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Power and the Cost of Faith: A Case Study of Religion Communication and Commercialisation in the Digital Age

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Abstract. Religious activities in China today are being changed by the digital era. Electronic wooden fish apps, Buddhist amulets and symbolic accessories are now popular among young people, but they often reduce the profound religious traditions to mere consumer goods and performative symbols. How modern society is changing people's conception of, application for and dissemination of religious ideas. Based on the two contrasting case studies, this paper will examine the mechanisms of religious distortion and countermeasures. Firstly, the religious merit and morality have been reduced to commodities and have lost their original ethical connotations. The second case is that temples, museums and other knowledge-based media can promote religious literacy through ethical content. According to the study, the cost of faith in modern society is not due to religion itself but rather to how it is expressed and consumed. Call for institutional accountability, platform regulation and educational innovation to promote critical religious literacy and preserve the deep cultural and ethical values of religion.

Keywords: Digital Religion, Religious Consumerism, Religious Literacy, Religious Commodification

1. Introduction

Religion is a system of beliefs and practices that connects people to the divine through worship, rituals, values, etc., such as gods, spirits and so on. Faith provides a moral system to help people choose to be good, such as helping others, caring for the sick, etc. When religious beliefs are commodified or turned into entertainment, people may continue to engage in religious activities but lose the original moral connotations [1].

In the public sphere, temples, churches, places of worship, and donations/gifts are often regarded as ways to make people "good". Religion is a powerful social system that influences behaviour and may lead some people to make irrational choices. Religion is a way for people to express their ideas about how life and the world have developed, and it provides emotional support, moral direction, a sense of belonging to a group, etc. Religion has always been close to culture, art and ethics throughout history, thus promoting the well-being of individuals and society, as well as the exchange and development of civilizations. It is this great power that leads to the corruption of religion. When religion is used for marketing or entertainment, the unity of faith and action may be compromised. Consumerism and digital media have led to a shift in focus for religion; now, most people only

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expect that religion should provide practical needs, such as safety, finding a partner, and wealth, and have neglected the original religious and cultural connotations of these objects and symbols [2].

Based on the analysis of cases, this paper studies how modern society has altered people's conception, behaviour and spread of religious ideas. Based on the above analysis, this study will investigate the costs associated with the displacement of core ethical features by consumption, symbolism and misinformation. Help young people develop critical religious literacy and, by doing so, enable them to understand the cultural and ethical connotations of religious elements and products. Communication institutions will use authoritative content to counter commercial misinformation and promote a more rational and all-round understanding of religion among the public.

2. Literature review

2.1. Belief to function

Academic studies of religion have long used to distinguish between ontological and functional approaches. Ontologically, one inquires into the nature of religion and what it needs to provide for people's lives. Dietary Laws, ascetic discipline and prohibitions on association can also distinguish between the sacred and the secular. The functional approach focuses on the effect of religion on people's thoughts and behaviour in life and society [3].

In a digitised society, young people are increasingly using the internet to learn about religion. Harvard believes that the media have taken over some of the functions of moral education, rites of passage and community building that churches once fulfilled [2]. Therefore, the religious ideas may spread beyond the doctrines and institutions that gave them importance.

Ouyang and Xie describe a form of symbolic and emotional religiosity in a mixed-methods study of Chinese youth [4]. Buddhist teachings help people cope with the anxiety caused by the post-pandemic period and rapid changes in society. Cao also notes that young people wear Yonghe Temple bracelets as fashion accessories and adapt the religious and historical symbols to their daily lives [5]. Lin and Lv call the relevant practice 'borrowing enchantment'. In the analysis of the digital wooden fish (Dianzi Muyu), users draw upon Buddhist rituals for self-suggestion and psychological comfort [6].

2.2. Commodification of religious meaning

When religious meaning is commodified, the sacred symbols, rituals and objects are taken out of their institutional settings and sold as consumer goods. Responsibility for disseminating the teachings of the clergy and the Bible has moved to consumers, influencers, and social media. Bracelets from Yonghe Temple (Lama Temple), for example, are both fashionable accessories and objects believed to have ling (efficacy). Social media posts by users can also generate these meanings independently of them or create new ones [5]. Lin and Lv show that the digital wooden fish is a commodity governed by the logic of symbolic fetishism [6]. Gamification in the application transforms spiritual practice into a quantifiable, competitive and monetizable activity. Ouyang and Xie also point out the development of symbolic consumption, where temple-produced cultural products are rebranded as carriers of positive energy [4].

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2.3. Psychological drivers of digital

In many places, the constellation of psychological motives of anxiety, existential uncertainty, social acceleration and emotional regulation has been identified as a reason for people to turn to digital religion.

According to Ouyang and Xie, the current economic uncertainty, academic and career competition, and anxiety among young people have led to a Buddhist coping strategy [4]. The items most endorsed by young people as related to Buddhist beliefs and practices were those related to psychological and emotional support in the face of stressful life experiences, and these formed the main lines of hoping for Bodhisattva blessings and seeking inner peace. Instrumental use of religion is not considered to be superficial utility; rather, it is a form of "survival" that is "culturally embedded" in a high-stress, high-uncertainty environment. Due to the interactive and fragmented characteristics of social media, there is an abundance of information and cognitive dissonance; therefore, people are seeking simplified, emotionally moving religious messages as a kind of psychological relief. These studies have indicated that the psychosocial attributes of digital religion are important, and it contributes to the emotional economy of late modernity in a non-technological way [7].

2.4. The multidimensionality of religious heritage

Particularly museums, as institutions for the construction, display and interpretation of religious heritage, have multi-faceted features; they are multi-dimensional objects that include artistic, historical, ethnographic, sacred, etc., attributes. Li shows that religious artifacts are always presented in a partial way [8]. Most presentations of Buddhist objects are in an art historical context; therefore, the focus is on their formal attributes, skill in execution, aesthetic values, etc. On the other hand, the former was not concerned with religious aspects; rather, the Institute of Ethnology Museum employs an ethnographic approach to display the objects in their original ritual settings and presents functional information, sacred meanings, and cosmologies of the communities that created them. The significance of religious heritage is not in the objects themselves but is created by curators' selections [9].

3. Case study

3.1. Case 1: commercialisation, entertainment and symbolic consumption of religion

3.1.1. Explanation of the case

In recent years, digital and material religious products have spread widely on Chinese social media and e-commerce platforms. Digital wooden fish (Dianzi Muyu) apps [10] that allow users to tap the screen for virtual 'merit points' have gone viral among young people. Buddha amulets, crystal bracelets and jade ornaments are also sold with wishes for wealth, academic success and health. Online expressions such as "Gongde +1" (virtue +1) and "Laotian baoyou, jinshan yinshan quandouyou" (Heaven bless me with gold and silver) link religious practice with personal gain [11]. These objects are both worn and acquired; a Guanyin pendant or Buddhist bracelet can be worn to display one's identity and aligns with the folk saying, "Nandai Guanyin, nüdai Fo" (men wear Guanyin, women wear Buddha) [4].

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3.1.2. Religious viewpoint

Therefore, religious activities will be altered in two ways. First, Gongde (merit) has traditionally been associated with prolonged practice, such as meditation, observance of precepts, generosity and compassion, etc.; now, it can be acquired by clicking a button. Digital wooden fish applications have preserved the well-known ritualistic movements but have lost the ethical foundation of Buddhist practice that gives them significance [6].

Secondly, mass-produced religious items may be displayed publicly to create a scene. Images of the Buddha and Guanyin are associated with wisdom, compassion and self-cultivation. When wearing a bracelet or pendant that carries these virtues, it can serve as an inspiration for people to be guided by such virtues in daily life. Religious identity is then easier to show than the behaviour it is supposed to exhibit [12].

3.1.3. Sociological perspective

Sociologically, it can be seen that there is a correlation between the popularity of such products and periods of increased social anxiety, such as during the economic crisis, exam pressure and job insecurity. These cheap and easy psychological remedies are used by young people and other vulnerable groups to gain a sense of control [13]. It is a moral support; people can feel good about themselves for a small fee or a click of the mouse without changing their behaviour or participating in any charitable activities in real life.

Culture consumption today uses religious symbols as signifiers. Buddha bracelets and Guanyin (jade) often have the ideas of "I respect tradition", "I am a good person", or "I have spiritual depth". The performative logic of social media has expanded, and it is no longer just a place to consume religious products. It will also be displayed publicly at that time. As a result, there is a disconnection between religious outward show and the conduct of one's life. One can wear religious symbols but not be good-natured; the other can be moral without any display of religion [4].

3.1.4. Effects

At the individual level, purchasing religious items may be financially burdensome for some people; at the same time, a sense of moral worth can be obtained through 'merit +1' functions and religious accessories without changing behaviour. When a purchase or display is motivated by ethics, it is no longer self-scrutiny and responsibility. It will also affect the public; if it continues to be about luck and personal gain, people will start to view religious practitioners negatively [12]. Algorithms and influencer marketing can promote the dissemination of such pictures by favouring easily marketable and shareable content.

Religious goods are also forms of online identity expression. A bracelet or pendant can show a person's membership in a group, but little attention is paid to the beliefs and practices of that group. Therefore, the meaning of religion is increasingly shaped by what people can purchase, wear and display.

3.2. Case 2: religion communication and education

3.2.1. Explanation of the case

Temples, museums and educational content creators use short videos, public WeChat articles, lectures and podcasts to present religious teachings, cultural heritage and philosophy. At the same

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time, the religious institutions were aware that any silence from the authorities would be filled by vendors and fortune-tellers. Thus, these accounts provide the audience with more background information than a list of products or wishes for good luck. Yonghe Temple (Lama Temple) has published guidance on wearing incense-ash glass bracelets [14]. Museums have added explanatory plaques next to the Buddhist relics, and scholars discuss religious ideas on Bilibili and podcasts. Documentaries and podcasts can also introduce religion to the younger generation by exploring its history and culture [15].

3.2.2. Religion's view

Educational communication can present religion as a system of beliefs, practices and values rather than a source of desired outcomes. Along with rituals and symbols, they can also convey the inheritance of moral education, self-discipline, altruism, and existential contemplation. History, culture and morality also change people's experience of religious objects. A Buddhist statue, for instance, may show compassion and wisdom and also carry the history of Buddhist art. Such explanations can help link the knowledge of religious symbols to their actual application and moral obligations [2].

3.2.3. Sociological perspective

Although the speed and spread of religious content on social media have risen significantly, this environment is also full of advertising, predatory marketing, superstitious content and other misleading information and behaviour. In the absence of an official source, the public is more likely to believe the simple story that turns complex information into a convenience for purchase and good fortune [13]. Temples, museums and educational media can provide the historical and cultural background for the objects and activities shown online. This context can help the audience judge the truthfulness of advertising and better understand religious communities and their culture [8].

3.2.4. Effects

Responsible Communication can help individuals gain religious literacy by providing them with historical and doctrinal foundations for learning. This knowledge can help them judge the commercial claims for religious items and learn to connect these items with their own values and culture. At the community level, showing beliefs and practices in context can help different traditions understand each other and transmit religious knowledge to younger generations through modern media [15]. The Path to belief changes one's experience of faith. Educational media, responsible institutions and critical consciousness can provide the cultural, historical and moral foundation for commercial promotion.

4. Discussion

4.1. From critique to constructive engagement

Although these are certainly not digital amulets but rather the digital wooden fish and online divination, this is not the end of religion; instead, it is religion reconfigured in the context of digital consumer capitalism. These are contemporary expressions of the ongoing human demand for meaning and control. Do not only point out these problems but, by means of conscious institutional construction, also address the reasons for their occurrence.

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4.2. Responsible religious communication

Short videos and exhibitions have begun to be employed by temples, museums and creators to disseminate factual religious information, but this has not been sufficient to counter the spread of misinformation through algorithms. In the future, platforms, schools and cultural institutions can be mobilised through public lectures, documentaries featuring curated artifacts and contextualisation, official science-communication accounts and AI-guided docents. Strengthen the regulation of online content and limit the spread of false religious information by reducing the number of responsible individuals responsible for these posts.

4.3. Regulating commercial distortion

Strengthen supervision of religious products on the platform and increase the requirements for such products, especially those making unfounded claims of being 'blessed', 'empowered' or 'fortune-changing'. Extend the protection of predatory marketing to vulnerable groups, such as anxious young people and socially isolated older adults. Public interest can be focused on learning and not just on transactional consumption through the institutional certification of religious goods and offline local community education initiatives.

4.4. Cultivating critical religious literacy

Youth should be aware of religion not as a way to get rich, but as a rich civilization heritage with a long history, diverse arts, ideas and morality. Educational strategies should help viewers understand the religious symbols and their historical background and religious meanings better, and learn to ask questions about them rather than being afraid of them. This will create a place for study and help to prevent the loss of faith through "eating, drinking and shopping".

4.5. Current situation and final thoughts

In the present day, with high social expectations and abundant media, people are more likely to seek emotional comfort. Therefore, the circumstances necessitate the prompt and responsible dissemination of religious ideas. Although social media has reduced religion to simple ideas, it can also spread rich, humane and deep knowledge about it in various ways. The way forward is to cultivate intentionally, establish institutional accountability and regulatory vigilance, promote educational innovation, and enable religion to continue serving as a source of morality and spirituality.

5. Conclusion

The two cases presented here indicate that religious meaning in China is shaped by the spread of beliefs and practices. In the consumer market and online, religious symbols are often used to offer people comfort or a sense of identity without moral connotations. Temples, museums and scholars can provide the historical and ethical background to help the public integrate religious understanding with life. This study has three deficiencies. Research directly on digital consumer culture and religious practice in China is lacking; the cases studied are specific to China; and the analysis relies on existing literature rather than new empirical data. In the future, other national situations can be studied, the evolution of digital religious products tracked, and causal relationships may be investigated through interviews, surveys or observations.

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