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Global Ties and Local Divides: How an Austin Buddhist Temple Responded to the COVID-19 Pandemic and Its Implications for Transnational Buddhist Communities

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Abstract

Drawing on interviews held in the spring of 2021 with the head nun of Fo Guang Shan (FGS) Xiang Yun Temple in Austin, Texas, this article is a case study of how the COVID-19 pandemic and the new-found reliance on virtual practice transformed the role of this node in FGS's global ritual network. Before the pandemic, FGS Xiang Yun Temple served as one of the major Buddhist communities in Central Texas and supported two congregations—an English-speaking congregation and a Chinese-speaking congregation. According to head nun Venerable Jue Ji, these communities operated largely independently owing to differing spiritual interests and religious practices. Like many religious communities during the pandemic, the temple made dramatic changes to its practice, including organizing virtual funerals, instituting distance chanting, and creating online dharma talks. My interviews with Ven. Jue Ji revealed that these changes brought about three unanticipated results that increased its transnational connectivity: (1) The temple's ethnic and linguistic Chinese ties were strengthened at the expense of its so-called English congregation; (2) the temple's role as a node in a transnational ritual network grew as the nuns performed funerals in Austin for dying parents and grandparents around the world; and (3) the temple became a greater participant in promoting the global spiritual goals of the FGS organization, including vegetarianism and cremation. This article examines how an increased reliance on virtual rituals accelerated by the pandemic might alternately strengthen transnational ties and weaken trans-linguistic ones, ultimately leading to more globally connected but more culturally and linguistically discrete religious communities.

To say that the COVID-19 pandemic was a period of fundamental transformation would be, perhaps, a bit of an understatement. Beyond the realization of just how quickly a virus could spread via international travel, COVID-19 was a terrible catastrophe that killed more than seven million people worldwide and has permanently lowered global life expectancy.[1] Amid this disaster, however, some unexpected opportunities arose. As an extraordinary event happening in real time, the COVID-19 pandemic allowed researchers to analyze how different communities and religious organizations responded in the immediate moment to a social, medical, and political disaster. The pandemic was a singular opportunity to develop our understanding of what transformations a community might undergo in a traumatic situation as it reevaluates its understanding of itself, its relationship with other communities worldwide, and the impact of its theological or doctrinal perspectives.

With this in mind, this article considers the experience of the Fo Guang Shan (FGS) Xiang Yun Temple in Austin, Texas, as a detailed case study of the pandemic's effects on local Buddhist practice in transnational contexts. While it was a time marked by significant isolation and segregation in many ways, the COVID-19 pandemic also became an opportunity for Buddhist communities to reframe their localized practice as components of a larger, virtual network that transcended nation-state boundaries. Eben Yonnetti has examined how the COVID-19 pandemic allowed Tibetan Buddhists living in Taiwan to promote obscure Driküng Kagyu practices in ways that tied exiled Tibetans to their surrounding national landscape in new and unprecedented ways.[2] Jan M. A. van der Valk documented how Tibetan medical practitioners around the world relied on virtual technologies to promote traditional Tibetan medicine as a holistic aid for COVID-19.[3] Kai Shmushko has noted how lay, ethnically-Han practitioners of Nyingma Tibetan Buddhism in Shanghai—unable to travel to Tibetan regions for pilgrimage—sold masks and other physical items over WeChat as a way to insert themselves into a larger ritual economy of Buddhist merit.[4] Although many of these practitioners have since returned to forms of religious practice and discourse prevalent before the pandemic, analyzing how communities adapted to the pandemic with virtual tools and transnational networks is critical. As discussed by Kaitlyn Ugoretz in this special issue, such "eddies," while a temporary response to one crisis, can continue to have a significant impact on the larger historical trajectory of religious traditions even after their dissolution.[5] It is important,

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[1] GBD 2021 Demographics Collaborators, "Global Age-Sex-Specific Mortality, Life Expectancy, and Populations Estimates in 204 Countries and Territories and 811 Subnational Locations, 1950–2021, and the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Comprehensive Demographic Analysis for the Global Burden of Disease Study 2021," *The Lancet* 403, no. 10440 (2024): 1989–2056, https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-67362400476-8/fulltext.
[2] Eben Yonnetti, "Masks and Mantras: The COVID-19 Pandemic and *Spiritual Reterritorialization* Among Tibetan Buddhist Communities in Taiwan," *Journal of Global Buddhism* 25, no. 1 (2024): 135–150, https://doi.org/10.26034/lu.jgb.2024.3958.
[3] Jan M. A. van der Valk, "Strategic Holisms: Documenting Online English-Language Sowa Rigpa Perspectives on COVID-19," *Revue D'Etudes Tibétaines*, no. 77 (May 2025): 95–127, https://d1i1jdw69xsqx0.cloudfront.net/digitalhimalaya/collections/journals/ret/pdf/ret_77_06.pdf.
[4] Kai Shmushko, "On Face Masks as Buddhist Merit: Buddhist Responses to COVID-19. A Case Study of Tibetan Buddhism in Shanghai," *Journal of Global Buddhism* 22, no. 1 (2021): 235–244, https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4727565.
[5] Kaitlyn Ugoretz, "Eddies in the Stream: Networked Flows of Spiritual Commodities in Global Shinto," *Transnational Asia* 8, no. 1 (2024): 1–21, doi:10.25615/ta.v8i1.129.

therefore, to document and contextualize even seemingly temporary practices to understand how Buddhist organizations respond to crisis and how such responses may continue to have a lasting impact.

As a temple already part of a transnational Buddhist network, the example of FGS Xiang Yun Temple is an important point of comparison in these larger conversations on Buddhist responses to the pandemic. The social crisis of the pandemic allowed for the temple's leadership to develop new ritual practices seeking to bind together global Chinese Buddhists, as well as novel doctrinal contemplations on cremation and vegetarian lifestyle. Austin's FGS Xiang Yun Temple used these innovative rituals and doctrines to strengthen its connections with both its transnational community and its local Chinese community. These changes ultimately limited the opportunities for interaction between the temple and non-Chinese-speaking spiritual seekers who had previously held some stake in the local temple and also, perhaps, the larger transnational FGS community. This article argues that the shift to virtual practice during the pandemic strengthened transnational ties of Chinese culture and weakened trans-linguistic ties in the temple's non-Chinese-speaking community (although these ties seem to have restrengthened after the pandemic's end). This is significant not only for considering what global Buddhism might look like in the future as virtual tools become a more prominent part of religious life, but also for mapping those resources understood as central in the face of a community's crisis and those that could, conversely, be de-emphasized.

Methodology

The basis for this article is a series of interviews I conducted in January 2021 with Venerable Jue Ji, the head nun and leader of outreach at FGS Xiang Yun Temple. These were held via Zoom after I reached out to Ven. Jue Ji while researching my recent book, *Shattered Grief*.[6] Initially, we scheduled only one two-hour interview via Zoom on the transforming nature of funerary services during the COVID-19 pandemic; after our interview, we extended follow-up via email and phone conversation to clarify some key points from the initial interview.

It is important to highlight that this article focuses on the perspective of only one nun operating at one single temple, and the generalizability of any conclusions I make here are necessarily limited. In this regard, this article functions somewhat as a microhistory or a micro case study. Writing with colleagues, Carlo Ginzburg—author of what is perhaps the most famous microhistory, *The Cheese and the Worms*—frames microhistory as a genre that focuses on "scraps" and "fragments" rather than a single, overarching narrative.[7] He goes on to state that "the obstacles interfering with research in the form of lacunae or misrepresentations in the sources must become part of the account."[8] Microhistory, in Ginzburg's perspective, is meant to take seriously incomplete sources and minor scraps of data as possibly revealing a significant experience that is lost when focusing scholarly attention only on a grand narrative. In this commitment, he is echoed by Francesca Trivellato, who identifies the central insight of microhistory as the fact that "a variation of scales of analysis breeds radically new interpretations of commonly accepted grand narratives."[9]

This article takes these insights to heart with the belief that before we can make our grand narratives about the historical shifts brought about by the pandemic, we must first understand the individual experiences and perspectives of those who lived through it. Historian István Szijártó identifies this very fact as a distinct advantage of microhistory, as "it can convey the lived experience to readers directly on the micro-level of everyday life."[10] Affirming Szijàrtó's point, American historian Jill Lepore frames microhistories as uniquely able to reveal larger, ineffable cultural trends by relating the sheer ordinariness of an individual's experience.[11] For phenomena like the COVID-19 pandemic—a global event in recent history with whose realities we are still struggling—it is imperative, therefore, to capture individual experiences first as the foundation of future grand narratives. This

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[6] Natasha L. Mikles, *Shattered Grief: How the Pandemic Transformed the Spirituality of Death in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2024).
[7] Carlo Ginzburg, John Tedeschi, and Anne C. Tedeschi, "Microhistory: Two or Three Things That I Know About It," *Critical Inquiry* 20, no. 1 (1993): 10–35. See also Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, trans. John Tedeschi and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980).
[8] Ginzburg et al., "Microhistory," 28.
[9] Francesca Trivellato, "Microstoria/Microhistoire/Microhistory," *French Politics, Culture, and Society* 33, no. 1 (2015): 122–134, 122.
[10] István Szijártó, "Four Arguments for Microhistory," *Rethinking History* 6, no. 2 (2002): 209–215, 210.
[11] Jill Lepore, "Reflections on Microhistory and Biography," *The Journal of American History* 88, no. 1 (2001): 129–144.

article attempts to do just that, along with initial efforts toward beginning to consider what that grand narrative might be.

The Environment: Fo Guang Shan Xiang Yun Temple

Located in Central Texas Hill Country, just northwest of Austin, FGS Xiang Yun Temple is part of the larger Taiwan-based FGS organization founded by Hsing Yun (1927–2023) in 1967. Jens Renike, who has written on the successful globalization of FGS, identifies the organization as "the leading contemporary order in the modernist reformation movement of the Chinese Mahayana tradition (*hanchuan fojiao* 漢傳佛教)[12] that has taken place over the past century."[13] FGS was created with the goal of modernizing Buddhist practice, what Hsing Yun termed "Buddhism of the human realm" (*renjian fojiao* 人間佛教), often called Humanistic Buddhism in English. Indeed, the work is traditionally framed around a model of the "Four Givings" that seek to help people attain distinctly "this-worldly" goals: (1) giving people confidence, (2) giving people joy, (3) giving people hope, and (4) giving people convenience.

FGS Xiang Yun Temple in Austin is one of over 200 around the world and was founded in 1994, though its doors were not open to the public until 2000 when construction on the main temple grounds was completed. Led by three residential nuns, the temple has historically served a diverse community of Chinese Buddhist expats and non-Chinese, predominantly English-speaking, spiritual seekers.[14] In this role, they have offered a variety of opportunities for interaction with the temple, including meditation classes, weekly chanting services, community art space, and house visits for the sick and dying. Ven. Jue Ji estimated that, before the pandemic, their regular Saturday and Sunday services averaged around thirty to fifty participants, with approximately two dozen more who attended weekly events in more casual settings.

As of 2021, there were three nuns in residence at FGS Xiang Yun Temple—one each from Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Taiwan. All came from ethnically Chinese families and were

[12] Transliterated Chinese terms in parentheses, unless specified otherwise.
[13] Jens Renike, *Mapping Modern Mahayana: Chinese Buddhism and Migration in the Age of Global Modernity* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021), 3.
[14] Although the Austin city government noted in a 2016 report that the city was experiencing "explosive" growth of its Asian American population and *The Texas Tribune* identifies Asian Americans as the fastest growing group in Texas overall, they remain a comparatively small minority in the city's demographic make-up. Currently, only 8 percent of the Austin metro population identifies as Asian. The 2021 census noted that the majority of Asian Americans in Central Texas were South Asian and Indian American. Chinese American made up the next largest community, but only 1.1 percent of the Austin metro area population identified as Chinese American in a 2011–2015 American Community Survey. Community leaders note that a general lack of information makes it difficult to clearly identify larger trends. See Ryan Robinson, "The Asian Community in Austin: a Demographic Snapshot," *Asian Quality of Life—City Demographer's Provisional Report*, Austintexas.gov, January 15, 2016, 1–5, https://www.slideshare.net/slideshow/a-demographic-snapshot-of-austin-by-ryan-robinson/62280034; Greater Austin Asian Chamber of Commerce, "2025 Asian Impact Survey," *Central Texas Asian Impact Project*, https://austinasianchamber.org/central-texas-asian-impact-project/.

raised speaking Chinese language(s).[15] Ven. Jue Ji was born in Taipei and has a background in the corporate business world. As the nun in residence with the most developed English-language skills, Ven. Jue Ji has become the public face of the temple for non-Chinese speakers. This work has earned her praise in a variety of settings, including *Lion's Roar* magazine,[16] the professional website for Interfaith Action of Central Texas,[17] and the local Austin *Neighbors* magazine.[18]

Like many religious institutions, FGS Xiang Yun Temple transitioned to a virtual format during the pandemic. In Ven. Jue Ji's words, "We closed the gate on March 22nd, 2020. It was very emotional. We want to be out there, to share our teachings with the world. I cried when I had to close the gate."[19] During our interview in January 2021, Ven. Jue Ji explained that one of the biggest changes she experienced during the pandemic was the lack of volunteers. Before March 2020, there were several women who came to help clean, organize, and take care of the temple. Their volunteer work had to be limited because of pandemic restrictions, and the entire responsibility of the temple fell on the three nuns. Maintaining the temple, therefore, took up a lot of the nuns' day-to-day life in the pandemic.

Further transformations brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic on the FGS Xiang Yun Temple community will be the focus for the remainder of this article. As we will see, many of these changes described by Ven. Jue Ji represent heightened or crystallized aspects of the FGS culture already outlined by FGS scholars like Jens Renike and Stuart Chandler.[20] The case study of pandemic-era changes enacted by FGS gives insight into how an Asian American religious community with global connections responds to crisis, as well as what a move to virtual practice might mean in a transnational Chinese community within a local environment marked by ethnic and linguistic diversity. Above all, the pandemic instigated surprising transformations. This micro case study allows scholarly reflection on what elements may be discarded, what elements may be retained, and what elements are renegotiated in a time of crisis.

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[15] Ven. Jue Ji first stated that she and her fellow FGS nuns spoke "formal Chinese," then explained on further questioning that they spoke the Mandarin dialect. However, she was quick to emphasize that all their forms of Chinese were a little different. It is unclear, though likely, that Mandarin is also the predominant dialect spoken between the nuns and the Chinese-language community at FGS Xiang Yun Temple.
[16] "Meet a Teacher: Ven. Dr. Jue Ji," *Lion's Roar: Buddhist Wisdom for Our Time*, September 21, 2021, https://www.lionsroar.com/meet-a-teacher-ven-dr-jue-ji/.
[17] "iACT Board of Directors: Venerable Jue Ji Shih," iACT, June 30, 2023. https://iact.cargo.site/about.
[18] "Venerable Jue Ji Interviewed at Xiang Yun Temple," *IBPS Austin*, March 2, 2024, https://www.ibps-austin.org/en/news/20240302C.php.
[19] Venerable Jue Ji, Personal interview by the author, January 27, 2021.
[20] Renike, *Mapping Modern Mahayana*; Stuart Chandler, *Establishing a Pure Land on Earth: The Foguang Buddhist Perspective on Modernization and Globalization* (Mānoa: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004).

Differing Responses Among Differing Linguistic Communities

Scholars have long held that Buddhist temples in America feature a relatively sharp division between a local, ethnically Asian community and non-Asian converts.[21] Their works note that first- and second-generation Asian immigrants often participate in their religious communities primarily as cultural centers and a locale for important ritual activity. In contrast, converts or spiritual seekers to Buddhism (who are predominantly, though not entirely, white[22]) are more often attracted to the meditative practices and doctrinal teachings. More contemporary thinkers have highlighted how this distinction is an oversimplification that does not fully take into account the complex realities of race and immigrant culture in America. In her book *Be the Refuge*, Chenxing Han argues that this particular model of American Buddhist communities leads to a systematic erasure of Asian American voices and related innovation.[23] Such a narrative reinforces the ideas of Asian docility and ethnic isolation, while also reinstantiating more widespread Protestant-originating critiques that religious practices based around ritual are "superstitious" or otherwise less-than or secondary to "real" religion.

While critiques like these are valid and deeply necessary, the FGS Xiang Yun Temple community appeared to exhibit, at least in part, a divided community before the pandemic. However, the FGS Xiang Yun Temple community was not so strictly culturally divided as it was linguistically divided. When discussing her activities at the temple, Ven. Jue Ji described splitting time between a Chinese-speaking community and an English-speaking community. She explained that these language differences often were accompanied by differences in ritual or practical interests more broadly:

> These two communities, they go their own way. The Chinese community comes here because they want to follow what they did in their home countries and do the rituals; they aren't really focused on dharma teachings. This place is like a community center for them, so they can share what they experience in their daily life in Chinese. The English community is a more loose community. They don't want to commit a bunch of their time here, and when they come they mostly have two purposes: one is that they want meditation and the other is that they really want to learn the teachings. Mostly speaking, they aren't so interested in the ritual part. They think it is "too Chinese."

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[21] Wendy Cadge, *Heartwood: The First Generation of Theravada Buddhists in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Carol A. Mortland, *Cambodian Buddhism in the United States* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2017).
[22] Jan Willis, "Yes, We're Buddhists Too!" *Lion's Roar: Buddhist Wisdom for Our Time*, November 10, 2011, https://www.lionsroar.com/yes-were-buddhists-too/; James William Coleman, *The New Buddhism: The Western Transformation of an Ancient Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Scott Michell, *Buddhism in America: Global Religion, Local Contexts* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016).
[23] Chenxing Han, *Be the Refuge: Raising the Voices of Asian American Buddhists* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2021).

> But, then again, a few of them are really crazy about the rituals, and they will come to the Sunday service even though it is in Chinese and they don't understand any of it! Ha![24]

The distinctive congregations at FGS Xiang Yun Temple are based primarily on linguistic differences that map, at least in part, on to cultural or ethnic differences, though with some overlap.[25]

To accommodate the differences in ritual interest between these two groups, Ven. Jue Ji and the other FGS nuns managed two parallel services before the pandemic—one on Saturday that was offered in English and focused on meditation, and one on Sunday offered in Chinese and focused on chanting and other more "ritualized" elements. Ven. Jue Ji explained that this allowed her and her community of nuns to best fulfill their purpose of serving the local Chinese Buddhist community while also missionizing Buddhist teachings to those speaking English. In our conversation, Ven. Jue Ji described the two communities as fundamentally parallel—using the temple for contrasting purposes, but having little social interaction. As evidence of this fact, Ven. Jue Ji told me she had never been asked by a member of her so-called English congregation to lead a funerary service, whereas this was a typical part of her work with the Chinese congregation.

The divided communities of FGS Xiang Yun leadership also allowed for the marrying of cultural and religious education that are often kept separate in other models of religious community. FGS as a global organization aims to propagate Buddhist teachings by hosting and inviting guests to participate in traditional Chinese cultural activities. Renike has noted that this is done to not only proselytize Buddhism via such cultural activities (i.e., make the cultural activities the vehicle for Buddhism) but also simultaneously preserve a global sense of traditional Chinese values and traditions (i.e., make Buddhism the vehicle for Chinese cultural activities).[26] Whereas people may identify with national identities that have complex (and sometimes antagonistic) histories, FGS presents an image of Chinese culture removed from these historical and political specificities. FGS aims to produce a generic rendering of Chineseness that transcends the national boundaries of specific communities of Chinese people living in Malaysia, the People's Republic of China, Taiwan, and so forth.[27] As the byproduct of this process, non-Chinese people interacting with the temple get to experience what Renike calls a "distinctive yet accessible rendering of Chineseness."[28] While this particular expression of a de-politicized Chineseness is, in part, a construction serving the goals of the FGS organization writ large, it also aims to unite diverse Chinese people the world over into a singular community transcending national

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[24] Ven. Jue Ji, personal interview.
[25] Ven. Jue Ji did not specify how those individuals who were ethnically Chinese but spoke only English participated in activities at the temple.
[26] Renike, *Mapping Modern Mahayana*, 63–64.
[27] Jens Reinke, "The Buddha in Bronkhorstspruit: The Transnational Spread of the Taiwanese Buddhist Order Fo Guang Shan to South Africa," *Contemporary Buddhism* 21, no. 1–2 (2020): 15–32.
[28] Renike, *Mapping Modern Mahayana*, 70.

boundaries.[29] In this way, even before the pandemic, the Buddhist practice of FGS was, by design, fundamentally bound up with a transnational Chinese culture removed from national specificities.

With the change to a virtual format in March 2020, these opportunities for an experience of transnational Chinese culture were lost for the English congregation and transformed for the Chinese congregation. Ven. Jue Ji at first continued the parallel services, believing the digital interface would provide greater opportunity for more English speakers to participate in the temple's activities. She was not incorrect in this assumption, as my other interviews with religious professionals during the pandemic demonstrated a significant influx of guests attending online services and an increase in participation for disabled or otherwise homebound community members.[30]

However, greater outreach was not what Ven. Jue Ji witnessed in her own experience with moving the English-speaking community to a virtual space. She described her early efforts to lead meditation online as a failure. As a result, the meditation classes, held twice a week and previously central to the English congregation, were unable to continue. She explained how she next attempted to transition the group to a weekly dharma talk and discussion—with an optional tea ceremony—but noted it had significantly smaller attendance and less energy than the in-person community before. At the time of our conversation in January 2021, Ven. Jue Ji still hosted weekly dharma talks for her English congregation, but said that sometimes no one showed up and that it was a significantly smaller and less committed crowd than had existed before the pandemic.

In contrast, Ven. Jue Ji's Chinese-speaking community found their ties to each other, the FGS Buddhist community, the global Chinese community, and the Buddhist teachings as a whole strengthened from the move to a virtual interface. Ven. Jue Ji explained that the difficulty replicating rituals on a digital interface forced her and the other nuns at the temple to be creative: "In Chinese rituals, people just follow along with the chanting, so they were still lacking that personal connection and interaction [we had before the pandemic]. As a result, I made an online study group. In that weekly online study group we have more time to talk about ourselves and our daily experiences, with the dharma at the center. I really do think it helped my Chinese congregation understand the dharma better!"[31]

Ven. Jue Ji noted with admiration and joy that her Chinese-speaking congregation expressed an increasing number of questions about Buddhist dharma than they ever had

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[29] FGS's representation of a Chinese culture apart from and above any national boundaries has significantly benefitted the movement. As noted in a 2017 *New York Times* article, FGS has been growing rapidly in the People's Republic of China with little government hindrance, unlike many other religious groups. When asked by a reporter about difficulties spreading Buddhism in a communist country, FGS founder Hsing Yun emphasized the value of Chinese culture, stating, "I don't want to promote Buddhism! I only promote Chinese culture to cleanse humanity!" See Ian Johnson, "Is a Buddhist Group Changing China? Or Is China Changing It?" *New York Times*, June 24, 2017, https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/2017/06/24/world/asia/china-buddhism-fo-guang-shan.html.
[30] Mikles, *Shattered Grief*.
[31] Ven. Jue Ji, personal interview.

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before. In response, she began using the pandemic as a teaching tool to understand dharma: "A person contracts COVID-19 in a faraway place, and the next day it can immediately be among your community. That proves the truth of the Buddha's teaching [of interdependence]. It is making us understand the world actually is one and that we are not all isolated by our own community. The COVID-19 deaths in New York and in California, they aren't just strangers out there, but rather part of us, ourselves!"[32] While Ven. Jue Ji's English-speaking congregation faltered somewhat in the move to a virtual interface, her Chinese community became more robust and devoted. Such doctrinal questions would presumably be of interest to both Ven. Jue Ji's Chinese- *and* English-speaking communities, but the move to a virtual interface seems to have benefitted only Ven. Jue Ji's Chinese-speaking community.

In thinking through the relationship between offline and online religion, Heidi Campbell has discussed what she calls a "networked community" and "networked religion" to describe a person's participation in diverse and overlapping religious communities both on and offline as part of their singular spiritual identity.[33] Campbell maintains that, rather than replacing offline religion, online religion often overlaps with the offline experience. Online culture may act as a "mirror" for certain fundamental changes happening across offline society at large.[34] Applying Campbell's ideas to the FGS Xiang Yun Temple community reveals that, in the virtual setting, the Chinese congregation more closely mirrored the offline reality of the temple functioning as, at least in part, a cultural center. Chinese-language adherents were able to deepen their offline commitment with the Buddhist community in the online space, whereas their English-speaking counterparts did not have sufficient offline support to continue their relationship in the virtual setting. Campbell writes that "the internet facilitates the ongoing processes of negotiation and change that characterize the practice of religion."[35] Rather than acting as a simple replacement for the in-person experience, the virtual community built on pre-existing offline relationships based on shared cultural and linguistic backgrounds. While weakening the trans-linguistic ties on which the English-speaking community was built, the virtual community ultimately strengthened the transnational cultural ties built through FGS's image of a de-politicized and de-nationalized Chinese culture.

A Postmortem Ritual Network

Along with the move to a virtual interface for weekly community meetings, certain important rituals had to be moved to a virtual format as well. When local Chinese Americans in Central Texas found themselves unable to return home to lead the funerary

[32] Ven. Jue Ji, personal interview.
[33] Heidi Campbell, "Understanding the Relationship Between Religion Online and Offline in a Networked Society," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80, no. 1 (2012): 64–93, 71.
[34] Campbell, "Understanding the Relationship . . . ," 84.
[35] Campbell, "Understanding the Relationship . . . ," 85.

rituals for their deceased loved ones, many decided to employ the services of the local FGS Xiang Yun Temple to perform these rituals for those thousands of miles away. The temple was already a transnational Buddhist space by dint of its participation in the FGS community as well as its dedication to and promotion of global, de-nationalized "Chineseness." The pandemic strengthened these ties by allowing nuns at the temple to perform rituals on behalf of those living abroad. By performing funerals in America for dying parents and grandparents around the world, the temple found itself refashioned as an important node in a transnational ritual network that stretched around the globe.

The importance of virtual death rituals for the pandemic-era FGS Xiang Yun Temple is not entirely unusual in and of itself. Many scholars have noted that Buddhism as a tradition has long had a special relationship with the dead and dying.[36] A common Japanese aphorism states that every Japanese person is "born Shinto, but dies Buddhist," reflecting the important role Buddhism has often taken in funerary traditions. When Buddhist imagery first entered China in the late second century, the Buddha appeared as a sort of "death god" uniquely associated with funerary traditions.[37] In the modern development of FGS as an institution, the opportunity for prime placement of devotees' physical remains after death has become an important selling point for various benefactors to support the development of its monastic complexes.[38]

Reflecting this important role funerary rituals have to Buddhist practice, Ven. Jue Ji explained in our conversation together that some of the first rituals she and the other FGS nuns had to recreate in the virtual format were funerary rituals:

> Before COVID-19, we monastics would go to their house for chanting when a person was near death or right after they passed away. We would chant the Buddhist scriptures and the holy name of the Buddha so that they would get good karma and have a good rebirth. Normally, these moments are very touching, as the whole community can share their condolences. But during COVID, we couldn't do that when a community member passed away. I told the daughter of one person who died that I would do the chanting for her father via Zoom and give dharma blessings directly to the dying person. Even though I was not there in person, he was able to put his palms together and receive the blessing at the end, which made his family feel better.[39]

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[36] Bryan J. Cuevas and Jacqueline I. Stone (eds.), *The Buddhist Dead: Practices, Discourses, Representations* (Mānoa: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011); Paul Williams and Ladwig Patrice (eds.), *Buddhist Funeral Cultures of Southeast Asia and China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Jacqueline I. Stone, *Right Thoughts at the Last Moment* (Mānoa: University of Hawai'i Press, 2013); George D. Bond, "Theravada Buddhism's Meditations on Death and the Symbolism of Initiatory Death, *History of Religions* 19, no. 3 (1980): 237–258.
[37] Yu Shuishan, "The Translation of Buddhism in the Funeral Architecture of Medieval China," *Religions* 12, no. 9 (2021): 690.
[38] Chandler, *Establishing a Pure Land*, 192.
[39] Ven. Jue Ji, personal interview.

In some ways, traditional Buddhist doctrine on merit dedication seemed uniquely suited for the move to a virtual environment. When I asked if community members gave Ven. Jue Ji any pushback on the karmic validity of virtual rituals for local residents, Ven. Jue Ji explained that, "We often teach our community that transferring the merit of chanting the Buddha's name or mantras is not inhibited by time or space, so they thought the shift to digital spaces was OK."[40] In a moment of candor when discussing the move to virtual rituals, Ven. Jue Ji joked, "In Chinese rituals, people often just follow along with the chanting, so they were maybe always lacking that personal connection and interaction. There wasn't really a change when we moved online!"[41]

As the pandemic continued, the shift to virtual rituals moved beyond the local environment and took on greater transnational significance. Organizing funerary rituals has always been a task largely performed by loved ones. Before the pandemic, when a Buddhist died in Asia whose close family—children, siblings, and so on—lived in America, people would fly back to Asia to work with local religious professionals to organize and perform commemoration rituals. Travel limitations during the pandemic, however, made this impossible. As a result, it was necessary for the FGS nuns to perform the rituals virtually in America on behalf of loved ones thousands of miles away:

> The family members of people in our communities who live in Asian countries—Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore—many of them passed away from COVID. One gentleman just recently, his father and mother died of COVID in Beijing. He couldn't fly back to China, and was just so heartbroken. Even though he wasn't a close member of our [Buddhist] temple, we were able to do forty-nine days of chanting service for his parents in Beijing. We believe that no matter where they live in the world, the chanting service and reciting the Buddha's name will transfer the merit to the deceased.[42]

Ven. Jue Ji explained that, unlike the shift to virtual funerary chanting for local community members, the karmic efficacy of these international services initially caused some confusion and hesitancy from her Chinese congregants. As a result, she and her monastic colleagues had to reaffirm karma's ability to transcend spatial boundaries that extended across the world. She explained they were continuing to hold such virtual funerals for deceased relatives in Asia at the time of our interview in January 2021, when travel between America and Asia remained halted.

One micro case study cannot serve as the basis for authoritative statements on the future significance and practice of the virtual funerary ceremonies held in America for deceased relatives abroad. However, the adaptations instituted by FGS Xiang Yun Temple during the COVID-19 pandemic hint at how globalized religious organizations acting in local contexts

40 Ven. Jue Ji, personal interview.
41 Ven. Jue Ji, personal interview.
42 Ven. Jue Ji, personal interview.

might develop in the future. In the past, most Buddhists—even those who identified with a global Buddhist organization like FGS—would have experienced their religious life largely as participation in their local temple community. When they traveled because of a family member's death, they would have continued to experience Buddhist practice in a specific physical temple. However, with the introduction of virtual rituals and their associated doctrinal infrastructure, any given local temple no longer remains a discrete place. Rather, temples become the point of entry to a larger religious network transcending national boundaries in which one can participate from any place on the planet. Campbell's ideas of a networked religious community that exists as a multisite reality presaged this shift as supported by a growing digital interface. Rather than single, physical locations, religious communities can spill over into overlapping virtual and in-person interfaces. Participants interact with these in a bounded physical place as well as in a virtual space that includes a variety of digital modalities transcending the physical boundaries of a nation-state. The FGS Xiang Yun Temple case suggests that a growing digital interface, especially one relied on in times of crisis, may transform religious communities' individual physical locations so that they become not only places of religious practice but also entry points into a global, virtual network.[43]

Relating to this new networked community, this case study also raises questions on the complexities of virtual rituals. Contrary to what many public commentators might believe, the scholarship highlights that a new world of religious ritual entirely online had already arrived before the COVID-19 pandemic. Song Niu has described conflicting responses among Muslims to the rise of virtual hajj relying on virtual reality technology in the metaverse.[44] Kerstin Radde-Antweiler has discussed the role of virtual rituals in the online world of Second Life.[45] The experience of FGS Xiang Yun Temple, however, represents a unique innovation in this larger context of virtual ritual transformations. Rather than a replacement for in-person rituals, the temple used virtual rituals to link two distant physical locales. In this way, the virtual ritual becomes a method to create connection between religious communities sharing Chinese culture and Buddhist beliefs across national boundaries. As scholarship on virtual funerals grows, this transnational cultural context and linking of physical locations via virtual measures deserves further scholarly study.

Supporting Transnational Goals with Novel Theologies

Beyond the changes in ritual practice and outreach, the pandemic also allowed Ven. Jue Ji and other FGS nuns to promote the global doctrinal goals of the FGS organization more

[43] Campbell, "Understanding the Relationship . . . ," 68, 80. Heidi Campbell and Wendi Bellar discuss these ideas in more detail in their recent primer *Digital Religion: The Basics* (New York: Routledge, 2022).
[44] Song Niu, "Virtual Hajj as a Response to Demographic and Geopolitical Pressures," *Contemporary Islam* 17, no. 1 (2023): 95–108.
[45] Kerstin Radde-Antweiler, "Virtual Religion: An Approach to a Religious and Ritual Topography of *Second Life*," *Online: Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 3, no. 1 (2008): 174–211.

prominently in their local dharma teachings and services. As part of its philosophy to modernize Mahayana Buddhist practice, the organization assertively endorses cremation and a vegetarian lifestyle. The pandemic created the opportunity for Ven. Jue Ji to find new ways to encourage these sometimes-controversial goals championed by the transnational FGS organization in her local Chinese-speaking community.

Cremation

Cremation has been a major social goal for the FGS organization since its inception. During the pandemic, many FGS organizations, including FGS Xiang Yun Temple, framed bodily cremation as a necessary public safety response to the coronavirus. Ven. Jue Ji explained that she and the other nuns held several events for the Chinese-speaking congregation that reviewed how cremation better aligned with public safety goals in response to the pandemic: "I told them that the coronavirus is everywhere, so the most healthy way to handle the virus is to cremate the body of the deceased. We want to respect the workers of the funeral home and ensure we do not make them sick. That is the most compassionate thing to do, so the best thing to do is cremate the body."[46] When I asked Ven. Jue Ji if anyone in her community had died from COVID-19 and been cremated, she told me that, as of January 2021, no one had died though a few had been very sick. Notably, Ven. Jue Ji's interpretation of cremation does not align with the Center for Disease Control or World Health Organization guidance, which stated at the time that cremation was not necessary.[47]

Whatever the agreement with national and transnational medical guidelines, Ven. Jue Ji's and FGS Xiang Yun Temple's promotion of cremation is culturally significant, as cremation remains a complex issue in contemporary Asian communities. Traditional Chinese culture generally encourages a burial of the body in a physical grave, so that descendants have a place to take care of their ancestor in the afterlife. As a result, cremation has historically been seen in Chinese culture as promoting a disrespectful disconnect between oneself and one's ancestors.[48] The past two decades, however, have seen concerted efforts by Asian governments to promote cremation in response to concerns about limited available land being used for the dead. These efforts are often spearheaded by island governments like Hong Kong and Singapore who need all viable land available for the living.[49] In the People's Republic of China, cremation is now mandatory in some provinces and often burial plots are allotted to families for only a short time.[50] These efforts have proven so

[46] Ven. Jue Ji, personal interview.
[47] "Infection Prevention and Control for the Safe Management of a Dead Body in the Context of COVID-19," *World Health Organization*, March 24, 2020, https://iris.who.int/server/api/core/bitstreams/dc537e93-522f-48db-a0a6-3004b2841ca2/content.
[48] Christiana Han, "Cremation and Body Burning in Five Dynasties China," *Journal of Chinese Studies*, no. 55 (2012): 1–22.
[49] Kelvin Chan, "In Crowded Hong Kong, Dead Find No Space to Rest in Peace," *Associated Press*, December 4, 2015, https://apimagesblog.com/blog/2015/12/04/hong-kong-no-space-to-die.
[50] Kerry Allen, "Why Chinese Are 'Turning' in Their Graves," *BBC*, June 25, 2018, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-44603990.

controversial that several elderly in Anhui Province elected to kill themselves when a new government order stated that everyone dying after a certain date would have to be cremated.[51] In contrast, Taiwan—the home of FGS and an island nation—has experienced a relatively greater acceptance of cremation and close to 100 percent of Taiwanese living in urban centers have elected for cremation.[52]

The FGS organization has been an important partner in this effort, making cremation a central part of its vision of modern Mahayana Buddhist practice. The pandemic allowed Ven. Jue Ji to enact the organization's transnational goals in the specific local context of her Central Texas Buddhist community. Ignoring contemporary medical data, she framed cremation as the most compassionate activity to perform on behalf of funerary workers to prevent the spread of the illness. The environment of the pandemic gave her new ways to frame transnational FGS ambitions in her local environment.

Vegetarianism

Beyond cremation, the FGS organization has also encouraged practitioners to adopt vegetarian diets and lifestyles that do not rely on animal products. This project has been especially important to Ven. Jue Ji, who has worked closely with the FGS-affiliated Buddha's Light International Association—a lay branch of the FGS community that makes vegetarianism a central concern. The pandemic provided her the opportunity to put the advantages of a vegetarian lifestyle in a new context. Calling the coronavirus a "living being we kill every day," Ven. Jue Ji urged practitioners to adopt a vegetarian diet as a means to counteract the irreparable karmic harm practitioners accrued by the daily use of hand sanitizer:

> We regard the COVID-19 virus as a living being and every time we use hand sanitizer to protect ourselves, we are killing hundreds of living beings like the coronavirus. We have no choice, the COVID-19 virus is threatening our life and it is because we have bad karma with the virus that we are in this situation. I encourage my community to take a vegetarian diet so that they can make more good karma and counteract the bad karma they make by killing the virus with hand sanitizer. Less killing now not only saves more lives but may help our future selves.[53]

As a Buddhologist, this view shocked me. In personal correspondence with other scholars of Buddhism and contemporary Buddhist practitioners, everyone I spoke with stated that viruses were not considered "sentient beings" (有情众生, *youqing zhongsheng*) because viruses

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[51] "Six Elderly People in China Kill Themselves 'Before Burial Ban,'" *The Guardian*, May 28, 2014. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/may/28/anqing-china-six-elderly-people-kill-themselves-burial-ban.
[52] Chen Hsin-yi, "Green Burials Catching On in Taiwan," trans. David Smith, *Taiwan Panorama*, April 2010, https://www.taiwan-panorama.com/en/Articles/Details?Guid=88ec5020-587c-46d7-9bf7-58b9713559f0&CatId=9&postname=Green%20Burials%20Catching%20On%20in%20Taiwan.
[53] Ven. Jue Ji, personal interview.

lacked the fundamental attribute of consciousness. When examining the full Buddhist scriptural tradition, it seems to be somewhat more conflicted on the topic. Some Vinaya texts make a distinction between allowable and unallowable water (Pali: *Udakaṁ akappiyanti sappāṇakaṁ*), defined as that which has small beings in it. Monks are permitted to carry a strainer to remove such beings, implying perhaps that such microbes might be considered "living."[54] An early sutra sees the Buddha describing his great care for all the small beings that might exist in so much as a drop of water.[55] In contemporary message board discussions on Reddit, Facebook, and other virtual communities, however, Buddhist posters are very clear that bacteria and viruses are not considered sentient beings. These claims rest on a variety of arguments, most notably contemporary scientific data on the volitional capacities (or lack thereof) of bacteria and other microorganisms. When the research that undergirds the present article was presented at the American Academy of Religion, the majority of the question-and-answer session was dominated by Buddhism scholars pointing out how Ven. Jue Ji's statements about viruses as sentient beings was incorrect or otherwise discordant with the Buddhist tradition's consensus.

Acknowledging her statement's significance, I emailed Ven. Jue Ji after our interview to follow up and ensure I did, in fact, understand her correctly. She reaffirmed her position—that we were all gaining potentially irreparable bad karma for the continued and necessary use of hand sanitizer—and sent me several links to websites with vegetarian alternatives to classic American dishes. In this regard, a lived religions methodology behooves us to take her comments seriously as a Buddhist teacher trying to make sense of their tradition in a confusing and climactic time. Ven. Jue Ji is part of a long tradition of Buddhist teachers using the environment of a pandemic crisis to promote tradition-specific goals.[56] Her comments are neither quirky, idiosyncratic, nor fundamentally incorrect from a scholarly perspective; rather, we see that the surrounding environment of a crisis allows her to think through her Buddhist doctrine in new and innovative ways that ultimately promote the larger, transnational goals of the FGS institution.

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[54] "Theravāda Collection on Monastic Law: A Translation of the Pāli Vinaya Piṭaka in English," Khuddakavatthukkhandhaka 15, trans. Bhikku Brahmali, *SuttaCentral.net*, https://suttacentral.net/pli-tv-kd15/en/brahmali?lang=en&layout=plain&reference=none&notes=asterisk&highlight=false&script=latin. However, the germ theory was unknown to the early Buddhists, so perhaps this is better read as preventing the ingestion of some sort of small insect or aquatic creature.

[55] "Middle Discourses: A Lucid Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya," Mahāsīhanādasutta 12, trans. Bhikku Sujato, *SuttaCentral.net*, https://suttacentral.net/mn12/en/sujato.

[56] See further: "Grand Master's Dharma Talk: From the SARS Prevention Blessing Ceremony (May 15th 2003)," *Buddha Gate Monastery*, https://buddhagate.org/gm-dharmatalk-sars/; Malcolm Huxter, "Coronavirus & The Buddha's Four Noble Truths," *Insight Timer Blog*, April 2020, https://insighttimer.com/blog/coronavirus-buddhism-four-noble-truths/; C. Pierce Salguro, "How Do Buddhists Handle the Coronavirus? The Answer Is Not Just Meditation," *The Conversation*, May 15, 2020, https://theconversation.com/how-do-buddhists-handle-coronavirus-the-answer-is-not-just-meditation-137966.

Concluding Analysis

Although an intimate case study of one local Chinese Buddhist temple framed by one nun's perspective on their work, this paper offers larger considerations on the nature of global Buddhism in a virtual world. Sociologist Ann Swidler famously theorized that culture functions as a "tool-kit" in which solutions can be found to novel problems.[57] In seeking a "Buddhist" response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the community made dramatic adjustments to its practice, including changing meditation formats and organizing virtual funerals and services. They also promoted innovative theologies concerning the efficacy of distance chanting and the living nature of the coronavirus. These changes had profound impacts on the makeup of the FGS Xiang Yun Temple community. Rather than encourage a greater number of non-Chinese-speaking Americans or local Texans with little knowledge of Chinese Buddhism to become involved in the temple's practice through these new virtual opportunities, the pandemic instead reinforced connections between the temple and other Chinese Buddhist communities around the world by emphasizing the ritual work that has historically attracted few non-Chinese congregants. It also promoted the doctrinal goals of the global FGS organization in the local context. FGS Xiang Yun Temple became a local entry point for Chinese-speaking community members into a larger, global network of Chinese temples. The combined effects of this were ultimately to limit the temple's involvement with spiritual seekers outside of its linguistically and culturally Chinese community.

The differing needs of a given temple's English- and Chinese-speaking communities reflect a division common, at least somewhat, to many Buddhist temples in America. Here we see that the crisis of the pandemic heightened rather than lessened these divisions, in contrast to what some religious leaders like Ven. Jue Ji herself expected with the ease afforded by virtual practice. As noted earlier, Chenxing Han has aptly identified scholarly recognition of this distinction as something that often comes to belittle, undermine, or otherwise obfuscate the contributions of Asian American Buddhists to the contemporary Buddhist landscape. The case study of FGS Xiang Yun Temple demonstrates how such a division might also help to highlight the vitality of the Chinese-speaking Buddhist community. Tied to the temple by more than doctrine or meditation (both of which can be studied at home), Ven. Jue Ji's Chinese-speaking community deepened their own Buddhist practice and knowledge in ways that bolstered the FGS Xiang Yun Temple community. Beyond even just Central Texas, the changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic ultimately served to strengthen the temple's ties to its global Buddhist community through novel technologies promoting closer ties to Chinese Buddhist families around the world. This article suggests that an increased reliance on virtual rituals accelerated by the pandemic might alternately

[57] Ann Swidler, "Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies," *American Sociological Review* 51, no. 2 (1986): 273–286, see particularly 278–280.

enhance transnational ties and weaken trans-linguistic ones, ultimately leading to more globally connected but linguistically and culturally discrete religious communities.

When I reached out to Ven. Jue Ji and the FGS Xiang Yun Temple team in the spring of 2025 for an update on religious life at the temple in the post-COVID world, no one answered my requests for a follow-up interview. The COVID-19 pandemic seems a long time ago, and, perhaps, we all would rather think about other things. Examining the temple's website, it seems that the pandemic period was, in part, a small blip in the structure of religious life at the temple. At present, activities are still divided between English- and Chinese-speaking communities, and the English-speaking community seems as robust as before, with several events happening throughout the week specifically noted as "English language." According to calendars found online, the English-speaking community meets for meditation, tai chi practice, a dharma service, and a lecture on Saturday mornings, with parallel events for multiple age groups. Sundays feature Chinese-language dharma services themed around chanting specific sutras or rituals for repentance, sangha offerings, and merit dedications. Some virtual elements remain in the weekly study sessions organized for both English- and Chinese-speaking communities. The extent to which the temple continues to participate in global funerary services for those unable to travel is uncertain. Conversations with funerary directors and other mortuary professionals outside the Buddhist context have made clear that virtual funerals will remain a component of our ritual lives for the foreseeable future. It is likely that will be true for those at FGS Xiang Yun Temple.

Despite the permanence of these changes, documenting how a community reacted to a crisis is important work. In his book *Crossing and Dwelling*, Thomas Tweed defines religion as "confluences of organic-cultural flows that intensify joy and confront suffering by drawing on human and suprahuman forces to make homes and cross boundaries."[58] In confronting the suffering of the pandemic, the temple mobilized elements of the Buddhist tradition that were intertwined with Chinese culture in novel ways at a pace heightened by the experience of adversity. As noted earlier, Kaitlyn Ugoretz has used similarly aquatic references in defining "eddies"—small, distinct formations felt in a river that affect the motion of the whole river itself. Often in flux, such eddies may be temporary or they may affect the river's flow for a lengthier time in small, nuanced ways.[59] The pandemic's move toward virtual practice altered, at least temporarily, the way the temple connected with its local community of spiritual seekers outside a linguistically Chinese environment and instead encouraged participation in a transnational, global network of Chinese Buddhist communities. This "eddy" became a touchstone that affected not only the Central Texas temple but the larger global Buddhist community as well. As it dissipated (at least potentially) the flow of the river itself holds onto its trace and remains, in part, altered. The

[58] Thomas Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 54.
[59] Kaitlyn Ugoretz, "Eddies in the Stream: Networked Flows of Spiritual Commodities in Global Shinto," *Transnational Asia* 8, no. 1 (2024): 1–21, doi:10.25615/ta.v8i1.129.

case study of FGS Xiang Yun Temple, therefore, represents an opportunity to evaluate how technology, crisis, and spiritual need have roles in shaping the future of global Buddhism.

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