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FORMATION OF RELIGIOUS IDENTITY IN THE DIGITAL ECOSYSTEM WITHIN THE CHINESE CULTURAL WORLD

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Abstract. Religion in the Chinese cultural sphere has long functioned as an everyday grammar of conduct and a public archive of shared meanings, while digitalization has entered this landscape as both a solvent and a binder, loosening inherited patterns of ritual mediation even as it knits dispersed publics into new communities of practice. This article advances a theoretically grounded and empirically informed analysis of how digital infrastructures recompose religious life in contemporary China by reshaping practice, authority, and identity under conditions of platform governance and state regulation. Building on regional scholarship in digital religion and on studies that document the Chinese case across institutional, organizational, and public communication levels, the article proposes a triadic framework that links platform affordances, governance regimes, and traditions of moral cultivation as co-determinants of online religious forms, and it operates this framework through an applied protocol that can be used by researchers and religious organizations to audit and improve digital presence in ways that are both effective and compliant. By synthesizing insights on virtual temples, online pilgrimage, streamed sermons, and the algorithmic circulation of ritual content with documented patterns of organizational strategy and public engagement, the study shows that digitalization does not merely transfer religiosity to a new venue; it reorganizes visibility, temporality, and communal belonging, and it does so within a Chinese internet ecology that is simultaneously innovative and regulated. The article concludes that future trajectories will depend on negotiated balances among technological innovation, regulatory guidance, and the resilient creativity of believers, and that these balances will be worked out in the hybrid spaces where incense and interface mingle.

Keywords: culture, religion, cultural mediation, internet, digitalization, identity, values

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ФОРМИРОВАНИЕ РЕЛИГИОЗНОЙ ИДЕНТИЧНОСТИ В ЦИФРОВОЙ ЭКОСИСТЕМЕ КИТАЙСКОЙ КУЛЬТУРЫ

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Аннотация. В китайском культурном пространстве религия давно задает «грамматику» повседневного поведения и служит общим архивом смыслов. Приход цифровых технологий действует двояко: ослабляет часть наследованных ритуальных посредников и одновременно соединяет разобщенные публики в новые сообщества практики. В статье предлагается теоретически выстроенный и эмпирически информированный анализ того, как цифровая инфраструктура перестраивает религиозную жизнь в современном Китае, трансформируя практики, авторитет и идентичность в условиях платформенного управления и государственной регуляции. На основе региональных исследований цифровой религии и работ, описывающих китайский материал на институциональном, организационном и публично-коммуникативном уровнях, формулируется трехчастная концептуальная схема, связывающая возможности платформ, режимы управления и традиции морального воспитания в качестве определяющих и взаимозависимых факторов онлайн-религиозных форм. Эта схема реализуется в виде прикладного протокола, пригодного для аудита и улучшения цифрового присутствия исследователями и религиозными организациями. Синтезируя наблюдения о виртуальных храмах, онлайн-паломничествах, стриминговых проповедях и алгоритмической циркуляции ритуального контента с описанными стратегиями организаций и паттернами вовлеченности, исследование показывает, что цифровизация не просто переносит религиозность в новый медиум, но переустраивает поля видимости, временные режимы и формы общинной принадлежности в рамках китайской цифровой среды. Итоговый тезис состоит в том, что будущие траектории зависят от сонастройки технологических новшеств, регуляторной поддержки и устойчивого творчества общин. Такая сонастройка будет происходить в смешанных пространствах, где ритуал соседствует с интерфейсом, а культурная память развивается параллельно с кодом.

Ключевые слова: культура, религия, культурное посредничество, интернет, цифровизация, идентичность, ценности

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Introduction

To speak of the “Chinese world” is to name not merely a geography but a civilizational weave in which ancestral reverence, moral cultivation, and communal obligation are bound together through rituals of memory and disciplines of conduct, and it is within this textured weave that the digital has begun to stitch new seams whose presence can be felt in rhythms of daily devotion and the timbre of public speech.

This study argues that digitalization in China has not only expanded access to sermons, scriptures, and sites, but has reshaped the conditions of religious life by redirecting attention, reorganizing authority, and recombining identities under platform affordances and governance. The claim rests on two simple observations that carry wide implications. The first observation is that Chinese religiosity has long been plural, layered, and pragmatic, such that Buddhist cultivation, Daoist alignment, Confucian ritual propriety, Islamic devotion, Christian liturgy, and a myriad of local cults can coexist in complementary fashion within single biographies and communities, with complementarity rather than exclusivity operating as the ordinary logic of belonging [6].

The second observation is that the expansion of digital infrastructures across the Chinese internet has multiplied the channels through which such plural practice can be represented, coordinated, instructed, and debated, and that this multiplication, while enabling new forms of access and preservation, has also rendered authority visible and contestable in publicity arenas that are structured by algorithms, metrics, and moderation [7; 8; 10].

From this vantage point, the meeting of incense and interface is not a simple juxtaposition of old and new, because the medium alters the message by altering its circulation and reception, and because state recognition and regulation inflect the translation of offline practices into online forms in ways that are distinctive of the Chinese case [8; 10]. The purpose of the present article is to move beyond descriptive inventories of virtual temples or streamed sermons toward an analysis that is simultaneously scientific in its conceptual clarity and applied in its practical utility, and to do so by grounding claims in an existing body of scholarship that has mapped digital religion in Asia and documented online publics, organizational strategies, and regulatory regimes in mainland China [9].

The contribution is threefold. The article first assembles a literature-based account of how

digitalization intersects with long-standing patterns of Chinese religiosity, drawing on historical and cultural studies to establish a baseline of practice and value [2; 6]. The article then articulates a triadic framework that foregrounds the interaction of platform affordances, governance regimes, and moral traditions, and it specifies operational indicators that make the framework testable and useful. The article finally demonstrates the analytic payoff of this framework through close readings of documented cases and through a normative protocol designed to help organizations align digital presence with pedagogical, ethical, and regulatory aims [8]. The writing adopts a flowing style to honor the integrative nature of the subject while maintaining the argumentative discipline of academic analysis, since the topic itself requires a prose that can accommodate complexity without sacrificing rigor.

Related research and conceptual background

The Asian region has supplied a generative stage for the mutual shaping of religion and digital culture, and within this region China has presented a case that is at once exemplary and singular because of its robust platform ecosystem and its distinctive architecture of state recognition and guidance [7]. Studies in digital religion have argued that the online is not only a repository of content but a field of practice where ritual is enacted, authority is negotiated, and identity is curated, and that the critical unit of analysis therefore shifts from “transfer” to “transformation,” since the conditions of visibility, interactivity, and archiving change what counts as authoritative and how belonging is forged [3].

Within the Chinese context, survey and case-study work has charted the adoption of websites, microblogs, and streaming channels by religious organizations, the emergence of online publics around Buddhist and Christian content, and the navigation of policies that regulate proselytization, youth access, and cross-border coordination [8].

This body of work supports two theoretically relevant claims. The first claim is that institutional actors in China have integrated digital tools not as an afterthought but as part of deliberate strategies to teach, coordinate, and represent civic contribution, thereby aligning online presence with public service and cultural heritage in forms that are legible to adherents and regulators alike [8; 9]. The second claim is that public communication about religion on platforms such as microblogs produces differentiated audiences and discourses across traditions, revealing both shared

tactics of engagement and distinctive patterns of rhetoric and attention that reflect doctrinal emphases and community histories [10].

To situate these dynamics within the *longue durée*, one recalls that Chinese religiosity is marked by a pluralism of practice and a pedagogy of virtue that embed moral cultivation within family, community, and state, and that the authority of religion has never been purely interior because ritualized conduct and shared memory have always given doctrine a public body [2]. Digitalization thus arrives not as an alien imposition but as another medium of mediation in a history that already includes script, print, image, sound, and architecture, with the novelty lying in speed, scale, and interactivity rather than in the mere fact of transmission [7].

The conceptual move this article makes is to construe digitalization as mediatization under governance, because platforms structure affordances and audience expectations through design and algorithmic curation, while the state structures the permissible range of expression and organization through recognition and regulation, and both structures meet a living tradition that supplies content, norms, and aims [3]. The interaction of these elements, rather than any single one of them, explains the observed forms of online religion in China and suggests where pressures and opportunities will likely appear.

Theoretical Framework.

The analytical framework proposed here rests on a threefold alignment that treats platform affordances, governance regimes, and traditions of moral cultivation as co-constitutive determinants of online religious life in China, and it insists on examining their interaction rather than isolating them in turn. Platform affordances encompass the pathways by which content is created, found, engaged, and archived, including interface design, recommendation systems, metrics of attention, and modalities of interactivity, and these affordances tilt practice toward forms that privilege shareable fragments, visual immediacy, and measurable engagement, while also enabling sustained learning through serialized lectures and searchable archives [4; 5].

Governance regimes encompass the recognition of religious bodies, licensing and moderation requirements, content guidelines, and the broader orientation toward public order and social harmony, and these regimes condition not only what can be said but how organizations craft self-presentation and allocate resources to digital outreach and compliance [8].

Traditions of moral cultivation encompass doctrinal teachings, ritual repertoires, and ethical aims that have long organized Chinese religious life, with an emphasis on filial piety, community solidarity, personal rectitude, and the alignment of internal disposition with external conduct, and these traditions supply both the content and the evaluative criteria by which digital practices are judged meaningful or deficient [2].

The hypothesis that guides the analysis is that the shape of online religion in China emerges from specific alignments across this triad, such that a high-affordance platform environment combined with stringent governance and a tradition that values communal discipline will produce online forms that emphasize education, charity, and heritage over direct proselytization, while a more permissive platform setting combined with lighter oversight and a tradition that valorizes testimony may yield forms centered on personal narrative and peer-to-peer sharing [7].

The Chinese case, with its domestically anchored platforms and explicit recognition of five religions, presents an alignment in which organizational actors are incentivized to construct public-facing content that showcases civic contribution, doctrinal instruction, and ritual beauty, and to do so in a manner that is responsive to platform metrics yet careful to avoid framings that could be read as disruptive to social harmony [8].

The framework therefore predicts the growth of online classes, archives, and streamed ceremonies as well as the careful curation of comment sections and the integration of charitable reporting, and it predicts a measured embrace of immersive technologies where they can assist preservation and pedagogy without supplanting embodied ritual.

Methodological note and an applied protocol

The argument advanced here relies on interpretive synthesis of published scholarship in digital religion and Chinese religious studies, with particular attention to survey work on online religion in mainland China, organizational case analyses, and comparative studies of platform publics, which together furnish empirical anchor points for the claims made about practice, authority, and identity [7; 8; 9; 10]. In order to translate conceptual insights into practical guidance for religious organizations and researchers, the article articulates an applied auditing protocol that is grounded in the triadic framework and in the classifications of online religious resources proposed in the literature [5].

The protocol proceeds through a set of analytical moves rather than a mechanical checklist, because qualitative judgment remains indispensable when aligning digital forms with doctrinal and ethical aims. The first analytical move is to map digital assets across formats and channels, which includes websites, official accounts on domestic platforms, streaming archives, and digital repositories of texts and chants, and to describe not only their existence but their affordance use, such as navigation clarity, searchability, interactivity, and accessibility, since affordance use determines whether content teaches, gathers, and sustains rather than merely displays [4].

The second analytical move is to identify governance-relevant features, which includes licensing disclosures, visible moderation practices, age-appropriate content gates, and the articulation of civic contribution through reports on charity, environmental stewardship, and cultural preservation, since these features mediate institutional legitimacy and public trust in the Chinese context [8; 9; 10]. The third analytical move is to assess alignment with traditions of moral cultivation, which requires examining whether digital offerings cultivate filial respect, communal solidarity, and personal virtue through sustained instruction and guided practice, or whether they drift toward fragmentary consumption without pedagogical scaffolding, since alignment determines whether digitalization strengthens or thins the moral fabric that religious communities exist to weave [2].

Although the protocol is framed for applied use, it also supplies research variables that can be operationalized for comparative study, including content depth, ritual mediation density, interactivity quality, moderation transparency, and civic presentation intensity, and these variables can be coded across organizations and traditions to test hypotheses about how the triad yields distinctive online ecologies [5].

The present article does not present new primary data but demonstrates how published findings can be reinterpreted through this lens to produce analytic clarity and practical direction.

Virtual ritual, streaming, and archival resources.

The literature documents the emergence of virtual temples that allow visitors to light symbolic incense, inscribe prayers, and make donations through interfaces that render ritual as a sequence of choices and visualizations, and while the tactile density of incense and

wood cannot be fully translated into pixel and sound, the digital form nonetheless permits participation for the distant, the disabled, and the time-constrained, and it does so in a way that can be rendered pedagogically rich when accompanied by explanation of symbolism and guided reflection rather than left as isolated gestures [7; 8].

The streaming of sermons and ceremonies has likewise become an ordinary extension of institutional life, and it changes practice not simply by expanding audience but by making ritual available in time-shifted archives, thereby transforming ephemeral moments into reusable resources that can scaffold lifelong learning, family instruction, and catechetical programs, provided that archives are indexed, contextualized, and curated in a manner that encourages depth rather than distraction [4].

The digitization of scriptures and chants has preserved fragile traditions and permitted comparative study across lineages, and it can facilitate cross-generational transmission when younger audiences encounter the beauty of language and repetition in accessible formats, although here the temptation to fragment the text into quotable aphorisms must be resisted by all who remember that scripture is a school of patience and not only a source of inspirational sentences [4].

The practice of online pilgrimage has grown as a supplement where political constraints, financial limitations, and public health concerns impede travel, and its value lies not only in visual representation but in temporal synchronization, since live streaming of festivals permits dispersed believers to share in communal time even when they cannot share in embodied space, and such synchronization can sustain belonging across distance and difference when organizers cultivate interaction and mutual recognition within the stream [7].

These practices illustrate the general point that digitalization expands reach while challenging depth, and that the decisive question is whether pedagogy adapts with equal ingenuity to the new forms so that the slow work of moral cultivation is not eclipsed by the fast work of circulation.

Authority and identity in a quantified public: metrics, charisma, and the algorithmic liturgies of attention

The migration of religious communication onto platforms that display metrics of attention has altered the ecology of authority by making audience response

visible and comparable, and this visibility can produce virtuous cycles when it rewards diligence in teaching, generosity in service, and clarity in explanation, but it can also tilt attention toward spectacle and simplification when numbers become an end rather than an instrument, and the balance depends on institutional cultures that prize substance over novelty and on moderation policies that foster respectful discussion [8].

The literature shows that charismatic teachers and lay interpreters can gather significant online publics through steady publication and responsive engagement, and that such publics are shaped by platform architectures and cultural expectations that differ across traditions, with studies of microblog discourse revealing both overlaps in moral vocabulary and divergences in style and emphasis between Buddhist and Christian communities.

In this setting identity formation becomes a curatorial act in which individuals assemble practices and teachings from multiple sources, a pattern that resonates with the longstanding Chinese tendency toward complementary belonging while requiring new forms of discernment so that elective combinations remain rooted in coherent paths of cultivation rather than devolving into consumptive eclecticism [2; 5].

If the algorithm can act as an unseen liturgist that guides discovery through patterns inferred from prior clicks and shares, then the crafting of recommendation environments becomes a pastoral responsibility as well as a design challenge, and organizations that value depth can seed sequences of content that move audiences from introductory fragments to sustained study, thereby harnessing the logic of recommendation to the aim of formation rather than allowing it to entrench superficiality [4; 5].

Authority in this environment is neither surrendered nor secure; it is negotiated in public with reference to doctrinal tradition, community recognition, and civic contribution, and this negotiation is healthiest where metrics are interpreted with humility and used to improve pedagogy rather than to substitute for it.

Governance and civility

The Chinese state's recognition of five religions creates a structured field in which institutional actors can pursue digital outreach under conditions that emphasize public order, social harmony, and civic contribution, and within this field the most successful online presences are those that present doctrine and ritual in close association with charitable work, environmental

stewardship, and cultural preservation, thereby aligning institutional identity with the broader project of common good [8; 9; 10].

Survey work documents both the increased sophistication of organizational platforms and the adaptive strategies used to comply with evolving content and youth-access guidelines, and these strategies include clear licensing, moderation practices that promote civility, and the avoidance of polemical framings that could be read as disruptive [8; 9].

Regulation does not merely constrain; it also stabilizes, since predictable expectations allow organizations to invest in archives, classes, and digital infrastructure that would be imprudent in a volatile environment, and the result is an ecology where constructive content flourishes and inflammatory speech is disincentivized, although the line between prudent moderation and excessive caution requires careful judgment and regular recalibration [8; 10].

Risks and responsibilities

The same velocity that grants digitalization its reach also grants misinformation its force, and religious communication is not immune to the hazards of rumor, sensationalism, and unvented authority, which is why media literacy becomes a moral as well as a civic imperative for communities that seek to protect the vulnerable and to preserve the integrity of teaching [1].

The digital divide persists across rural and urban regions, income levels, and generational cohorts, and this divide shapes religious participation by limiting access to online classes, streamed ceremonies, and archives, which in turn can exacerbate inequalities of education and voice within communities unless institutions deliberately design for low-bandwidth access, invest in offline complements, and create intergenerational tutoring arrangements that elevate the confidence and competence of older adults [5].

Ethical design in this context means building interfaces that reward patience, structuring sequences that encourage progression from curiosity to competence, and treating attention not as prey to be captured but as a trust to be nurtured, and it means imposing friction where necessary so that sensitive content is approached with proper context and youthful audiences are safeguarded in accordance with both regulation and pastoral care [1; 8].

Applied Organizational Model

The triadic framework yields prescriptive guidance for religious organizations that is consonant with both

tradition and governance, and that guidance can be summarized as an alignment of pedagogy, heritage, and service within digital presence so that teaching deepens, memory endures, and civic contribution is made visible and verifiable [2].

Pedagogy deepens when organizations construct curricular pathways that lead audiences from foundational teachings into advanced study, when they pair streamed sermons with transcripts, glossaries, and reading lists, and when they cultivate communities of practice that integrate online instruction with offline mentoring, because learning that remains solitary and disembodied rarely matures into character. Heritage endures when digitization projects are prioritized according to fragility and significance, when descriptive metadata and contextual essays accompany texts and recordings, and when archives are designed for discoverability without sacrificing reverence, because preservation that is merely technical fails to transmit the living sense of inheritance [4].

Service is made visible and verifiable when reports on charity and environmental projects are accompanied by documentation, when donation flows are transparent and accountable, and when platforms facilitate participation rather than only observation, because credibility in the digital age is fortified not only by eloquence but by open books and shared work [8].

These practices are neither costly ornaments nor optional extras; they are the means by which religious organizations translate their deepest aims into a medium that rewards clarity, continuity, and care, and they are also the means by which organizations navigate a regulatory landscape that privileges constructive contribution to the common good [8].

The applied model therefore indicates the need for institutional patience and strategic investment, as depth cannot be rushed and credibility cannot be improvised.

Comparative readings

Comparative analyses of online publics in China have shown that Buddhist and Christian communities on micro-blogs occupy partially overlapping yet distinct rhetorical fields, with differences in the balance between doctrinal exposition, moral exhortation, personal testimony, and community news, and with differences in audience composition and engagement patterns that reflect both tradition-specific histories and broader cultural expectations [10].

These differences matter because they reveal how tradition shapes the voice that is most persuasive

and how platform architecture interacts with community habitus to encourage certain speech genres over others, and they therefore suggest that effective digital presence must be tradition-specific rather than generic if it is to resonate and instruct.

Organizational case studies centered on the Buddhist Association of China illustrate how a national body can integrate digital strategies that encompass teaching, heritage preservation, charitable coordination, and public diplomacy, and how such integration aligns with recognition and regulation while delivering content that is broadly accessible and evidently beneficial, a pattern that supports the argument that governance can be a condition of creative adaptation rather than a mere constraint [9].

Survey work across the Chinese internet documents the diversity of actors and initiatives that populate the religious digital sphere, and it underscores the need for taxonomies that distinguish between official, semi-official, and grassroots efforts, and between informational, ritual, and community-building functions, because analytical clarity is a prerequisite for both research and practice [5].

Limitations and future research

The present study is limited by its reliance on published scholarship and on interpretive synthesis, and it accordingly refrains from presenting new quantitative measures or ethnographic observations, although it does provide an applied protocol that can be operationalized in future research. Subsequent work can test the triadic framework by coding organizational presences across platforms using the variables suggested here, by tracing the evolution of content strategies through regulatory shifts, and by conducting audience studies that measure how pedagogical sequences affect retention, understanding, and practice, thereby linking digital form to moral outcome [5; 8; 9; 10].

Further comparative research across Asian contexts can clarify the extent to which the Chinese alignment of platform affordances, governance regimes, and traditions of moral cultivation is distinctive or exemplary, and such clarification will refine theoretical claims about digital religion in environments where state involvement in religious affairs is pronounced [7].

Normative inquiry is also needed to articulate ethical standards for the use of immersive and generative technologies in ritual and instruction, since the line

between enhancement and substitution will grow thin as tools become more persuasive, and prudential criteria rooted in tradition can guide communities toward wise adoption rather than uncritical embrace [1; 4].

Conclusion

The Chinese world in a platformed age offers a laboratory in which the mutual transformation of religion and digitalization can be observed with unusual clarity, because plural traditions of moral cultivation now meet a domestically structured internet under a regime of recognition and regulation that prizes social harmony and public good, and the result is an evolving ecology of online practice that is inventive within bounds and disciplined by aims beyond mere attention.

The argument of this article has been that practice, authority, and identity are being recomposed by the interaction of platform affordances, governance regimes, and traditions of moral cultivation, and that this recomposition yields forms of virtual temple, streamed sermon, and curated archive that can deepen understanding and broaden participation when pedagogy

is thoughtful, moderation is prudent, and service is visible [2].

The risks of misinformation, inequity, and superficiality are real, yet they can be mitigated by media literacy, ethical design, and institutional cultures that reward depth over novelty, and by regulatory clarity that stabilizes expectations while leaving room for creative adaptation [1]. If incense and interface now mingle in the air of contemporary devotion, the task before scholars and practitioners is to ensure that the heat of reverence is not chilled by the cool glow of the screen, that the grammar of virtue is not dissolved by the speed of circulation, and that the memory of tradition is not flattened by the hunger of metrics.

The future of religious life in digital China will not be decided by technology alone or by policy alone or by tradition alone, but by the negotiated balances that households, institutions, and platforms strike each day as they choose what to make visible, what to teach, and whom to serve, and it is in these choices that a new reality takes form.

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