Transnational immanence: the autopoietic co-constitution of a Chinese spiritual organization through mediated communication

Pauline Hope Cheong[a]*, Jennie M. Hwang[b] and Boris H.J.M. Brummans[b]

[a]Hugh Downs School of Human Communication, Arizona State University, AZ, Tempe, USA; [b]Département de Communication, Université de Montréal, Montreal, Quebec, Canada

Information and communication technologies are often cited as one major source, if not the causal vector, for the rising intensity of transnational practices. Yet, extant literature has not examined critically how digital media appropriation affects the constitution of transnational organizations, particularly Chinese spiritual ones. To address the lack of theoretically grounded, empirical research on this question, this study investigates how the Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation (Tzu Chi), one of the largest Taiwan-based civil and spiritual nonprofit organizations among the Chinese diaspora, is co-constituted by various social actors as an operationally closed system through their mediated communication. Based on an innovative theoretical framework that combines Maturana and Varela's notion of 'autopoiesis' with Cooren's ideas of 'incarnation' and 'presentification', we provide a rich analysis of Tzu Chi's co-constitution through organizational leaders' appropriation of digital and social media, as well as through mediated interactions between Tzu Chi's internal and external stakeholders. In so doing, our research expands upon the catalogue of common economic and relational behaviors by overseas Chinese, advances our understanding of Chinese spiritual organizing, and reveals the contingent role of digital and social media in engendering transnational spiritual ties to accomplish global humanitarian work.

Keywords: information and communication technologies; social media; autopoiesis; transnationalism; communicative constitution of organizations; nonprofit; authority; Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation; Taiwan; Asia

This article aims to address several prominent gaps in the literature on transnationalism and, in particular, Chinese spiritual transnationalism, by examining the mediated co-constitution of the Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation (Tzu Chi), one of the largest Taiwan-based spiritual nonprofit organizations among the Chinese diaspora. With the quickening cadence of globalization, transnational spiritual organizations are growing in significance as they shape the identities and daily practices of migrants around the world. Concomitantly, information and communication technologies (ICTs) play a cardinal role in creating and sustaining the networks of interconnected communities of practice that co-constitute these organizations (Khagram & Levitt, 2008; Levitt, 2003). However, due to a common focus on technological artifacts, extant research tends to overlook the role of mediated communication in this co-constitution.

*Corresponding author. Email: pauline.cheong@asu.edu

This knowledge gap is strikingly apparent in Chinese transnational studies, which have privileged the economic and political dimensions of globalization at the expense of analyzing social and spiritual dimensions. Traditionally, these studies have highlighted the interplay between the financial imperatives to migrate and family obligations, suggesting that *guanxi* is valued for cross-border relations, transnational business enterprises (Ong & Nonini, 1997), and entrepreneurial networks (Chen & Wellman, 2009). On the other hand, as Cadge, Levitt, and Smilde's (2011) review showed, research on non-Abrahamic religions in non-US locales remains scant. That is, studies on media and religion published in the last decade have over-emphasized Western religions and concentrated on Judeo-Christianity (Chen, 2007; see also Tracey, 2012), which not only limits our awareness of the great variety of spiritual organizations, but also overlooks the changing spiritual practices of immigrant populations.

Particularly noteworthy is that research on Chinese transnational religious practices has paid comparatively little attention to the role of the internet, although globally dispersed Chinese populations rely on digital media to enable the exchange of various resources and sustain ties to their physical church, *jia,* or spiritual home, thus transcending national borders (see Cheong & Poon, 2009). Most important with regard to the current article is that publications on the renowned Tzu Chi Foundation have primarily attributed the organization's stellar growth to the extraordinary charisma of its founder and leader, Master Cheng Yen. As Huang's (2009) treatise on Tzu Chi's 'transnationalization' suggests, the Master's philosophy of 'humanistic (or engaged) Buddhism' is communicated through various media, including the Tzu Chi website. However, the author did not examine the role of the internet in the organization's overall humanitarian outreach, let alone its role in defining the organization's identity. Chen (2007), on the other hand, showed that Tzu Chi has been resourceful in its media use and adopted a 'macrolevel approach within cultural studies' (p. 187), providing a broad sweep of Tzu Chi's media outlets and content instead of a systemic analysis of its digitally mediated communication. The author drew upon a single interview with the editor-in-chief of Tzu Chi's English quarterly to illustrate how the organization creates its cultural discourse at home and abroad. More recently, Liao (2012) discussed how Tzu Chi's 'multimedia' approach enables Master Cheng Yen's leadership, primarily based on a textual analysis of Tzu Chi's television dramas.

While these studies invite us to think more deeply about the ways a Chinese transnational spiritual organization, such as Tzu Chi, extends its influence through media across borders, they do not theorize or empirically investigate the mediated communication practices that enable the co-constitution of this kind of organization. To address this limitation, this article explores how ICTs are appropriated in Tzu Chi's transnational co-constitution. Digital appropriation includes discursive *reinterpretation*, which implies changes in language associated with the technological artifact, as well as *adaptation*, entailing the modification of both the discourse and use based on the flexibility of the technology to be modified by discovering a latent function or using it in a different way from the one originally conceived (Eglash, 2004). Specifically, the current study examines how Tzu Chi is co-constituted or 'coproduced' as a socio-technical network by different social actors through the appropriation of digital media and mediated communication, including Facebook.

To construct an innovative conceptual basis for this research, we develop a theoretical framework that draws upon Maturana and Varela's (1987) concept of 'autopoiesis', which refers to the idea that living beings are 'continually self-producing' (p. 43; see also Luisi, 2003). That is, within a dynamic network of ongoing interactions, an autopoietic unity emerges, characterized by operational closure in that it reproduces itself through the creation of boundaries with its environment. Accordingly, autopoietic unities are continuously focused on sustaining their own 'sense of self' or 'being', which means that their 'being and doing … are inseparable, and this is their specific mode of organization' (p. 49). The notion of autopoiesis allows us to

investigate how the appropriation of digital and social media enables Tzu Chi's enactment within and across Taiwan's borders as a collective 'self' with symbolic and material characteristics, such as a coherent discourse expounding a specific philosophy and recognizable artifacts. Hence, drawing upon a systematic analysis of interview and social media data, we illustrate how mediated interactions enable Tzu Chi's transnational co-constitution by making Master Cheng Yen's humanistic Buddhism present, which provides Tzu Chi members around the world with an inspirational and legitimate basis for their activities.

Tzu Chi offers a compelling case study for our investigation of organized Chinese spirituality in a transnational context, as it is 'simultaneously an intrinsically Taiwanese phenomenon and a cultural deterritorialization' (Huang, 2009, p. 6). While its headquarters are located in Taiwan, Tzu Chi operates in many countries in the Americas, Africa, Europe, and Asia (including Hong Kong, Mainland China, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Japan, and the Philippines). As O'Neill (2010) noted, it is 'the largest non-government organization in the Chinese-speaking world, with 10 million members in more than 30 countries'. 'It is [also] the richest charity in Taiwan, with annual donations of $300 million and an endowment of more than NT $26 billion ($780 million)' (p. 2). Tzu Chi's rapid growth makes its 'concept of universal love and a worldwide program that acts on it … unprecedented in the Chinese experience' (p. 2).

The organization's humanitarian programs primarily consist of Chinese migrants, middle-class overseas Taiwanese volunteers who gradually develop branches in accordance with 'local culture and social needs and in conformity with the Tzu Chi spirit' (Ho, 2009, p. 140). It defines itself as a volunteer-based, spiritual and welfare organization (Tzu Chi Foundation, 2010a) and was founded as a grassroots women's group in 1966. Inspired by the humanistic Buddhism of her own Master, Cheng Yen established Tzu Chi believing that Buddhism should alleviate spiritual poverty and material deprivation. Organizationally, this belief is translated into the implementation of four missions: charity; medical care; education; and 'humanitarianism', that is, promoting kindness and love through community voluntarism and media (including self-produced publications, radio, TV and internet programs). More recently, Tzu Chi has also started to focus on environmental conservation. As described on its website, the Mandarin word *ciji* ('compassion relief') captures the organization's overall mantra: 'to cultivate sincerity, integrity, faith, and honesty within while exercising kindness, compassion, joy, and selflessness to humanity through concrete actions', to 'promote the universal value of "Great Love"', and to 'fully employ the humanitarian spirit of Chinese culture to its utmost' (see Tzu Chi Foundation, 2011a, para. 2).

By studying the central role of media appropriation in Tzu Chi's worldwide enactment, this article provides valuable insights into the communicative dynamics of a prominent Chinese transnational spiritual organization. While ICTs are usually understood as being rather revolutionary in that they destabilize spatio-temporal orders and hierarchy, our study shows that digital and social media can also afford the sustenance and reinforcement of a spiritual organization by enabling its internal and external stakeholders to coproduce it communicatively as an operationally closed social system in a competitive global environment. Before detailing our study, we develop our theoretical framework in the next section.

Autopoiesis and the communicative co-constitution of transnational spiritual organizations

United in their conviction that communication does not merely happen *in* organizations, but plays an integral role in their continuous making, a number of researchers have studied the communicative constitution of nonprofit organizations (e.g. see Chaput, Brummans, & Cooren, 2011; McPhee & Iverson, 2009). These organizations are often run by employees and volunteers,

governed in non-traditional ways, and 'face significant challenges to their existence, let alone success' (Lewis, Hamel, & Richardson, 2001, p. 7). This is especially true for transnational spiritual nonprofit organizations, which need to be sensitive to fulfilling the expectations of external stakeholders and ensure the continued identification and commitment of internal organizational members. Given these challenges, it is important that we examine the emergent ontologies or 'modes of being' (Cooren, Brummans, & Charrieras, 2008) of these organizations, as they are communicatively co-constituted by various social actors via contemporary digital and social media.

To study this phenomenon, we draw on Maturana and Varela's (1987) idea of autopoiesis, which presumes that 'an autopoietic unit is a system that is capable of self-sustaining owing to an inner network of reactions that re-generate all the system's components' (Luisi, 2003, p. 51). Maturana and Varela's (1987) way of looking at the world is useful for our purposes because their perspective focuses on explaining how 'the organization of living things' (p. 33) emerges in ongoing interactions between 'beings' who exist on different levels of aggregation, such as biological cells or human beings, and, by extension, social collectivities, such as groups or organizations.

Looking at a cell's interaction with molecule X, Maturana and Varela (1987) observed that what takes place is 'determined not by the properties of molecule X but by the way in which that molecule is "seen" or taken by the cell as it incorporates the molecule in its autopoietic dynamics'. In other words, the 'changes that occur therein as a result of this interaction will be those changes caused by the cell's own structure as a unity' (p. 52). Moreover, the authors noted that the interactions between autopoietic unities can become recurrent or more or less stable (p. 75). For a given autopoietic unity, the activities of other unities that constitute its environment are thus perturbations that may trigger interior structural changes. Unity and environment are operationally distinct, yet structurally coupled through continuous interactions. Similarly, the autopoietic unity is 'a source of perturbations' for its environment, meaning that it does not instruct the environment (p. 96); rather, the outcomes of these interactions are determined by the environment's structure. In turn, living beings are autopoietic systems, caught up in a 'natural drift' (p. 109) of ongoing interactions with their environment, bringing forth their own worlds by, metaphorically speaking, 'laying down [their] path in walking' (Varela, 1987, p. 48).

While Maturana and Varela (1987) suggested that through structural coupling, autopoietic unities can form higher-order unities like groups, James Taylor (1995, 2001) introduced autopoiesis to conceptualize the communicative constitution of organizations – although his writings on this subject have not been taken up to conduct empirical research. Taylor (2001) proposed that Maturana and Varela present a constitutive view of social life that is inherently communicative: Higher-order unities' structural coupling is of a social kind and this coupling is made possible through communicative practices. Although human social systems follow the same 'laws' of autopoiesis, their distinctive feature is that they 'exist also as unities for their components in the realm of language'. Therefore, 'the identity of human social systems depends on the conservation of adaptation of human beings not only as organisms but also as components of their linguistic domains' (p. 198). These domains are characterized by operationally closed ways of interacting involving the recurrent use of similar language, artifacts, etc. Thus, collections of human beings who engage in regular interaction bring forth or enact (Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1991) their own, more or less autonomous, universes of meaning through their consistent and coherent 'languaging' (Maturana & Varela, 1987, p. 210). Languaging is essential because it enables human actors to refer to themselves vis-à-vis others and to the collectivity they coproduce through their interactions vis-à-vis other social collectivities. In other words, self-referentiality is important for the communicative co-constitution of organizations, as it enables the coproduction of their identities through the management of ongoing tensions between autonomy and adaptation

(or independence and interdependence) vis-à-vis their larger environments, and prolonged incongruence may result in deterioration or extinction.

Laying down the path of a Chinese transnational spiritual organization through mediated communication

Internal and external stakeholders of contemporary transnational spiritual organizations are enmeshed in exactly these kinds of communicative struggles for identity: Through recurring interactions, these organizations emerge as autopoietic unities with more or less distinct identities as they bring forth their own universes of meaning within which others (individuals, organizations) figure as potential perturbations. But what role do digital and social media play in the autopoietic processes of these organizations, engaged in distinguishing themselves in a global religious 'marketplace' replete with organizations that challenge their existential legitimacy or *raison d'être* because they are vying to occupy similar symbolic and material spaces through the use of limited resources?

Although prior organizational communication research by Taylor, Cooren, and colleagues has not looked at mediated communication per se, their studies suggest that an organization's self-constitution occurs through the interplay between the linguistic and the material. For example, their analyses show the central role of an organization's name (e.g. 'Apple Macintosh') because it enables the creation of a semantic point of reference that both unites and divides (e.g. see Brummans, Cooren, & Chaput, 2009). Hence, the name 'incarnates' the organization (incarnation literally meaning 'in-flesh-ment') and makes it present as a 'macro actor' that is constituted by other 'micro actors' (human beings, texts, artifacts, etc.), authorizes members to do things on its behalf, and provides people with a source of identification (or dis-identification). An organization is thus 'presentified' (Cooren et al., 2008) through all the human and nonhuman actors who incarnate it, suggesting that names, pronouns, logos, media, discourses, etc. all contribute to the incarnation and presentification that make the autopoietic co-constitution of an organization possible (see also Brummans, Hwang, & Cheong, 2013).

To extend this research, we propose that the appropriation of digital and social media is central to the self-production of transnational spiritual organizations, as it enables them to be incarnated in such a way that they are perceived and experienced as identifiable unities around the world. What is particular about these organizations is that their operational systems are grounded in specific spiritual philosophies, be they Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, or other, as well as cultural values. These systems can therefore be seen as institutional incarnations or manifestations of such philosophies and values. In this article, we aim to understand how the appropriations of ICTs enable a collectivity of individual Chinese actors to engage in communicative practices that coproduce this kind of organization transnationally as an autopoietic unity. Thus, we explore how these human agents appropriate various technologies (nonhuman agents) to speak or act on the organization's behalf (Cooren & Taylor, 1997) and, in turn, contribute to its presentification. These social actors may be clerics, lay leaders, members, or even people who are not officially affiliated with the organization, such as interactants posting on its social media sites. Each of these actors' ICT appropriation practices have different degrees of import, for they contribute in different ways to the coproduction of its presence by giving it a voice and appearance that sets it apart from its environment.

As we suggested, conducting this study is important because relatively little is known about the role of digital media appropriation in the autopoietic co-constitution of Chinese transnational spiritual organizations, even though prior studies have discussed the historical ubiquity of other transnational faith-based organizations and their use of 'new' media, in particular early organizational incarnations of Christianity and Islam. For instance, Stamatov (2010) highlighted how

'long-distance advocacy' was initiated and enacted by Catholic and Protestant organizations in Europe in the sixteenth century and Turner (2007) discussed how information technologies have helped create a 'diaspora democracy' for global Islam. More closely related to our inquiry is recent research that highlights the appropriation of ICTs by Buddhists in Asian contexts to build community and gain influence. Lee (2009), for example, showed how Korean Won priests have created blogs for self-cultivation, empowerment, the development of new leader-member relationships, and the (indirect) deliverance of sermons. Another study highlighted how Buddhist leaders in Singapore practice various forms of 'strategic arbitration' by using the internet to facilitate the co-creation of information and expertise, under conditions where laity cooperation is elicited by retaining discretionary power among the leadership to determine informational and interpersonal outcomes and refrain from destabilizing the organization (Cheong, Huang, & Poon, 2011). Since these studies provide limited insight into the constitutive role of ICTs, we investigated the following research questions:

RQ1:   How do leaders of a Chinese transnational spiritual organization appropriate digital and social media to participate in the autopoietic co-constitution of their organization?

RQ2:   How do mediated interactions between organizational leaders, members, and non-members contribute to this co-constitution?

Case study

To examine these questions, we analyzed how Tzu Chi leaders account for their appropriation of digital and social media and how the mediated interactions they initiate play into the organization's co-constitution. Because we were interested in understanding Tzu Chi's broader communication ecology, given the importance of embedding communicative practices within the context of everyday work life as well as the contemporary convergence culture where different media systems interact amidst fluid media flows and the multiplicitous phenomenon of publishing online across platforms (Jenkins, 2006), we collected both offline and online data.

Data collection and analysis

The research for this article was part of a four-year, multidisciplinary, naturalistic study (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002), funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Council of Canada and the A. T. Steel faculty grant, Center for Asian Research, Arizona State University. This study investigates Buddhist organizing via multiple methods, including extensive archival and literature research, interviewing, participant and nonparticipant observation, and the systematic analysis of the Tzu Chi website and social media interactions. For this article, we triangulated interview and online data (Markham & Baym, 2009) because it allowed us to develop a rich set of complementary insights into Tzu Chi's transnational co-constitution.

To understand how Tzu Chi leaders appropriate digital and social media to participate in the co-constitution of their organization (RQ1), we analyzed in-depth face-to-face interviews with 12 directors or senior managers of various departments of the Da Ai Cultural and Humanitarian Centre ('Da Ai'), conducted in Taipei in 2011. Da Ai ('great love' in Mandarin) plays a pivotal role in enacting the organization's missions and constitutes its heart in terms of all things related to media (see O'Neill, 2010). The interviews were semi-structured, lasted on average 60 minutes, and asked people to reflect on their management practices in view of their media use, work motivations and the role of Master Cheng in their work. Most interviews were conducted in Mandarin by the second author who fully masters Mandarin and Taiwan's cultural practices – some interviews included a mix of Mandarin and English. All interviews were

transcribed (totaling approximately 200 pages), where necessary translated into English, and then analyzed thematically (see Lindlof, 1995; Ryan & Bernhard, 2003; Van Manen, 1990).

The latter implied that we 'reflectively [analyzed] the structural or thematic aspects [of Tzu Chi leaders' accounts]' (Van Manen, 1990, p. 78), focusing on those aspects that showed how leaders made sense of the role of their media appropriation in the co-constitution of their organization. To accomplish this, we repeatedly read our transcripts (often while simultaneously listening to our audio recordings and checking our field notes). This repeated reading allowed us to identify recurring points of reference in the data, such as 'compelling incidents, sequences of action, repetitive acts, and other critical details that inform[ed our] understanding of the scene' (Lindlof, 1995, pp. 219–220) – Van Manen (1990) refers to these reference points as 'fasteners, foci, or threads around which the phenomenological description is facilitated' (p. 91). Looking at the regularity with which these foci resurfaced then enabled us to define two related themes or '[essential] structures of experience' (Van Manen, 1990, p. 79), capturing leaders' specific ways of accounting for the role of their media appropriation Tzu Chi's coproduction (see first part of next section). While keeping these main themes in mind, we subsequently reexamined our data to uncover and correct any inconsistencies or misinterpretations in our initial analysis.

To understand how mediated interactions contribute to Tzu Chi's co-constitution as an operationally closed system (RQ2), we analyzed (1) Tzu Chi's Chinese and English Facebook sites (http://www.facebook.com/TzuChi.org?v=wall and http://www.facebook.com/pages/Tzu-Chi-Foundation/114315968643044?v=wall] and the Da Ai Facebook [http://www.facebook.com/Da AiTV]) for the 2011 calendar year (the Chinese Facebook started in November 2010 and currently has 35,990 'likes' or Facebook 'fans'; the English Facebook started in February 2011 and has 3609 'likes', 1 January 2013). To gain additional insight into Tzu Chi's engagement with the contemporary convergence culture, we also examined Tzu Chi's video channels (http://www. livestream.com/Da Aitv, which links to Facebook and Twitter, and http://www.youtube.com/ user/TzuChiDa Aitv/feed); the Da Ai Radio site (http://radio.newDaAi.tv/aod/index_in.php); and Tzu Chi's two official apps (i.e. one allows users to consume a wide range of Chinese media content through live TV/radio, podcasts, and RSS, and the other allows users to download and read the *Tzu Chi Monthly*). On Facebook, we located 176 (101 Chinese and 75 English) posts. We compared popular posts (i.e. posts that received a more than average number of likes or comments (i.e. $\geq 44,108/101 = 437$ likes or $\geq 2556/101 = 25$ comments for the Chinese Facebook; $\geq 1156/75 = 15$ likes and $\geq 87/75 = 1$ comment on the English site) to determine different types of appropriation. This analysis involved a constant comparative method of individually reading the online data to categorize data in view of our second research question, returning to the data for reexamination and confirmation, and then discussing our interpretations to ensure convergence and consistency. These research team discussions enabled us to select representative excerpts to illustrate our insights (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). As we will show in the second part of the next section, our analysis of Tzu Chi's communication ecology revealed the central role of multiple types of social media appropriation in the organization's transnational autopoietic co-constitution.

Tzu Chi's autopoietic co-constitution through mediated communication

Tzu Chi is a remarkably advanced organization that uses media to incarnate Master Cheng Yen's particular Buddhist philosophy around the world. According to her,

> media should only report what is true and moreover, guide the public in the right direction. What our society needs is peace and harmony. We should use the media to educate people and teach them the right values by reporting the positive, wholesome elements of society and humanity. I hope that the

media can be the means of reviving moral values and ethics, purifying people's hearts and minds, and cleansing the unwholesomeness in our society. (Tzu Chi Foundation, 2010b, para. 8)

As indicated, Da Ai plays a central role in enacting the Master's philosophy transnationally. According to Da Ai's director, '[Da Ai] is her eyes and ears to Tzu Chi in the world' (O'Neill, 2010, p. 60). Instead of focusing on gossip and sensationalistic entertainment, Da Ai employees and volunteers work to purify the minds of audiences through 'wholesome media' (see Tzu Chi Foundation, 2010b). Hence, older and newer media are appropriated to reinforce a unique linguistic domain with more or less coherent symbolic and material features that reflects Tzu Chi's (and the Master's) philosophy. By communicating with people who are (or are not) Tzu Chi members through these media, Tzu Chi leaders, employees, and volunteers thus perpetuate their organization's way of making sense of the world and assure the continuity of their linguistic domain vis-à-vis ongoing environmental perturbations, as we will show next.

The role of leaders' media appropriation in Tzu Chi's autopoietic co-constitution

Our analyses indicate that Tzu Chi leaders engage the convergence culture in such a way that they embody and extend Tzu Chi's spiritual philosophy. Particularly, (1) they perceive digital media as extending karmic affinities and view digital media programming as sacramental; and (2) because they work in Master Cheng Yen's name, they consider their media work to be the enactment of her vision.

First, one concept that resurfaced frequently in Tzu Chi leaders' accounts was 'karmic affinities' (*yinyuan* in Mandarin). *Yinyuan* generally implies the idea that we are 'bound' to each other through cause-and-effect relationships, both in this life and in previous or future ones. For this reason, our positive or negative emotions and actions are believed to come to fruition in the form of positive or negative circumstances for ourselves and others.

In several accounts, interviewees shared how they work to construct 'positive news' and maintain 'open, universal and free' media access to foster *yinyuan* across the globe. For instance, one Da Ai program manager explained why she quit her work at a commercial media outlet to join Tzu Chi's leadership. Since she understood karmic affiliations and its emphasis on the meritorious relationship between cause and effect, she saw her work as fulfilling Tzu Chi's worldwide missions and, thus, as avoiding reincarnation to inferior states in future lives:

Listening to the Master, I began to comprehend the importance of discerning between good and evil. Therefore, I gradually realized that my news occupation does not benefit society and may even stir up social unrest … I began to fear because you reap what you sow. There is a story about an author who descended through eighteen levels of hell because his writings inspired others to think and do bad things. Therefore, since retribution is so miraculous, I decided not to harm society by resigning from my corporate job.

As this account shows, this manager believes that her work at Tzu Chi is sacramental, an act of redemptive purification. She appropriates digital media to tell stories that provide moral examples and contribute to society in positive ways. More specifically, she views her media work as a manifestation of Tzu Chi's philosophy, which is not primarily driven by audience ratings. In turn, this account shows how this manager's digital programming to create content that alleviates global suffering and advances well-being plays into the advancement of Tzu Chi's operationally closed universe of meaning.

Similarly, Da Ai's media operations manager justified open access to Da Ai's satellite television programming and a change in their digital media content production by framing their media development strategy in terms of *yinyuan*:

> How do we efficiently reach audiences now and in the future? Its terrestrial satellite, websites, mobile devices, everything, to let more people watch and receive our signals. We use nine satellite transponders to communicate to the whole world. Only places like the North Pole, and the middle of Africa cannot receive the signal. We don't lock the signal … So if you want, if you have the *yinyuan*, you can receive it … The other is new media … [They] can reach the [whole] world, so we need to attract more people to our site … because Da Ai TV is all about video and audio, so now we put more videos online. You can easily touch your mobile device to access … so we connect everything and integrate content. For our future, we need to think about this experience and restructure.

While this statement illustrates how the global telecommunications infrastructure is consistently adapted to incarnate Tzu Chi's philosophy, it also demonstrates how digital media appropriation feeds into the communication through which the organization is co-constituted transnationally as an identifiable linguistic (and material) domain. Hence, we see how this manager views the appropriation of media in terms of the *yinyuan* concept, so that this appropriation makes sense in the context of Tzu Chi's languaging and serves the operationally closed dynamics through which Tzu Chi is constituted as a collective, organizational self in relation to its larger environment.

Another example of this autopoietic co-constitution was provided by the director of Tzu Chi's internet radio department. At the time of our research, the organization was in the midst of organizing the theatrical adaptation of the 'Water Repentance' text to show how 'human beings have created negative karma as a result of their afflictions and inner impurities and urge all to sincerely reflect and repent' (Tzu Chi Foundation, 2011b, para. 1). Referring to this major event, the director stated:

> Everyone is pure and good-natured. We can collectively unite this goodness to welcome peace, good fortune, and a nice climate. All these relate to everyone but not many know about it. Therefore, we use the show to explain Master's views. There are many people doing repentance. At Tzu Chi, this means: present my own body to speak about truth. So we will try our best to find these stories, hire someone to record something, help him or her with the editing. Then during the daily radio show, everybody can hear different repentance stories.

Here, we see that this Tzu Chi leader accounts for the use of internet radio to convey her organization's (and Master Cheng Yen's) message, both in Taiwan and abroad. By recording people who 'let their bodies speak about the truth' of their own experiences and playing these recordings during her show, they come to speak on behalf of Tzu Chi and make its worldview present. Also in this case, then, a particular medium is adapted to incarnate Tzu Chi's philosophy: internet radio becomes a channel for encouraging people to reflect on their own lives. As the Master stated, 'Their example inspires us to realize that the Buddhist teachings are in fact very connected to our everyday sufferings and can transform our lives if we practice them. These stories are truly modern sutras [canonical Buddhist texts]' (Tzu Chi Foundation, 2011c). Thus, by telling their stories, which are then made public through the internet, people also help to lay down Tzu Chi's path in communicating, and by using Tzu Chi's languaging, they sustain its operationally closed linguistic domain.

Second, interviewees noted that they do not appropriate digital media based on a set recipe dictated by the Master, but by using her teachings and mantras as guiding organizing principles. Thus, they feel emancipated in their work and 'empowered' in their leadership because they intervene in critical and pressing matters. The media operations department manager illustrated this by stating:

> The most important in Da Ai TV is the philosophy … to attain our goals to purify people's hearts for harmony [in] society … If we want to purify people's hearts, it is most important to use media. If we talk one by one, this cannot happen. So we [refer to] the Sutra of Immeasurable Meanings … the seed,

one seed becomes [many seeds] … So, [working at] Da Ai TV, I don't feel there is any limitation. We just feel what we need to do, we do, and report to the Master because we know we are doing things for Da Ai to promote and embody the words of the Master.

The sutra of reference here postulates that '[e]veryone has the same sincere pure heart as the Buddha'. Its aim is to inspire 'people to vow to unlock their intelligence, to attain purity in the chaotic life and to bring benefits to all sentient beings'. In turn, it can enable people to use 'this immeasurable power, to unleash others' good conscience and altruistic selves' (Tzu Chi Foundation – Australia, 2007, para. 7). This manager refers to this scripture to explain how Da Ai's appropriation of media can be seen as the incarnation of Master Cheng's view of 'wholesome media', but we also see how his work activities and sensemaking contribute to sustaining Tzu Chi's operationally closed linguistic and material domain.

Thus, our analysis shows that leaders appropriate various media in such a way that they carry out the Master's Buddhist philosophy around the world. Yet by engaging digital media they also partake in constituting their organization in ways that adapt their operationally closed system to the changing global media landscape and ensure the continuation of their collective, organizational self.

The role of social media interactions in Tzu Chi's autopoietic co-constitution

Our analysis of social media interactions revealed three types of digital appropriation, each playing an important role in the organization's transnational co-constitution: (1) posting updates to inform and celebrate Tzu Chi's activities and accomplishments, (2) forwarding prayer requests to galvanize members toward communal interaction, and (3) presenting Master Cheng in social media.

First, Tzu Chi leaders employ Facebook to inform users (who may or may not be Tzu Chi members) about its activities and accomplishments. On average, the Chinese Facebook page is updated at least once a day, whereas the English page is updated on a monthly basis. Users typically react by praising the organization and/or the Master. The following interaction illustrates this dynamic:

Tzu Chi Foundation
On October 2, the Tzu Chi Foundation held a tea party to celebrate completion of the second phase of a new community it built in south Taiwan. They built it for those who lost their homes to Typhoon Morakot in August 2009. At the ceremony, 250 homes at the Shanlin Da Ai Community, in a suburb of Kaohsiung, were handed over to their new residents, taking the total of 1,002 homes. Construction of the new homes began on March 12 this year.

Tzu Chi Completes Second Phase of Community for Taiwan Typhoon Victims
[http://tw.Tzu Chi.org/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=874%3Atzu-chi-completes-second-phase-of-community-for-taiwan-typhoon-victims&catid=42%3Atyphoon-morakot&Itemid=160&lang=en]

Like · Comment · October 12 at 2:58am ·

[Person 1], [Person 2], [Person 3] and 21 others like this.
1 share
6 comments

[Commentator 1] Keep it up the good work!
October 12 at 3:09am · Like 2

[Commentator 2] God bless you all for all the kindness and help you had given to my country Philippines....from the bottom of my heart Thanks alot...Salute you all REAL LIVING HEROES;)
October 12 at 3:19am · Like 1

[Commentator 3] A humbling example of what our true purpose in life is.
October 12 at 7:42am · Like 1

[Commentator 4] our sincere Respect n Admiration to Tzu Chi members/volunteers n the dynamic Team ! Thank You all.
October 12 at 10:21am · Like 1

[Commentator 5] Keep it Up Tzu Chi.
October 13 at 6:23am · Like

[Commentator 6] I was very delight to meet with Tzu Chi members in United States during my recent tour... I feel really wonderful their activities…Thank you all for all members and followers... We will continue do our best the world. I'm very honor to organize very special prayer for World Peace here in our Sera Monastery in South India. Keep it Up Tzu Chi.
October 15 at 9:46am · Like

Examining this interaction, we see that this post does more than simply provide information about Tzu Chi's activities. It presents an instance of self-referential or 'auto-communication' (Cheney & Christensen, 2001), which is a pivotal communicative practice for the organization's self-production. By informing Facebook users about Tzu Chi's accomplishments, members around the world who post these kinds of messages enable the organization to 'pat itself (and its members) on the back', so to speak, and, thereby, legitimizes the organization's *raison d'être*. In turn, a post like this appears to 'call out' to Facebook users (who may be members or not) because their 'likes' and comments suggest that they are motivated to participate in Tzu Chi's enactment. This interaction thus illustrates how Facebook enables the autopoiesis through which this spiritual organization is constituted by showing how Tzu Chi's adaptation of this medium fortifies existing members' organizational identification and draws non-members into its universe of meaning.

This kind of interaction can be observed regularly on Tzu Chi's Chinese and English Facebook sites, although users participate much more actively on the Chinese site (where the most popular posts receive more than 437 'likes' and 25 comments). Moreover, we can see that this kind of mediated communication may facilitate transnational spiritual humanitarian work as it allows readers to draw inspiration from the organization's work and feel impelled to act in the name of the organization (and the Master) and carry out its (and her) missions. For example, in response to a post on Tzu Chi's earthquake victim relief efforts, one user got inspired to support the organization and wrote on 17 March 2011: 'I was touched the way Tzu Chi Foundation respond to the sufferings of people in Japan. My heart is saddened to see a lot of people suffer from the disasters. I am going to start collecting relief supplies to be donated to your foundation and I want to be part of the Tzu Chi Foundation. Buddha bless you all!'

Second, social media are appropriated to forward prayers requests. In so doing, members are galvanized to engage in collective intercession and action. The next interaction on the Chinese Tzu Chi Foundation Facebook site provides a telling example of this, demonstrating how the social media network is reinterpreted to incarnate the organization's philosophy:

Tzu Chi Foundation
[Forward] Everyone please pray for the student [student's name]! [http://vmedia2.TzuChi.net/pray2/index.htm]

[Content] I am a recent graduate from Tzu Chi High School. On June 11, we held a solemn graduation ceremony in the Jing-Si Meditation Hall. However, the day after, our student, [student's name] (she is currently in her 6th year), had a terrible car accident on the road near the school due to inattentive driving. Right now, he is in a coma in the intensive care unit of the Tzu Chi General Hospital.

I think, to be able to meet each other on this human path, making a connection, must be due to very special karma. I always believe what Master says: the rise of karma is never extinguished.

I know the power of prayer is very great. And today what we can do is accompany him silently, but also pray for him. I believe positive praying will become the power for his recovery. I would like my Tzu Chi aunts and uncles to spread this news to everybody and have everyone pray for him together. We will also recite the Heart Sutra for him and, if you have the habit of reciting the Heart Sutra, please don't forget to include him in the dedication.

Like · Share · June 14 at 8:36pm ·
522 people like this.
229 comments

[Commentator 1] Amitofo… [a prayer to Buddha Amithaba, Tzu Chi's principal Buddha]
June 15 at 1:53am · Like

[Commentator 2] sincerely praying be well soon:)
June 15 at 2:01am · Like

[Commentator 3] sincerely praying, praying for regaining your health soon!
June 15 at 2:07am · Like

[Commentator 4] praying for the student [last name]!
June 15 at 2:07am · Like

[Commentator 5] add oil!! [Chinese expression: keep going, you can do it]
June 15 at 2:17am · Like

[Commentator 6] _/_ [symbol representing two hands held together in Buddhist prayer]
June 15 at 2:23am · Like

[Commentator 7] I believe you will be able to overcome the difficulty – add oil!
June 15 at 2:23am · Like

Here, the user comments show how mediated communication plays into the coproduction of Tzu Chi's linguistic domain, characterized by its own particular terms (*Amitofo*; *Namo guan shi yin pusha*), expressions (*gan'en*, 'giving thanks'), symbols (e.g. _/_ signifying 'hands clasped together praying piously'), sutras, and aphorisms – the organization has even developed its own sign language. Thus, this excerpt illustrates how Tzu Chi leaders use Facebook posts to shape the organization, yet also how comments by online interactants help to coproduce and sustain Tzu Chi as an autopoietic unity. Multiple linguistic elements help to make the organization present and contribute to the constitution of the symbolic and material membrane that distinguishes it from its environment. By posting this message, liking, and posting positive comments and prayers, people appear to believe that they can put the organization's Buddhist philosophy into action. Many comments are indicative of their belief that their small communicative acts can actually make a difference in relieving the suffering of the injured student. Indeed, it is not uncommon to see Facebook posts that solicit (or respond to) prayers and intercessions,

particularly for peace in the world, and for those who are suffering in different parts of the world. As the above example shows, Facebook communication thus contributes to the transnational enactment of Tzu Chi's philosophy and the worldwide co-constitution of the organization as a higher-order autopoietic system.

What is also interesting – although not shown in the interaction above – is that commentators start interacting among themselves. For instance, one commentator regularly posted updates about the student's recovery. We observed the same kind of interaction on the Da Ai internet radio site. On 10 June 2011, a popular radio host posted a message about his recovery from an illness, followed by many prayers in the form of comments. In this case, Da Ai internet radio, which enables listeners to interact with hosts while their program is going on, was transformed into an online venue for the expression of joy and exchange of encouragements and prayers.

Third, in line with our analysis of Tzu Chi leaders' accounts, our analysis of social media interactions reveals that the organization appropriates its social media sites and online video channels to make Master Cheng Yen present in the lives of ordinary people and to allow them to have more or less 'personal' contact with her. Although the Master does not have a personal Facebook account, Tzu Chi leaders adapt the site to make her part of people's social network and communicate 'directly' with them. Facebook thus enables leaders to make her speak – and to speak on her behalf – *in her absence*. This is accomplished, for example, by posting what they call 'Master's Teachings' on the English site, such as 'Our mind is very powerful; with one thought, we conjure up many things. The Buddha describes the mind as a dexterous artist' (Tzu Chi Foundation Facebook post 27 July 2011). On the Chinese site, leaders post the Master's daily address to Tzu Chi volunteers. While the Master's words can simply be taken as inspirational quotes, they actually give many users the sense that the Master is speaking to them and guiding their lives. As one user commented, 'The more I know about Tzu Chi and Master's thoughts, the more I admire Master! Looking at myself, I feel ignorant, small, and selfish' (Tzu Chi Foundation Facebook comment, 11 October 2011). Moreover, these daily posts are often complemented by links to her complete teachings and video clips of her speeches on particular topics or by songs that transform her teachings into music and thus enable people to incorporate her words by singing along. All these examples show how Tzu Chi leaders adapt the contemporary convergence culture to presentify their founder and enact her authority. And by enabling those who frequent these sites to interact with her in this way, organizational members and non-members across the globe are given the opportunity to partake in coproducing Tzu Chi's operationally closed universe of meaning.

Discussion

In this article, we have investigated how leaders of a Chinese transnational spiritual organization appropriate digital media to participate in the autopoietic co-constitution of their nonprofit organization and how social media interactions between various actors contribute to this co-constitution. The results of our analyses have several important implications for research on the internet, transnationalism, and civic engagement in Chinese societies.

First, Luisi (2003) noted in his review of research on autopoiesis that as open systems, living organisms must operate within 'an interesting contradiction between the biological autonomy and at the same time the dependence on the external medium' (p. 54). As our analyses have indicated, this same principle applies to higher-order unities like spiritual organizations: '[T]he perturbations brought about by the environment are seen as changes selected and triggered by the inner [organizing processes of these organizations]' (p. 49), which are enacted though mediated communication. Thus, social media appropriation and mediated communication by organizational leaders, members, and online interactants play a *vital* – in the literal sense of the word – role in these

organizations' ongoing adaptation and autonomy by enabling (and constraining) the reproduction of their social collectivities, grounded in particular spiritual philosophies. As we have shown, these organizations are co-constituted through self-referential ('auto-')communicative practices, such as informing internal and external audiences about the organization's accomplishments or making spiritual leaders' mantras present on an iterative basis. What is particularly interesting, in this regard, is how essential seemingly ordinary, even trivial practices like posting Facebook messages are for the enactment of these organizations; they 'scale up', one social media post at a time, to reproduce the unity of its more or less coherent linguistic and material domain. Therefore, this article demonstrates how useful it is to see transnational spiritual organizations like Tzu Chi as autopoietic systems with specific symbolic and material features that emerge within our current convergence culture and are made present (Cooren et al., 2008) through ongoing appropriations of digital media.

Correspondingly, Castells (2009) has argued that contemporary communication networks are dialectically composed in that social actors program their goals and operating procedures while their structure evolves in a more or less flexible, fluid manner. Communicative power is thus expressed through local, national, and transnational socio-spatial networks that reproduce power relationships through a variety of social practices and organizational forms. The autopoietic co-constitution processes we have examined by studying the case of Tzu Chi are fueled by interactions between different actors, many of whom hail from Taiwan, but also other parts of the world. They show the subtle, complex exercise of power, predicated on communicative actions to build a consensual universe of meaning. Hence, Tzu Chi may be seen as an impressive organizational 'machine' with clear material artifacts, such as a sophisticated telecommunications infrastructure, hospitals, recycling stations, etc. in Taiwan and beyond. Our analyses illustrate, however, that 'the' organization only exists at the grace of ongoing and mediated interactions between leaders, members, and non-members, which make the social system present as an identifiable unity on a global stage. Tzu Chi is therefore not an abstract, objective entity, but a 'virtual self', a social collectivity that acts as a coherent whole, yet lacks a central agent (see Varela, 1999). In turn, we see that the notion of 'organizational membership' becomes increasingly vague, as diasporic and even non-members are called out to participate in this coproduction, which blurs the boundaries between the organization's internal and external stakeholders. ICTs play a significant role in this presentification, but their role is not causally determined. Rather, ongoing mediated communicative acts coproduce the transnational logics that manifest Tzu Chi's spiritual philosophy of universal love, and the success of the organization's global aspirations and operations depends on their constitutive force.

According to O'Neill (2010), since Tzu Chi's 'mediatization' puts Master Cheng Yen in the spotlight, it may seem like the organization's constitution depends on one central agent. However, the Master persistently denies that she constitutes Tzu Chi *by herself* and asserts that employees and volunteers should be credited for the organization's transnational co-constitution. Rather than appropriating media to create a cult of the personality, then, organizational leaders and members appropriate media 'to spread the message of Tzu Chi, especially overseas' and see 'the focus on Cheng Yen [as] a means to achieve this … not an end' (O'Neill, 2010, p. 56).

These insights are important because they expand the catalogue of economic and relational behaviors commonly attributed to overseas Chinese by highlighting the divergent transnational engagements of Chinese actors in civic collaborations and spiritual humanitarian work to build global civil societies. According to Chan (2008), transnational networked organizations are often ideated as 'embodiments and carriers of global civil society, yet these assessments remain incomplete due to a lack of empirical research on their internal dynamics' (p. 232). In view of this observation, the rich case we have analyzed shows how digital media afford

transnational practices and illuminates the role of a Chinese spiritual nonprofit organization in engendering social change for the betterment of people across the world.

Second, understanding the constitutive properties of ICTs is heuristically innovative, as digital media are popularly celebrated for their subversive potential to destabilize institutions and enervate authority. Our study demonstrates that spiritual networked organizations can provide the vision and resources to engender collaborative action and social change. As we have shown, investigating how mediated autopoietic processes enable spiritual philosophies to be incarnated in the form of transnational spiritual organizations illustrates how these kinds of organizations are brought and kept 'alive' through posting social media messages, online interactions, etc. – among other forms of communication. While social media certainly allow for contestation and debate, we observed comparatively few critical or contentious comments within the discursive domain of Tzu Chi's social media (in 2011, approximately 32% of the comments on the Chinese Facebook could be deemed as critical and within this subset, many were phrased as questions; 1% of the comments on the English Facebook were critical) – interestingly, Hutchings (2011) observed a similar operational closure in a Christian organization where the pastor's authority is reinforced by exhortative chatroom discourse. For example, on 2 July 2011, someone responded to a Tzu Chi Facebook post about karmic affinities by writing: 'not to be a fly in the ointment but I think these things – karmic affinities – probably have scientific explanations. If we want Buddha's healing message to reach the suffering in the world we need to abandon superstitious beliefs, such as karmic affinities.' There were no follow-up posts that critiqued the sender or this viewpoint, although we did observe posts that expressed how proud individuals felt to be a Tzu Chi member or volunteer. Moreover, on 27 September 2011, slightly critical comments were posted in response to Tzu Chi's disaster relief in North Korea. Of 25 comments, two expressed the view that Tzu Chi should not be working in North Korea, but most interactants supported the humanitarian efforts by expressing gratitude in the form of writing *gan'en* (giving thanks) multiple times. Interestingly, one post pointed out that Tzu Chi's 'universal love' principle should not preclude geographic areas and cultural groups, and attempted to 'correct' the prior dissenting posts' misperceptions by posting a rhetorical question about Tzu Chi's vision, thus reinforcing the coherence of its linguistic domain.

There are several plausible reasons for this focus on discursively maintaining harmony. One obvious reason is that Tzu Chi leaders and followers' desire for harmony and concatenate online-offline interactions reflects the Chinese culture of collectivism and conflict avoidance (see Leung, 1988). A more compelling reason, though, is that Master Cheng advises members not to become defensive or aggressive in view of critique, but to focus on creating understanding and expressing compassion. As she says, 'Only when we humble ourselves and respect others can our presence open other minds' (Tzu Chi Foundation – Philippines, 2011). Critical (or negative) comments on Facebook or other online forums are thus seen as opportunities for cultivating Tzu Chi's philosophy of mindfulness (see Brummans et al., 2013). However, the reason that corresponds most closely with our analyses is that Tzu Chi leaders and members are concerned about saving their organization's 'face' – and, accordingly, their own individual face. As we have shown, their mediated communicative activities concentrate on organizational *mianzi* (face-saving) by bolstering the reputation of their virtual collective self in a global environment from which it tries to distinguish itself, yet on which it also depends. Hence, our analyses indicate that Tzu Chi leaders and members are driven by their desire to present a coherent, positive collective self (see Goffman, 1959) by communicatively reinforcing the distinctness and uniqueness of their linguistic domain. For instance, the editor-in-chief of *Rhythms Monthly*, which is supported by Tzu Chi, told us that he hoped that Tzu Chi would become 'a future symbol of Taiwan', so that 'when [people] think of Tzu Chi, they think of Taiwan'. Furthermore, our field observations and interviews reveal how preoccupied 'Tzu Chi *ren*' (an often used Mandarin term, implying 'Tzu

Chi people') are with preserving their organization by creating an organizational history. For example, during our first visit to Tzu Chi in 2007, we observed how 'every event is recorded, particularly those events in which Master Cheng Yen participates' (Field notes, 15 July 2007). As one of the managers of Tzu Chi's public relations department explained, this is done 'for when Master Cheng Yen is no longer there'. In addition, the manager noted that Tzu Chi had recently been officially recognized as a 'new school in Buddhism', which was significant because it would allow people to see that Tzu Chi's humanistic Buddhism is, as he said, 'one of a kind'. Observations like these suggest that Tzu Chi leaders and members realize how essential it is to ensure the continuity of their organization in an environment with similar organizations, especially since they know that their leader and founder will pass on. Their archivization 'fever' (Derrida, 1995) originates, therefore, from their desire to preserve their organization's present and future existence within the ongoing processes of its erasure through their communicative practices.

Third, given that little research has looked at the role of digital technologies in the voluntary sector (Kenix, 2008), the autopoietic perspective we have developed and applied in this study presents an alternative lens for understanding the role of transnational Chinese nonprofit organizations in view of the technological affordances of emerging media. Our findings reveal that the autopoietic co-constitution of an organization goes beyond leaders' construction and framing of the internet as a suitable vehicle for the creation of sacred communal unity. Rather, leaders and members reinterpret and engage the convergence culture co-terminously. Hence, this study underlines the importance of examining how spiritual organizations' 'core beliefs and patterns' (Campbell, 2012) are incarnated *in* everyday mediated interactions that enable the co-constitution of these autopoietic social systems. Additionally, our research reveals how the Chinese spiritual principle of *yinyuan* facilitates the revitalized appropriation of digital and social media to sustain goodwill and retributive justice in this life and the next to secure merit for future generations.

In sum, the autopoietic processes we have analyzed illustrate the mediated coproduction through which a transnational spiritual organization emerges vis-à-vis a global convergence culture filled with social collectivities that are pursuing similar missions. They reveal the intricate interplay between mediated and organizational communication, thus providing valuable insights into the ways organizational autopoiesis works through everyday interactions. In turn, our work further underscores the importance of understanding the context of new media appropriation beyond the Web 2.0 hype and demonstrates what Horgan and Wellman (2012) propitiously name 'the immanent internet', embedded in concrete, quotidian, and socio-historical settings. In this context, the notion of transnational immanence emerges not merely as an ethereal paradox, but more significantly as a profound and hybridized online-offline phenomenon in our mediated epoch, worthy of continued systematic research.

Future studies should extend this exploratory research by investigating how members account for their digital appropriations in greater detail than space would permit here, as well as the different ways in which mediated autopoiesis expresses itself in different contexts, to yield even finer, more complex understandings. For instance, future studies may examine additional Tzu Chi Facebook sites, since beyond the two official sites analyzed in this article, Tzu Chi members worldwide have also started regional and/or local Facebook sites (e.g. Tzu Chi USA currently shows 945 likes and Tzu Chi UK 3153 likes). Moreover, at present, only a comparatively small number of Tzu Chi members actively use Facebook. Hence, analyzing other social media data will reveal their role in the organization's autopoietic co-constitution. Future scholarship could also focus on articulating the similarities and differences between transnational spiritual organizations and spiritual social movements that frame their collective identity through shared texts to mobilize potential adherents and activists. As Benford and Snow (2000) suggests, to rectify social conditions, social movements typically frame issues by pitting 'us' versus 'them', which resonates with the autopoietic perspective we have presented here. Correspondingly, it would be

useful to examine how transnational spiritual organizations like Tzu Chi construct a 'repertoire of harmony' in contrast to a 'repertoire of contention' (i.e. a set of protest-related tools and actions that are available and developed within a particular time frame; see Tilly, 2003). Beyond this case, future research should also look at other transnational spiritual organizations that are adopting social media in their local and cross-border work, beyond those lodged in the Western hemisphere (see Tracey, 2012). Comparatively investigating the organizational incarnation of different spiritual philosophies is important, as it will help us understand more deeply how faith-based organizations lay down their paths in mediated communication.

Acknowledgements

Notes on contributors

Pauline Hope Cheong (PhD, Annenberg School for Communication, University of Southern California) is Associate Professor at the Hugh Downs School of Human Communication, Arizona State University. Her research focuses on the social and cultural implications of communication technologies, including the examination of religious authority and community. [email: pauline.cheong@asu.edu]

Jennie M. Hwang (PhD, State University of New York at Buffalo) is an invited researcher at the Département de Communication, Université de Montréal, Canada. Her research focuses on the effects of new technologies on individual well-being and learning, as well as children and media. [email: jennie.hwang@umontreal.ca]

Boris H.J.M. Brummans (PhD, Texas A & M University) is Associate Professor at the Département de Communication, Université de Montréal, Canada. His research looks at Buddhist organizing in various parts of Asia. [email: boris.brummans@umontreal.ca]

References

Benford, R. D., & Snow, D. A. (2000). Framing processes and social movements: An overview and assessment. *Annual Review of Sociology*, *26*, 611–639.

Brummans, B. H. J. M., Cooren, F., & Chaput, M. (2009). Discourse, communication, and organisational ontology. In F. Bargiela-Chiappini (Ed.), *The handbook of business discourse* (pp. 53–65). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Brummans, B. H. J. M., Hwang, J. M., & Cheong, P. H. (2013). Mindful authoring through invocation: Leaders' constitution of a spiritual organization. *Management Communication Quarterly*, *27*(3), 346–372.

Cadge, W., Levitt, P., & Smilde, D. (2011). De-centering and re-centering: Rethinking concepts and methods in the sociological study of religion. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, *50*(3), 437–449.

Campbell, H. (2012). How religious communities negotiate new media religiously. In P. H. Cheong, P. Fischer-Nielsen, P. S. Gelfgren, & C. Ess. (Eds.), *Digital religion, social media and culture: Perspectives, practices, futures* (pp. 81–96). New York, NY: Peter Lang.

Castells, M. (2009). *Communication power*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Chan, S. (2008). Cross-cultural civility in global civil society: Transnational cooperation in Chinese NGOs. *Global Networks*, *8*, 232–252.

Chaput, M., Brummans, B. H. J. M., & Cooren, F. (2011). The role of organizational identification in the communicative constitution of an organization: A study of consubstantialization in a young political party. *Management Communication Quarterly*, *25*(2), 252–282.

Chen, C. H. (2007). Building the pure land on earth: Ciji's media cultural discourse. *Journal of Media and Religion*, *6*(3), 181–199.

Chen, W., & Wellman, B. (2009). Net and jet. *Information, Communication & Society*, 12(4), 525–547.

Cheney, G., & Christensen, L. T. (2001). Organizational identity: Linkages between internal and external communication. In F. M. Jablin & L. L. Putnam (Eds.), *The new handbook of organizational communication: Advances in theory, research, and methods* (pp. 231–269). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Cheong, P. H., Huang, S. H., & Poon, J. P. H. (2011). Cultivating online and offline pathways to enlightenment: Religious authority in wired Buddhist organizations. *Information, Communication & Society*, 14(8), 1160–1180.

Cheong, P. H., & Poon, J. P. H. (2009). Weaving webs of faith: Examining internet use and religious communication among Chinese Protestant transmigrants. *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication*, 2(3), 189–207.

Cooren, F., Brummans, B. H. J. M., & Charrieras, D. (2008). The coproduction of organizational presence: A study of Médecins sans Frontières in action. *Human Relations*, 61(10), 1339–1370.

Cooren, F., & Taylor, J. R. (1997). Organization as an effect of mediation: Redefining the link between organization and communication. *Communication Theory*, 7(3), 219–260.

Derrida, J. (1995). *Archive fever: A Freudian impression* (E. Prenowitz, Trans.). Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

Eglash, R. (2004). Appropriating technology: An introduction. In R. Eglash, J. Croissant, G. Di Chiro, & R. Fouche (Eds.), *Appropriating technology: Vernacular science and social power* (p. vii–xxi). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.

Ho, G. (2009). *Challenges: The life and teachings of venerable master Cheng Yen*. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre.

Horgan, B., & Wellman, B. (2012). The immanent internet redux. In P. H. Cheong, P. Fischer-Nielsen, P. S. Gelfgren, & C. Ess. (Eds.), *Digital religion, social media and culture: Perspectives, practices, futures* (pp. 43–62). New York, NY: Peter Lang.

Huang, C. J. (2009). *Charisma and compassion: Cheng Yen and the Buddhist Tzu Chi movement*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Hutchings, T. (2011). Contemporary religious community and the online church. *Information, Communication & Society*, 14(8), 1118–1135.

Jenkins, J. (2006). *Convergence culture: Where old and new media collide*. New York, NY: New York University Press.

Kenix, L. J. (2008). Nonprofit organizations' perceptions and uses of the internet. *Television & New Media*, 9(5), 407–428.

Khagram, S., & Levitt, P. (2008). Constructing transnational studies. In S. Khagram & P. Levitt (Eds.), *The transnational studies reader: Intersections and innovations* (pp. 1–22), New York, NY: Routledge.

Lee, J. (2009). Cultivating the self in cyberspace: The use of personal blogs among Buddhist priests. *Journal of Media and Religion*, 8(2), 97–114.

Leung, K. (1988). Some determinants of conflict avoidance. *Journal of Cross-cultural Psychology*, 19(1), 125–136.

Levitt, P. (2003). 'You know, Abraham was really the first immigrant': Religion and transnational migration. *International Migration Review*, 37(3), 847–873.

Lewis, L. K., Hamel, S. A., & Richardson, B. K. (2001). Communicating change to nonprofit stakeholders: Models and predictors of implementers' approaches. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 15(1), 5–41.

Liao, P. (2012). The mediating role of mediatized religious content: An example of Buddhist institutional use of prime-time dramas. *Australian Journal of Communication*, 39(1), 37–52.

Lindlof, T. R. (1995). *Qualitative communication research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Lindlof, T. R., & Taylor, B. C. (2002). *Qualitative communication research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Luisi, P. L. (2003). Autopoiesis: A review and a reappraisal. *Naturwissenschaften*, 90, 49–59.

Markham, A., & Baym, N. (2009). *Internet inquiry: Conversations about method*. London: Sage.

Maturana, H. R., & Varela, F. J. (1987). *The tree of knowledge: The biological roots of human understanding*. Boston, MA: Shambhala.

McPhee, R. D., & Iverson, J. (2009). Agents of constitution in communidad. In L. L. Putnam & A. M. Nicotera (Eds.), *Building theories of organization: The constitutive role of communication* (pp. 49–87). New York, NY: Routledge.

O'Neill, M. (2010). *Tzu Chi: Serving with compassion*. Singapore: John Wiley & Sons.

Ong, A., & Nonini, D. (Eds.). (1997). *Ungrounded empires: The cultural politics of modern Chinese transnationalism*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Ryan, G. W., & Bernhard, H. R. (2003). Techniques to identify themes. *Field Methods*, *15*(1), 85–109.

Stamatov, P. (2010). Activist religion, empire, and the emergence of modern long-distance advocacy networks. *American Sociological Review*, *75*(1), 607–628.

Taylor, J. R. (1995). Shifting from a heteronomous to an autonomous worldview of organizational communication: Communication theory on the cusp. *Communication Theory*, *5*(1), 1–35.

Taylor, J. R. (2001). The 'rational' organization reconsidered: An exploration of some of the organizational implications of self-organizing. *Communication Theory*, *11*(2), 137–177.

Tilly, C. (2003). *The politics of collective violence*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Tracey, P. (2012). Religion and organization: A critical review of current trends and future directions. *The Academy of Management Annals*, *6*(1), 87–134.

Turner, B. (2007). Religious authority and the new media. *Theory, Culture, Society*, *24*(2), 117–134.

Tzu Chi Foundation. (2010a). Introduction to Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation. In *Introductory pamphlet to Tzu Chi.* Retrieved August 12, 2012, from http://www.scribd.com/doc/36043934/Introductory-pamphlet-to-Tzu-Chi

Tzu Chi Foundation. (2010b). *Wholesome media.* Retrieved January 8, 2012, from http://www.tw.TzuChi.org/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=485%3Awholesome-media&catid=80%3Amissionofculture&Itemid=180&lang=en

Tzu Chi Foundation. (2011a). Tzu Chi *missions*. Retrieved January 8, 2012, from http://tw.TzuChi.org/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=293%3Atzu-chi-missions&catid=58%3Atzuchi&Item id=283&lang=en

Tzu Chi Foundation. (2011b). *Synopsis of the sutra adaptation of the water repentance text*. Retrieved January 8, 2012, from http://www.tw.TzuChi.org/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=866&Itemid=328&lang=en

Tzu Chi Foundation. (2011c). *A modern sutra: Real-life stories of repentance.* Retrieved January 8, 2012, from http://www.tw.TzuChi.org/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=853%3Aa-modern-sutra-real-life-stories-of-repentance&catid=112%3Aseries-on-repentance&Itemid=322&lang=en

Tzu Chi Foundation – Australia. (2007). *Tzu Chi dharma teachings (sutra of immeasurable meanings).* Retrieved January 8, 2012, from http://www.TzuChi.org.au/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=309%3Atzu-chi-dharma-teachings-sutra-of-immeasurable-meanings&catid=101%3Aphilosphy&Itemid=265&lang=en

Tzu Chi Foundation – Philippines. (2011). *Master Cheng Yen answer commonly-asked questions about Tzu Chi.* Retrieved August 12, 2012, from http://www.TzuChizam.org/Tzu Chi/about-tzu-chi/faq.html

Van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy.* London: The Althouse Press.

Varela, F. (1987). Laying down a path in walking. In W. I. Thompson (Ed.), *GAIA, a way of knowing: Political implications of the new biology* (pp. 48–64). Hudson, NY: Lindistarne Press.

Varela, F. J. (1999). *Ethical know-how: Action, wisdom, and cognition.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Varela, F. J., Thompson, E., & Rosch, E. (1991). *The embodied mind: Cognitive science and human experience*. Boston, MA: MIT Press.