hence my ability to engage in further exchange with these participants was limited. For example, in the Bodhi Study Society, the community primarily centers on the Nyingma tradition, with most members focused on studying Nyingma scriptures and practices. However, there are smaller subgroups and thus relatively marginal groups within this community, such as the Pure Land Buddhism practitioners, and had somewhat less desirable relationships with other subgroups. These underlying tensions often shape the inner boundaries of defining an insider.

https://doi.org/10.33621/jdsr.v7i154877

In a Telegram message exchange on 20 March 2023, I was taken aback when a community member, who had previously praised me as a promising young Buddhist talent and hosted the 2021 Zoom Christmas gala where I performed a Sanskrit Buddhist song, decisively declined my invitation for a Zoom interview without even any hesitation. Given his past enthusiastic support and appreciation for me, I never expected such a response. Later, I learnt that he was a practitioner from the Pure Land Buddhism Telegram subgroup. Then his refusal made sense to me as since I was in the main subgroup primarily studying Nyingma scriptures, he likely considered me as an outsider with respect to my subgroup belonging. Another example is associated with the study of Ke Cui (2015), who shed light on how a fieldworker's pre-existing relationship with some of the interviewees might change due to shifts in insider/outsider positionality during interviews, especially within the context of China's social value system. In my case, I recognized that when "face" (an act of doing a favour) is given to a Buddhist fellow practitioner through the acceptance of interviews, it does not necessarily mean that everything following would go smoothly and be shared in a friendship or an insider setting, as the dynamics are different in a researcher-researched relationship.

For example, I encountered a situation during a Zoom interview where I was on the verge of being relegated to an outsider. This occurred when the interviewee, who had initially introduced me warmly to the Pure Land Sutra Chanting group and often had online exchanges with me in the group, unexpectedly requested that I explicitly disclose my affiliated Buddhist lineage at the start of the interview to decide whether to proceed with the interview. To secure my insider position for the interview, I explained my Buddhist journey since the age of 18, which was not something I typically do in an interview. Another example is, in an unexpected informal conversation, I encountered a middle-aged male Buddhist practitioner who had only recently started his Buddhist journey for two years. He abruptly labelled me as an outsider to Buddhism upon knowing my researcher identity, claiming that if he were presented with my writings, he would not even "bother to read them" because he arbitrarily presumed that I only engage in *studies* of Buddhism rather than *practicing* Buddhism and that my supervisors are all Western scholars who know nothing about Buddhism, which renders me as a "fake Buddhist".

My fieldwork experience gradually taught me that I should not arbitrarily assume myself to be either an insider or an outsider because the distinction between "insider" and "outsider" becomes blurred from time to time. This insight is reflected in the work of Kim Knott (2010), who emphasizes the fluid and shifting nature of the insider-outsider dichotomy in religious studies. She urges the recognition of the crucial role of reflexivity, negotiation, and mutual understanding in the interplay between researchers and the communities they investigate. Knott writes: "My own view, formed in the context of developing a spatial methodology for the study of religion, is that all interlocutors – whether secular observers, religious participants, or those who strategically move between the two positions – are actors within a single knowledge-power field (Knott 2005). Despite their differing goals and interests, they have together defined, constituted and criticized 'religion' in general, particular 'religions' and their beliefs and practices, and the secular or non-religious domain beyond religion." (Knott, 2010, p. 270). On the other hand, I also came to realize that, in terms of a dual role as researcher and a Buddhist practitioner in religious communities, I "cannot escape being both insiders and outsiders" as Wilkinson and Kitzinger acutely observed (Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 2013: 252), because I am on an equal footing, as an actor and participant, alongside other community members, the only distinction being my ethnographic insights. The study of Chuan Yu (2020) on Chinese online translator communities further exemplifies the fluidity of positions. Yu observed that the way a digital ethnographer and her informants position themselves relative to each other is highly contextual and unpredictable, owing to the fluid and ad hoc nature of online practices and communities. In addition, the relativism of the insider-outsider spectrum should also be taken into consideration, as anthropologist Fiona Bowie (2019: 125) points out, "insider and outsider are relative terms", and according to Robert K. Merton (1972: 22), each individual possesses "not a single status, but a status set".

https://doi.org/10.33621/jdsr.v7i154877

How then should I navigate my position in fieldwork and research? Chuan Yu's (2020) concept of "multiplex persona" resonated deeply with me. It offers a perspective that "views positionality as a decentered entity that encompasses our multi-faceted characters, roles and aspects of identities, presented to and perceived by others and ourselves in the momentary communicative events" in digital space. With this insight, I introspectively examined my own kaleidoscope of positionalities. My manifold social identities that were clearly declared, as I introduced in the introduction when making my first entry into the community, include facets such as a first-generation Chinese immigrant, a doctoral student in religious studies as well as a Buddhist practitioner. Furthermore, my multifaceted engagement with others unveils a diversity of roles, including, but not limited to, being a community member, researcher, ethnographer, event manager, authority or apprentice in Buddhism, consultant, gatekeeper, listener, empathizer, confidante, volunteer, guest presenter, a wife, someone perceived as fortunate, and a young professional. These personas fluidly intertwine, sometimes simultaneously, sometimes separately, as community members engage with the varied dimensions of my identity. However, reflecting on my role as a Buddhist practitioner does not mean limiting my social persona to one aspect but it means being very aware of some blind spots.

It is crucial to recognize that declaring multiplex personas or positionality is not a once-for-all permanent solution for a representation of myself. My understanding of reflexivity in my research further demands me to delve deeper, seeking reciprocal understanding, and reflecting on how misunderstandings are either resolved or contribute to the subjective interpretations and mutual projections in my research. It also involves the discernment, orchestration, and negotiation of these facets of identity during every interaction and decision-making process within the dynamic landscape of the digital realm as can be seen in the next section. This becomes even more salient when engaging with Chinese individuals, for whom *guanxi* ('interpersonal relationships') and *mianzi* ('face", or 'social standing') are deeply embedded cultural values. To gain acceptance and build rapport with Chinese Buddhist communities, especially in digital ethnography, demands that I deftly navigate these sociocultural currents with a measure of tactfulness and sensitivity.

4. Presenting myself as a digital Buddhist researcher rather than a Frenzy Devotee

Crafting a digital identity as an academic Buddhist researcher is itself a form of skillful means. An ethnographic researcher must, as Christine Hine warned: "pay considerable attention to their self-presentation. Establishing one's presence as a bona fide researcher and trustworthy recipient of confidences is not automatic" (2015, p. 20). Gaining acceptance tends to be perhaps sometimes even more difficult in the digital world than offline world, "where a panoply of methods for communication can be used to ingratiate oneself into a community" (Bluteau, 2021: 238). Understandably, some people tend to see or interact with the real person before they build trust and relationships. This requires extra effort and the exercise of caution. In this sense, personal presentation is more essential in the digital world than in the offline world (Bluteau, 2021; Horst, 2009). Throughout my fieldwork, I inadvertently employed a strategy that was described using Crystal Abidin's concept as "visibility labour" — a flexible strategy "enacted to flexibly demonstrate self-conspicuousness" (Abidin, 2016: 90) "in order to win favour among your audience" (Abidin, 2020: 62) through both "physical interaction" and "digital traces" (Abidin, 2020: 60).

This approach was essential in familiarizing my community members and informants to my digital presence and identity, and in establishing a sense of credibility and trust from the outset, which is particularly important in the digital milieu. Because social media such as WeChat, Telegram, and Facebook lack the traditional physical embodiment, in such a setting, visibility entails leaving digital footprints for a potential audience and establishing a trustworthy virtual presence. They were able to evaluate or verify my academic creadibility and social roles, learn more about me through my posts on daily life, or even occasionally discover mutual acquaintances through likes and comments, thus

https://doi.org/10.33621/jdsr.v7i154877

increasing my credibility. My work in visibility labour made it easier for other participants to understand my academic life and research interests, thus distinguishing me as a scholar rather than an apologetic or overly zealous Buddhist devotee. I also regard this as a constant ethical declaration of my research agenda with the community. Furthermore, one of the benefits of showing my status and posts on WeChat to my informants was that this involves deciphering each other's language and skills, evaluating each other's social contexts, balancing statuses, and understanding the spaces that separate us (Abidin, 2020). The aim was to mutually benefit from the social capital and foster "relational care", as Abidin noted (2020: 73).

Besides, a certain degree of visibility allows me to create a "cohabitation" status (Bluteau, 2021) with the community members where I can experience what they are experiencing. Joshua Bluteau further (2021: 268) acutely pointed out that "developing a digital self as a tool through which to access and research the digital field site is powerful. The beauty of this method lies in its dual function as both an access point and a research tool, but by engaging in the same activities as one's informants, a degree of reflexivity can be brought to bear. Furthermore, it is "possible to gain an understanding of the habitus of one's informants and even to cultivate a shared understanding of said habitus if the process of crafting the digital self is sufficiently immersive over a long enough period of time" (Bluteau, 2021: 272). I argue that this "visibility labour" is critically important in building rapport with a small Buddhist group characterized by a greater degree of personal intimacy and transparency who are setting clear boundaries for outsiders and insiders.

The intersection of the "field" with my private life presented a delicate balancing act which entails substantial "behind-the-scenes labor" (Abidin, 2020) - because social media, such as WeChat, is both my fieldwork sites when it comes to the Buddhist groups researched, and my personal communication channel with friends and family. This labour involved making critical decisions regarding how to craft and present my visibility because this visibility is a double-edged sword. While it could foster a sense of relatability and connection, it was vital to exercise caution regarding the non-Buddhism-related aspects of my life that I chose to share with the Buddhist groups and their members. I was mindful that my posts have the potential to elicit a range of reactions from my informants – from resonance and intimacy to skepticism and hindrance. This, in turn, could have potential ramifications on my fieldwork or interviews. Furthermore, scholars have found that the personal and professional entanglement via social media and its intrusion into researcher's personal lives has become a prominent challenge in the realm of social media research (Zayed,2021: 56; Dodds, 2019: 733; Käihkö, 2020: 85). This was also true in my case. For example, the visibility and easy accessibility of social media (during and post fieldwork) sometimes became tricky when I needed to distance myself from the community. Various community members could easily reach out to me through direct messages or video calls, inviting me to unintended socialization, group activities, or volunteering opportunities, often interrupting my personal time. They knew I would check WeChat, and it felt unethical to pretend I wasn't. This became even more frustrating when I was occupied with conferences, thesis chapters, or home-calling my family through WeChat video. It was also not easy to say no to them, as they saw me more as a community member than an academic researcher. To address this, I posted a message on WeChat Moments stating that I was in a writing retreat or busy researching to alert participants to my limited availability.

Striking the right balance in visibility is thus crucial in managing perceptions and maintaining the integrity and effectiveness of the research process. Navigating the terrain of visibility during my fieldwork entailed meticulous management, particularly, in discerning "when to display and conceal visibility, and what types of visibility were appropriate for specific contexts" (Abidin, 2020, p. 62). This required an ongoing, thoughtful calibration to ensure that my presence was visible to my informants without becoming either "too much or too little" (*ibid*.). One of the complexities arose from the nature of the "digital field" being not only a platform for academic "showcasing" but also a window into my private life. For example, I actively used social media platforms like WeChat and Facebook, to share posts concerning both my scholarly pursuits and personal life events such as trips to Quebec City. In these cases, the insider-outsider roles are contextually defined and reciprocally constructed by both me and my

https://doi.org/10.33621/jdsr.v7i154877

participants. This is reflected in the way I judiciously decided which aspects of my posts should be seen by informants and co-participants, necessitating careful profile management and the use of WeChat's "hiding from certain contacts" feature to conceal posts like non-vegan dining, fishing activities and my lesbian marriage, which some Buddhists might frown upon and to show posts I presume they would accept or get interested in. Generally, I tended to share content related to Buddhism when I want to foster a sense of kinship with the Buddhist communities, perceiving them as insiders. Alternatively, there were instances when I consciously chose to project an air of distance by portraying myself as more of an outsider, maintaining a degree of separation and not sharing any Buddhist content.

To ultimately ensure that my selective visibility did not compromise the integrity of my research, I was not only being transparent, both online and offline, about my dual role as a researcher and a practitioner of Buddhism, but most importantly, I also avoided influencing the dynamics of the group or the natural behaviours of the community members by refraining from making any remarks or comments on the community and individuals being researched. My digital visibility (e.g., engaging on WeChat by posting updates, liking and commenting on others' posts, and sharing links, videos, photos, and personal reflections) was nothing more than showcasing my personal and academic Buddhist experiences and general understanding of Buddhism, no different from any average active participant I observed. After all, in the digital world, being seen is essential to soliciting acceptance and understanding. Making selective visibility alone, however, is insufficient for fully engaging with Chinese digital Buddhist practitioners on a deeper level, as it also requires recognition and respect from the community members. Therefore, I constantly drew on the spirit of skillful means rooted in Buddhist compassion, to reflect on my level of visibility and participation. This allowed me to ensure a balanced approach between maintaining research integrity and having collaboration with the research communities through my own expertise, which I will discuss next.

5. Establishing a Buddhist-researcher-voice on WeChat

In the digital landscape, social media currency refers to frequently manifests as social capital, encompassing knowledge and expertise, rather than tangible wealth (Abidin, 2020). Consequently, it becomes increasingly important to establish one's expertise on digital platforms. Cui's (2015) research on an online Chinese translation community highlighted that an individual's initial standing within such a community is heavily influenced by their domain-specific expertise and interpersonal skills, rather than the duration of their membership.

For them, there is a distinction between intellectual understanding and "genuine" spiritual practice and the embodiment of Buddhist principles in daily life. Also, members' considerations go beyond mere Buddhist knowledge; they take into consideration facets such as personal life, familial ties, and insights shared through communication channels, such as WeChat. These diverse elements enable them to assess the degree to which a newcomer resonates with the community's ethos, thereby influencing their level of interaction. Engagement with Chinese Buddhists requires not only proficient interpersonal skills but also a distinct sensitivity and insight for the nuances of Chinese culture. Furthermore, it demands a unique understanding of the emotional and life experiences of Chinese immigrants. Apart from utilizing sensitivity and a degree of personal experience to all these factors, as an anthropological researcher seeking acceptance in this setting, it was vital for me to strike a balance by demonstrating a blend of academic rigour and genuine insights into Buddhist teachings, all the while exercising restraint in not imposing my viewpoints. This was particularly salient in interactions with those deeply engaged in intellectual discourse on Buddhism. Therefore, it was imperative that I meticulously craft a digital persona intertwining my academic pursuits – with an emphasis on my interest in academic studies of Buddhism as well as a robust foundation in Buddhist scholarship and practice. Additionally, revealing myself as a compassionate, thoughtful, and culturally integrated Chinese immigrant woman added a layer of relatability. For instance, I often shared photos of myself participating in Buddhist events at different

https://doi.org/10.33621/jdsr.v7i154877

temples, such as attending Buddhist weddings, volunteering at the temple by welcoming Quebecois visitors during vegetarian food sales or engaging in sutra copying activities. These posts oftentimes received a substantial number of likes and comments from my Buddhist cohorts on my WeChat. Again, this strategy does not aim to change the dynamics of the group and thus distort the research results, but to earn respect and recognition.

Engaging with certain individuals, particularly those who attempt to establish social connections through engaging in discussions about Buddhism and treating the depth of understanding as a mark of distinction, required a careful positioning strategy. It was vital to eliminate any misconceptions that might categorize me as a novice in Buddhism, and therefore, deemed unworthy of interaction. To accomplish this, I took on a proactive role in showcasing my personal reflections on Buddhist ideas and my academic research about Buddhism on WeChat via posts. This strategy was not merely an exercise in increasing my visibility, but a calculated move to build influence and establish a presence within the community, fostering more egalitarian interactions with its members. These efforts varied in nature, ranging from delivering guest presentations to large communities to assuming the role of an event organizer for an offline new member reception gala.

Conversely, during intense or controversial discussions where I was expected to take sides as a group member, I deliberately neutralized my opinions, emphasizing my academic positionality or outsider identity. This approach was strategically employed to avoid aligning "too closely with the beliefs of those whom one studies" (Hine, 2015: 130), as Hine (2015:130) asserts, "insider knowledge is not necessarily an advantage for an ethnographer". At times, I deliberately "mask my power" as a researcher, as I refrained from imposing an academic interpretation on the issue being discussed (Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 2013: 252). This approach helped create critical distance to circumvent potential tension. It was critical that I did not give the impression of challenging their religious views, contesting consensus interpretations of certain sutras among my co-participants, or competing for attention with those who were prolific in posting their own Dharma-related opinions on social media. This was not about limiting my voice, but rather about creating a comfortable environment conducive to ongoing participation and interaction – a goal that cannot easily be achieved. In this regard, my role constantly evolved and required careful negotiation and adaptation, based on the dynamics of each situation. Reflecting on this, my positionality within these online communities could be best described as one of "in-betweenness", oscillating between the insider-outsider spectrum as the contexts demanded, but this positionality is based on the constant reflexivity, ensuring that I do not *over-anticipate* the context's need and try to emanate a persona as a product of anticipation and projection.

Establishing a scholarly voice within Chinese Buddhist communities is frequently interwoven with high visibility, which in turn tends to precipitate invitations for offline volunteering work. Throughout my fieldwork, participation in such volunteer activities demonstrated itself as a fascinating strategy for fostering and nurturing relationships with community members within real-world contexts. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that the process of cultivating such a clear voice and presence within the community does not come without its challenges. The community held a plethora of expectations from me, which often surpassed what I was able to fulfill. I was often struggling to say no to volunteers and this caused many anxieties. My anxieties stemmed from a range of issues including the potential for exclusion, the loss of invaluable informants, and the prospects of becoming the focus of unfavourable community gossip regarding my reluctance in involving in their activities.

Another layer of complexity was added by the dual roles I played in the field. For example, when participating in a Tibetan Buddhist community, I consciously refrained from immersing myself too deeply in their publicity campaign agenda of "supporting the guru's dharma propagation cause as a loyal devotee" as they claimed, where they highly value my professionalism in Buddhism. This was because the level of engagement started to verge on becoming "uncomfortably too close for an ethnographer", as Hine (2015: 131) points out. My reservation was grounded in the need to maintain the priority of an independent perspective as a researcher, rather than assuming the role of an advocate for a particular master or

https://doi.org/10.33621/jdsr.v7i154877

Rinpoche, especially even from an insider perspective, I had not taken refuge or pledged my loyalty to any specific Buddhist monastic. Upholding independence as a researcher was paramount. This required a careful and balanced approach, which is deeply informed by academic integrity and Buddhist skillful means.

6. Caveats of being an academic Buddhist practitioner

Skillful means can be highly useful in navigating pitfalls when my academic identity falls short of community expectations. During my fieldwork, my academic identity, while being a conduit for acceptance, often invited projections and blind endorsements. Community members, perceiving me as an insider academic Buddhist researcher, expected me to bring an in-depth insider understanding of Buddhist knowledge, as they presumed that my academic training granted me deeper insights into the Buddhist doctrines than they possessed. However, it is crucial to acknowledge the limitations of academic background in decoding the intricacies of rituals or doctrines specific to certain Buddhist sects. But this should be done in a very tactful avoiding a direct admission of "I don't know" and this is not simply because I was fearing of not living up to their expectation or hurting my intellectual ego. According to Peter C King and Wei Zhang (2018), the act of preserving one's face is closely associated with maintaining cognitive and affective trust and maintaining good rapport in the Chinese context. The endorsement and appreciation they gave me as a community member are considered as granting me face, or trust, believing I could handle the issues beyond their capacity. Nevertheless, if at this moment I straightforwardly let them down by saying "I don't know", it would highly possibly be considered a rude response and potentially harm the affective trust they have in me. For instance, the Nyingma sect's mandala rituals are complex and not easily understood or engaged with through video. When my understanding fell short, I sometimes resorted to online resources to swiftly comprehend the discussion at hand and provide an informed response when the community members asked me to decode it. Meanwhile, I consistently reminded them that my knowledge in certain areas, such as the mandala ritual, might be less advanced than theirs, as they are adept practitioners. I emphasized that I was still in the process of learning.

Recognizing the need for humility and learning, I adopted the "willing apprentice strategy" (Abidin, 2020) during my fieldwork, acknowledging the limitations of academic training and fostering an atmosphere of mutual learning, which not only facilitated my integration into the community but also created a foundation for trust, honesty, and sincerity, thereby enriching exchange of knowledge and experiences. This approach was particularly effective when interacting with community members who were regarded or considered themselves as adept in expounding Buddhism. Demonstrating humility demystified any preconceived notions of me as an all-knowing scholar, a perception that may have arisen from their awareness of my status as a Buddhist academic. It mitigated defensive attitudes, as some might fear the loss of their authority in the presence of an academic outsider. From the onset, I communicated transparently, dispelling any presumptions that I was omniscient in matters of Buddhism. I expressed my earnest desire to learn from the community, acknowledging that they held a repository of knowledge and experiential insights that might elude me and that I very much would like to learn from them. This genuine humility garnered trust and goodwill. It was reinforced when I sought their guidance in practical matters, such as selecting the best edition for sutra chanting or inquiring about the appropriate digital manuals for Buddhist funeral rituals from online resources.

7. Conclusion: Using skilful means in studying digital religious diasporic communities

In this article, I examined how I utilize a model of Buddhist skillful means to study Chinese Buddhist practitioners converged on digital platforms from multiple regional and cultural socioeconomic backgrounds. This model is afforded by digital possibilities and ethnographic reflexivity to constantly

https://doi.org/10.33621/jdsr.v7i154877

navigate, negotiate, and devise new strategies for pinpointing the digital field sites and conducting participant observation.

I highlighted the digital affordances one could leverage as both a researcher and practitioner to actively build visibility and researcher voices in the researched community, which helps to facilitate rapport and fieldwork. Nevertheless, I also pointed out the caveats and pitfalls this approach can bring. My experience with researching these Chinese digital groups told me that digital fieldwork with these Chinese diasporic communities goes beyond the traditional style of ethnographer or anthropologist, which emphasizes "being there" and presenting as what you are, refraining from interfering with the field. Instead, it demands situational reflexivity, skillful positioning, active or silent engagement, and proficiency in the norms of the Chinese social value system, such as *mianzi* (face). This requires establishing a certain level of reputation, digital visibility, and a voice of expertise, as I illustrated in the article. Being a Chinese immigrant as they are, automatically means there is something expected from me but might not apply to a Western anthropologist working in a Chinese community. Accordingly, it is important to recognize that it is the digital platform that brings many possibilities in this respect.

It should be recognized that the preference for digital platforms is also distinct between Chinese diasporas from different regions and cultural backgrounds. WeChat is more often heavily used by mainland Chinese and Facebook and Line are favoured by Taiwanese and Cantonese when it comes to functionality of individual, and group messaging and sharing posts. When approaching the digital field in the West, a common misassumption for many Western scholars is that Western social media such as Twitter and Facebook dominate all online immigrant communities in the West. In reality, in addition to dwelling on Western social media, many Chinese immigrants spend most of their time on their own version of YouTube and Facebook such as WeChat for more in-depth communications regarding their faith and for carrying out Buddhist practices. More often, Western social media only functions as an auxiliary digital platform for periodically streaming collective public Buddhist ceremonies and promoting the community to the local society.

Since it launched in 2011, WeChat has become one of the largest standalone apps and an indispensable digital tool and digital "infrastructure" in the daily lives of Chinese people (Plantin & De Seta, 2019) with one billion monthly active users as of 2018. WeChat's perceivable benefits with respect to its cultural affinity, multi-integrated functionality, and embeddedness and pervasiveness inbuilt into the daily lives of mainland and diasporic Chinese make WeChat outstanding among many digital social media platforms. It has become so integral that it "has become increasingly hard to live in China without a WeChat account" (Plantin & De Seta, 2019:262). Scholars argue that overseas diasporic Chinese also heavily rely on WeChat for community, networking, economic purposes, and maintaining relationships with family and friends in China (Zhang et al., 2022). Therefore, WeChat has emerged as an essential digital ethnographic field for researching Chinese religious diasporic communities, or even common Chinese individuals and groups. Its significance was highlighted when it was even elevated as an emerging research method, in the conference solely dedicated to "WeChat Ethnography" held by the University of Geneve in 2022 and 2023.

I thus strongly urge researchers to consider WeChat as a primary digital social media platform, a new methodological tool and a novel digital field, on par with Facebook and Twitter, when studying mainland Chinese communities and Chinese diasporas. Despite this, it should be equally noted that researchers on digital religious communities on WeChat are facing increased digital censorship from the Chinese government, particularly targeting online religious communities in China by identifying and supressing religiously sensitive content posted. As a result, some Chinese Tibetan Buddhist groups were forced to migrate to niche platforms such as WhatsApp and Telegram due to explicit political concerns. This makes these vulnerable religious groups more fearful and even less accessible, thus rendering ethnographic work with them extremely difficult. Additionally, multi-sited digital fields involving various Buddhist communities introduced an overloaded fragmented and ephemeral posts, messages images, videos, and

https://doi.org/10.33621/jdsr.v7i154877

links, creating unique challenges distinct from traditional ethnography and demanding continuous attention on these platforms to avoid missing important information.

As digital ethnography expands to more digital religious communities, particularly those involving non-Western religious traditions such as Buddhism, I argue that it is imperative for future researchers to cultivate the capacity to adapt to an ever-evolving digital environment that increasingly shapes human interaction. We should develop a model that accommodates specific religious beliefs, practices, and sociocultural norms that are considered conventional in their communities, informed by a specific cultural-religious context and supported by specific digital infrastructures and platforms. Recognizing this diversity is important because the current framework of digital religion, particularly digital Buddhism, is primarily shaped by Western religious traditions such as Christianity, as well as Western academic paradigms, and it significantly lacks non-Western methodological voices and conceptual tools. As I remarked in the opening, even though many new data and themes have emerged in scholarly literature in the context of Asian countries such as China, the methodological approach still misses deep reflections and adaptable adjustments. To quickly grasp the intersection of digital space and religion, innovation in methodological approaches is of the utmost importance.

Taking the example of the skillful means model I suggested in this article, Buddhist skillful means entails capitalizing on the very digital possibilities that the virtual space affords and tactfully dealing with the situationally arising challenges and pitfalls presented by the digital fieldwork. I hold that the Buddhist skillful means, being creative and adaptable to various contexts and nuances, are essential for navigating positionality and understanding the dynamics faced upon entering the digital field, both in the roles of a researcher and as a fellow practitioner of the same faith. The very model I employed contains some practical steps or tips for future researchers to follow, including incorporating the digital field and particular digital platform into research methods, using religious-informed reflexivity and cultural sensitivity, as well as acknowledging the researcher-participant interaction dynamics that are unique to the digital platform. This further entails using visibility and the researcher's voice to solicit acceptance, earn recognition and deepen mutual understanding and level of engagement. Furthermore, I would like to add that since my ethnographic approach entails balancing the roles of researcher and participant, as well as maintaining reflexivity within these online communities, this practice of balancing is in nature deeply grounded in the Buddhist concept of the "Middle Path," a well-known Buddhist principle that emphasizes finding an intermediate position between extremes in every doctrine, attitude, aspect of daily life, or method of the Dharma. It is also a way of life that seeks moderation and balance among opposing forces. For instance, just as the Middle Path seeks to avoid extremes, my methodological approach avoided over-identification with any of the community members' doctrinal preferences, even when I personally agreed with them, as well as avoiding excessive detachment from those with whom I could not resonate at all. Insights as such not only guided my reflexivity but also informed my ethical engagement with participants, ensuring that my digital participation was comfortable and consistent to my co-practitioners.

The benefit of this model also lies in its ability to generate richer, thicker data through deeper levels of engagement, a full acknowledgment of the multiplicity of the researcher's identity, and the facilitation of collaboration and ethical engagement with the researched community. Active digital trust-building, visibility, and persona crafting also allow me to gain entry into and study digitally less accessible communities. However, challenges often arise when researchers make themselves digitally visible, which can easily attract uninvited disturbances or make it difficult to manage community expectations due to the disclosure of their expertise. Digital ethnographers studying digital religious communities must also be constantly mindful of ethical practices during data collection to maintain data privacy, comply with platform restrictions, and build rapport and trust, especially with religiously and politically vulnerable communities.

On a final note, I am not advocating for a single set of methodological tools or frameworks to be applied universally across all cultural and religious contexts. Instead, I encourage researchers working

https://doi.org/10.33621/jdsr.v7i154877

with diverse religious and cultural traditions to embrace their own model of "skillful means," much like how the Buddha taught people of various geographical, sociocultural, and religious backgrounds in his time.

Acknowledgements

The author expresses deep gratitude to the two anonymous reviewers for their invaluable insights and thoughtful revision suggestions, which have greatly enhanced this paper. Sincere appreciation also goes to Leizia Chiara, Roxanne Marcotte, and Jeff Wilson for their guidance throughout the development of this article. A special thanks to my wife, Jinyu Jiao, for her generous support in formatting the paper.

References

Abidin,C. (2016) Visibility labour: Engaging with influencers' fashion brands and #OOTD advertorial campaigns on Instagram. *Media International Australia*, 161(1), pp. 86–100.

Barbosa,S., and Milan, S. (2019) Do not harm in private chat apps: Ethical issues for research on and with WhatsApp. Westminster Papers in *Communication and Culture*, 14(1), pp. 49–65.

Bluteau, J. M. (2021) Legitimising digital anthropology through immersive cohabitation: Becoming an observing participant in a blended digital landscape. *Ethnography*, 22(2), 267–285.

Boellstorff, T., Nardi, B., Pearce,C., et al. (2012) Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: *A Handbook of Method*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Campbell. H.A. (2012) Understanding the relationship between religion online and offline in a networked society. J*ournal of the American Academy of Religion*, 80(1), 64–93.

Campbell, H. A. (2013b). Community. In H. A. Campbell (Ed.), *Digital religion: Understanding religious practice in new media worlds* (pp. 57-71). London; New York: Routledge.

Campbell, H. A. (Ed.). (2013a). *Digital religion: Understanding religious practice in new media worlds*. London; New York: Routledge.

Cera, M. (2023) Digital ethnography: Ethics through the case of Qanon. *Frontiers in Sociology*, 8, 1119531. https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2023.1119531

Cui, K. (2015) The insider–outsider role of a Chinese researcher doing fieldwork in China: The implications of cultural context. *Qualitative Social Work*, 14(3), 356–369.

De Seta, G. (2020) Three lies of digital ethnography. *Journal of Digital Social Research*, 2(1), 77–97.

Dodds,T. (2019) Reporting with WhatsApp: Mobile chat applications' impact on journalistic practices. D*igital Journalism*, 7(6), 725–745.

Gómez, Cruz. E. (2016) Photo-genic assemblages: Photography as a connective interface. In: Gomez Cruz E and Lehmuskallio A (eds.) *Digital Photography in Everyday Life. Empirical Studies on Visual Material Practice*s. London: Routledge, pp. 228-242

Grieve. G.P. (2017) *Cyber Zen: Imagining authentic Buddhist identity, community, and practices in the virtual world of Second life*. New York (N.Y.): Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Grieve, G. P. (2017). *Cyber Zen: Imagining authentic Buddhist identity, community, and practices in the virtual world of Second Life. London*; New York: Routledge.

Grieve, G. P., & Veidlinger, D. (Eds.). (2018). *Buddhism, the internet, and digital media: The pixel in the lotus.* New York, NY: Routledge.

Han, X. (2022). Digital merit: A case study of a Chinese Buddhist meditation group on WeChat during the early outbreak of COVID-19 in China. *Journal of Media and Religion*, 21(4), 175-192.

Hine.C. (2015) *Ethnography for the Internet: Embedded, Embodied and Everyday*. London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Hine, C. (2016) From virtual ethnography to the embedded, embodied, everyday internet. In Hjorth L, Horst HA, Galloway A and Bell G (Eds.) *The Routledge Companion to Digital Ethnography*. New York: Routledge, pp.21-28.

Hine, C. (2017a) Ethnography and the internet: Taking account of emerging technological landscapes. *Fudan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences*, 10(3), 315–329.

Horst,H.A. (2009) Aesthetics of the self: digital mediations. In: Miller D (Ed.). *Anthropology and the Individual: A Material Culture Perspective* (pp. 99–114). London: Bloomsbury Academic. Retrieved July 9, 2023, from http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781474214193.ch-007

Huang, W. (2017). WeChat together about Buddha: The construction of sacred space and religious community in Shanghai through social media. In S. Travagnin (Ed.), *Religion and media in China: Insights and case studies from the mainland, Taiwan and Hong Kong* (pp. 110–128). London: Routledge.

Irons, E. (2021) 'Chryssides, George D. and Stephen E. Gregg (EDS) 2019. The Insider/Outsider Debate: New Perspectives in the study of religion.', *Fieldwork in Religion*, 16(1). doi:10.1558/firn.20193.

Käihkö, I. (2020) Conflict chatnography: Instant messaging apps, social media and conflict ethnography in Ukraine. *Ethnography*, 21(1), 71-91.

Katie, A. , Cornish, H., and Joyce, A. (2015) Plotting belonging: Interrogating insider and outsider status in faith research. *DISKUS,* 17(1). https://doi.org/10.18792/diskus.v17i1.61

King, P.C. and Wei, Z. (2018) The role of face in a Chinese context of trust and trust building, I*nternational Journal of Cross Cultural Management*, 18(2), 149-173. https://doi.org/10.1177/1470595818767207

Knott, K. (2010) Insider/outsider perspectives in the study of religions. In Hinnells J (Ed.), *The Routledge companion to the study of religion* (pp. 259-273).2nd Ed.

Labaree, R.V. (2002) The risk of 'going observationalist': Negotiating the hidden dilemmas of being an insider participant observer. *Qualitative Research*, 2(1), 97–122. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794102002001641

Liu, R-F. (2022) Hybrid ethnography: Access, positioning, and data assembly. *Ethnography*, 146613812211454. https://doi.org/10.1177/14661381221145451

Merton, R.K. (1972) Insiders and outsiders: A chapter in the sociology of knowledge. *American Journal of Sociology* 78(1), pp. 9–47.

Myerhoff, B., and Ruby, J. (1982) Introduction. In:Ruby J (Ed.), *A crack in the mirror: Reflexive perspectives in anthropology* (pp. 1–36). University of Pennsylvania Press. http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv5137jf.5

Nairn, K., Showden, C.R., Sligo, J., et al. (2020) Consent requires a relationship: Rethinking group consent and its timing in ethnographic research. I*nternational Journal of Social Research Methodology* 23(6): 719–731.

Roberts, L.D. (2015) Ethical issues in conducting qualitative research in online communities. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 12(3), 314–325. https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2015.1008909

Sang, Y. (2021). The power of compassion: The Buddhist approach to COVID-19. In J. Golley, L. Jaivin, & S. Strange (Eds.), *China's yearbook: Crisis* (pp. 1-30). Canberra: ANU Press.

Shmushko, K. (2021). On face masks as Buddhist merit: Buddhist responses to COVID-19. A case study of Tibetan Buddhism in Shanghai. *Journal of Global Buddhism*, 22(1), 235–244.

Shmushko, K. (2023). Digital footprints of Buddhism in Chinese-speaking cyberspace: Ethnography, developments, and challenges. *Asiascape: Digital Asia*, 10(1–2), 53–73.

Tarocco, F. (2017). Technologies of salvation: (Re)Locating Chinese Buddhism in the digital age. *Journal of Global Buddhism*, 18, 158.

Travagnin, S. (2019). Cyberactivities and civilized worship. In Z. Ji, G. Fisher, & A. Laliberté (Eds.), *Buddhism after Mao: Negotiations, continuities, and reinventions* (pp. 290–311). Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press.

Travagnin, S. (2020). From online Buddha halls to robot-monks: New developments in the long-term interaction between Buddhism, media, and technology in contemporary China. *Review of Religion and Chinese Society*, 7, 120–148.

Tseng, A. A. (2020). Mahayana Buddhists' responses to COVID-19 pandemic. In A. A. Tseng (Ed.), *Exploring the life and teachings of Mahayana Buddhists in Asia* (pp. 1-30). New York: Nova Science.

Wilkinson, S.,and Kitzinger, C. (2013) Representing our own experience: Issues in "insider" research. *Psychology of Women Quarterly,* 37(2), 251–255. https://doi.org/10.1177/0361684313483111

Wilson, J. (2020, July 8). Global roundup of Buddhist responses to COVID-19. Paper presented at the Jivaka Project Webinar. Retrieved from http://www.jivaka.net/buddhism-in-the-pandemic-video-materials

Yu, C. (2020) Insider, outsider or multiplex persona? Confessions of a digital ethnographer's journey in *Translation Studies. Journal of Specialised Translation*, 34, 9-31.

Zayed, H. (2021) Researching digital sociality: using WhatsApp to study educational change. *Journal of Digital Social Research* 3(2). https://doi.org/10.33621/jdsr.v3i2.80

Zhang, Y. (2017). Digital religion in China: A comparative perspective on Buddhism and Christianity's online publics in Sina Weibo. *Journal of Religion, Media and Digital Culture*, 6(1), 44–67.

