

# Weaving Webs of Faith: Examining Internet Use and Religious Communication Among Chinese Protestant Transmigrants

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*This paper examines the relationship between new media use and international communication that addresses religiosity and affirms users' standpoints occupied by transmigrants that are marginalized in dominant societal structures. Drawing from focus group interviews among recent Chinese Protestant immigrants in Toronto, we argue that new media "use" is broadened by users' cultural appropriation in situational contexts to include proxy internet access as accommodative communication given the political and legal constraints in their home country. Chinese transmigrants not only reinterpret and alter semantic associations that spiritualize the internet, they also engage in innovative strategies that involve the intertwining of offline and online communicative modes. These include deploying complementary media forms or communicating in codes that are mutually understood among participating members to facilitate intragroup networking among Chinese religious communities. Implications are discussed with regard to the importance of cultural norms and situational context in shaping mediated international communication.*

*Keywords:* New Media; Online Religious Communication; Transnational Networks; Chinese Immigrants; Cultural Appropriation and Resistance

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In recent years, the analytical ante has been raised in the areas of international and religious communication as nation-states respond to civil disturbances and heightened sensitivities concerning interreligious relations, and social cohesion. Such a revival prompts needed academic inquiry into the study of religion beyond sacred texts, as religion is critical in identity and community development in many parts of the world (Golden, Niles, & Hecht, 2002; Hecht, Warren, Jung, & Krieger, 2005; Kong, 2001). In addition, in light of web-based technology developments, expectations regarding the role of the Internet for advancing globalization and transnational communication have been raised (Chen, 2006). As a new avenue for religious communication, the Internet provides an international platform weaving new immigrants to their countries of origin, local places of worship, as well as to transnational religious movements. Given the increasing Internet adoption rates around the world, Internet use may facilitate a “diasporic public sphere” (Parham, 2004), a “safe” discursive space for identity-construction (Mitra, 2005) and debate among religious bloggers (Cheong, Halavais, & Kwon, 2008), and a “cultural sphere” for ethnically affiliated immigrants (G. Yang, 2003). Indeed, the Internet may play a more critical role than older media in global religious networks, or in what Levitt (2001) refers to as religiously relevant “social remittances” including religious ideas, beliefs, and social capital that is circulated from host to home countries. Although the Internet can facilitate geographical dispersion of religious groups (Helland, 2007; McAlister, 2005), scarce empirical research has focused on the communicative dimensions of transnational religious flows (Khagram & Levitt, 2008), rendering the mediated interrelationships between local and global religious connections a fertile ground for study.

Extant research on international migration and religious communication has seen two separate but related literatures. The first literature increasingly emphasizes the transnational dimension of migration, yet there are few studies on the forms and nature of transnational religious ties maintained by a growing number of “transmigrants” (Ebaugh & Chafetz, 2002). The second recognizes the webs of religious communication in transnational flows (e.g., Levitt, 2007), but this literature has paid scant attention to computer-mediated communication. This paper therefore seeks to integrate and expand both literatures by critically examining the role of the Internet in religiously related communication and analytically assessing the expectation that Internet use will enhance and expedite cross-border interactions between religious actors. Following calls for research in co-cultural communication strategies to explicate ways in which minority and marginalized members communicate within dominant societal structures (Orbe, 1998; Orbe & Spellers, 2005), we extend the traditional foci on face-to-face communication to show that examining online transnational religious communication can unveil innovative media practices, thereby broadening conceptions of Internet “use” to include immigrants’ creative weaving of online and offline communication, including proxy Internet access. Concomitantly, we investigate and discuss the extent to which the Internet is appropriated for transnational religious communication, particularly how users tactically enact their mediated communicative practices as resistance (de Certeau, 1984), under conditions of heightened religious sensitivity and potential conditions of censorship.

The foci and context of investigation here are the Chinese Protestant immigrants in Toronto, Canada. Recent studies point to the surge in spirituality in China including the rise in self-identified Christians reaching up to 40 million (Cody, 2007). Interest in spirituality in China is in part attributed to the quest for new value systems to replace the instability engendered by the abandonment of communist doctrine for market economies (Aikman, 2003). Moreover, issues of immigrant integration and management of religious diversity have long attracted academic and policy interest in Canada and the United States where significant shares of residents in cities like Toronto, Vancouver, Los Angeles, and New York are recent immigrants. Investigating the nature of transnational religious communication of Chinese immigrants should help provide a barometer of community building where ties to the (universal) Church family and house churches are valued, even as nation-state boundaries are being challenged by popular images of globalization and intensified transnational communication.

### **Religious Transnationalism: Whither the Internet?**

Historically, religious believers, especially those affiliated with world religions like Christians, Buddhists, and Muslims, have utilized a variety of older media including newspapers, radio, and television to propagate and fulfill their faith missions (Soukup, 2002). It is thus unsurprising that the introduction of newer media applications online has been heralded to advance dramatic changes to religious communities and leadership. Yet, such expectations have not been verified by studies lodged in particular locales and conditions of religious individuals' everyday Internet use. In the case of religious transnationalism, previous studies on Chinese migration highlighted the presence of transnational religious communication but mostly did not examine the role of newer media. For example, F. Yang's (2002) case study of Chinese transnationalism of a church in Texas identified multiple formal and informal ties between members, ministers, and missionaries with Christian organizations in Asia as members contribute knowledge, time, and organizational skills to overseas churches. Chinese migrants maintained their transnational relationships via letters, phone calls, and the sharing of religiously related magazines and tapes through visiting pastors or laypersons. However, findings of this study conducted between 1997 and 1999, during the nascence of the Internet's popularization, did not explicate the role of the Internet in facilitating the flows of religious communication. Similarly, Guest's (2003) ethnographic research of migrants in New York's Chinatown illustrated how local clergy and church members served as bridges when Chinese churches in Fuzhou received books, pamphlets, and tapes produced in New York from immigrants returning to visit or to serve as missionaries. Perhaps because the population studied comprised primarily of monolingual and low-income migrants who were presumably not Internet savvy, the role of the Internet was also not investigated.

More recently, in *God Needs No Passport*, Levitt's (2007) findings from four transnational communities in Boston, highlighted how many first generation

immigrants live transnational lives through religion. Levitt (2007) contends that transmigrants structure a “new religious architecture” that operates flexibly via transnational supply chains of religious artifacts and decentralized ritual practices. However, although technological innovations like television, videos, and a few websites were mentioned in her book, an explication of the role of online religious communication in supporting the proposed “global religiosity” was absent in her analysis. Yet recent research evidences rising numbers of Internet users who practice “faith online” (Hoover, Clark, & Rainie, 2004), highlighting the potential of the Internet to act as a global platform for the exchange of religiously relevant information, goods, and services, with consequences for transnational communication (Cheong & Poon, 2008). However, as the Internet is a metamedium (Agre, 1998), the notion of “Internet use” tends to be conflated and thus needs to be better understood with regard to new migrant standpoints (Hiller & Franz, 2004). More recently, Chen (2006) explored how the Internet affords transnational entrepreneurship among Chinese immigrants in Canada, and stressed the importance of investigating both online and offline contexts for international communication. Thus, we argue that the notion of Internet use and (non)use needs to be unpacked and critically considered in light of distinct contexts in which media is embedded.

### **Cultured Technology and Transnational Religious Appropriation of the Internet**

The Internet plays a significant role in facilitating globalization and transnational ties as newer media support a higher intensity of exchanges, new modes of transactions, and increase in transnational travel and contact (Portes, Guarnizo, & Landolt, 1999). According to O. Krueger (2004), the spread of religious ritual and dogmatic knowledge is increasingly reliant on Internet-based discourse in religious newsgroups and forums. Furthermore, people who find themselves in a religious minority are often enthusiastic about using the Internet to foster ties with other marginalized group members (Mittra, 2005). Therefore, for some migrant communities, such as the Chinese immigrants being examined here, the Internet appears to be offering a new opportunity for reestablishing the spatial bonds of fledgling religious community. Helland’s (2007) analysis of the early Usenet system, for instance, highlighted how Jewish and Hindu online forum users connected with others in their home countries as well as practiced long-distance rituals and cyber pilgrimages. However, what is less understood is how users shape Internet use in sync with certain social obligations and local conditions that promote or impede online religious connections, with implications for their transnational lives.

Indeed, a corpus of literature has argued that computer-mediated communication does not operate in a social vacuum. Instead, newer media is shaped by users, embedded in local contexts and social relations (e.g., Ess, Kawabata, & Kurosaki, 2007; Kling, 2000). This is relevant for transmigrants because the Internet may be subjectively appropriated by religious users in various ways. The level of technology appropriation, according to Eglash (2004), exists along a continuum of consumption and production. On one side, “reinterpretation” occurs on the consumer end of the

spectrum, with changes only in language associated with the technological artifact. In the middle of the spectrum is “adaptation” which modifies both the semantic association and use. Adaptation is based on the flexibility of the technology to be modified by discovering a latent function or using it in a different way as originally conceived. The strongest changes are “reinvention” at the production end of the spectrum, where the technological artifact is significantly altered and where new functions are created through structural change.

Broadly speaking, technology appropriation is an extension of the “social shaping of technology” perspective, which emerged as a critique to “technology determinism” (Mackay & Gillespie, 1992). According to Kling (2000), social context is influential in how people use online technologies, and thus affects the consequences of the technology for the maintenance of social relationships. Technology is pliant, bearing imprints of its domestication within specific cultural and ethnic enclaves (Leonardi, 2003) and reinvention in ways that embody critique, resistance, and even revolt (Eglash, 2004). For instance, fringe group members’ experimentation may reconfigure media and facilitate technological innovations outside of established corporate institutions (Sawhney & Lee, 2005). According to Mackay and Gillespie (1992), technology appropriation is integral for its cultural shaping, as people “may reject technologies, redefine their functional purpose, customize, or even invest idiosyncratic symbolic meanings in them” (p. 699). As such, Internet use or non-use may be attributed to the extent by which religious users reinterpret, adapt, and reinvent web-enabled applications within their daily locales. In the case of religious communication, these levels of appropriation may interpretatively constitute tactics of resistance (de Certeau, 1984), or assimilation, accommodation, and separation co-cultural communication strategies (Orbe, 1998) among minority ethnic, religious individuals on the margins of dominant society.

According to Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai (2005), the Internet represents a form of “cultured technology” as their analysis of an ultraorthodox Jewish community highlights how believers selectively use the Internet to maintain, even reinforce, the fundamental values of their community. As such, a “spiritual shaping of technology” perspective examines the extent to which religious adherents frame technology and create online narratives within a spiritually rich worldview (Campbell, 2005). More recently, Kluver and Cheong (2007) maintain that instead of secularization, technological modernization and religion mutually reinforce and coexist in Singapore, a highly wired city, as the Internet is shaped for community building by Asian religious leaders of diverse faiths.

In the context of transnational religious communication, in addition to local influences, spiritual shaping of the Internet may be further complicated by interacting conditions in both the host and home countries. As Levitt (2001) puts it, migrants create “transnational social fields” with core and extended activities that vary in complexity and scope, depending on migrant involvement as well as how the state and religious organizations interact within specific geographical contexts. It follows that for transmigrants, online and offline religious flows need to be considered within the social and political contexts in which they occur. Such transnational contexts can

be quite significant in influencing communicative behavior, as subsequent sections will show below, because the patterns of social interactions among Chinese immigrants appear to be contingent upon the political and institutional environments of their home country, in particular, constraints associated with the regulation of the Internet in China. Traditionally, diaspora is seen as antithetical to government control, and migrants may use the Internet to “narrowcast” to other members, thereby overcoming border restrictions and national regulations (Karim, 2003). The Internet may function as a site of resistance for activism, political and religious discourse in highly regulated societies (Ho, Baber, & Khondker, 2002). For example, Robinson’s (2004) analysis of websites devoted to the spread of religious fundamentalist beliefs suggests that the Internet is important for the creation of transnational religious identities among the Hindu middle class in the United States. Yet, the ability of religious actors to maintain rich and varied transnational communication may be adversely affected by uneven transnational social fields.

F. Yang (2002) highlights that transnational religious ties between the Chinese in the U.S. and China remain mostly informal primarily because of the Chinese government’s control of religious groups. The absence of a strong denominational infrastructure also encourages loose associations between congregants, with many believers in underground “house churches.” China, however, regulates both religious and Internet practices. While the post-Mao government has allowed limited religious freedom, the latter is subjected to legal restrictions (Potter, 2003). Internet use is governed by laws prohibiting “controversial” online content, protecting “state secrets,” sanctioning the employment of filters on websites and emails, as well as controls on Internet service and content providers (Opennet Initiative, 2005). These constraints raise questions regarding if and how Chinese migrants negotiate transnational religious practices, online and offline.

In sum, this paper examines the interface of international communication and the cultural shaping of new media as manifested in the relationships between transnationalism and Internet use for religious communication. In the following sections, we seek to investigate how recent Chinese immigrants approach the Internet and negotiate their religious ties with implications for their transnational lives. Specifically, the literature reviewed above raises the following research questions. In what ways do recent migrants view and utilize the Internet and other media, for the exchange of transnational religious relevant remittances and the construction of transnational religiously related ties? Given that recent migrant groups can create a new international religious architecture to facilitate transnational flows, how do they appropriate the Internet to participate in the rising forms of global religiosity?

## **Method**

This study draws upon focus group interviews that were conducted as part of a larger project on the Internet and religion in Toronto, located in the province of Ontario, Canada, from July 2005 to May 2007. This included interviews with religious leaders, ethnographic observations of religious services, as well as a website and hyperlink

analysis of religious organizations to provide rich contextual data from different perspectives (Yin, 1994). Historically and demographically, Toronto is ideal for studying transnationalism as it is a cosmopolitan city of approximately 2.5 million people, including new ethnic minority immigrants of various religions (Statistics Canada, 2001). According to the latest census, Chinese immigrants accounted for more than a quarter of the ethnic minority population in Canada. Toronto, together with Vancouver and Montreal, is amongst the top three cities of residence for more than 80% of immigrants from Mainland China (Statistics Canada, 2001). In addition, Toronto affords the opportunity to examine the role of the Internet in religious practice: The latest Canadian Internet usage survey report (Zamaria & Fletcher, 2008) shows that a large proportion of urban residents in Ontario use the Internet (75% in 2004, and 81% in 2007).

This study draws from three focus group interviews conducted among 24 Chinese Protestant immigrants who were recruited after one year of fieldwork in collaboration with local religious organizations, in line with recommendations from prior ethnographic research among Protestant Chinese immigrants advocating vigilance in building trust with local official and lay religious leaders over time (Guest, 2003). Given the research interests of this study, recruitment was targeted at current adult users of the Internet. All interviewees were first generation immigrants from China (16 females, eight males, with an average age of 33 years). The majority of them had been residents of Canada for less than five years. Generalizability is not sought with this sample. Instead, given the dearth of information on religious transnationalism, and to respond to the mandate for further grounded research to investigate “transnationalism from below” (Guarnizo & Smith, 1998), focus group interviews provide rich, in-depth data that are sensitive to the social context in which the data are produced (R. A. Krueger, 1997).

The discussion sessions typically lasted about 1½ hours and the groups met in a local residence near a large church identified by religious leaders as a regular gathering place for discussions and prayers. The authors, who are effectively bilingual in Chinese and English, led the interviews in Chinese. Participants were given the choice to respond in Chinese or English. Sessions began with the participants introducing themselves and they were then asked to discuss their perceptions of the Church and the Internet, and Internet use including transnational religious communication, information seeking, and community building. The project arranged for a \$50.00 honorarium and provided refreshments to all participants. The interviews were transcribed in full for textual analyses as well as the use of verbatim quotations for reporting the research (Barone & Switzer, 1995). They were then subjected to thematic codification using The Ethnograph software, version 5.0 for qualitative analysis and analytic interpretation in conjunction with memos constructed from field research (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). To standardize the presentation of the Chinese and English quotations from interview transcriptions, we have translated the Chinese responses into grammatically correct English. To protect the anonymity of the respondents, and in light of the sensitive information shared, personal names and identifiers are not mentioned, and acronyms, instead of names of the actual places, are used in this article.

## Analysis

Our interviews revealed that the Internet carries various affirmative and liberatory meanings for Chinese migrants. They have a largely positive approach to the Internet and use it for various religiously related purposes. Respondents described how the Internet was appropriated for transnational communication as web-enabled applications were reinterpreted and adapted to meet faith goals within the social milieu undergirding their local religious and transnational relationships.

### *Internet Perception and Appropriation for Religious Information Seeking*

For all respondents, the Internet was used regularly to communicate with others and for most to search for information, including religious information and instruction. Our respondents indicated that religion online presents several functional advantages over older media connections in terms of religious information seeking. The Internet is perceived to be “full of religious and cultural resources” and “valuable for nurturing the spiritual life.” For some, the Internet was seen as “critical” and “exceptionally helpful,” for others “a matter of convenience” for connecting to textual and audio forms of religious information, including devotional materials, scripture, bibliographies of saints, and Chinese translations of short stories and commentaries, sermons, and hymns. Their comments included the following:

I use the Internet mainly to locate more news and information about Christianity . . . when I need to clarify certain bible verses, look up songs for praise and worship and retrieve sermons from English and Chinese speaking pastors. . . . It is really convenient, like the library, and it's easier to go online for the information that you need.

I will log on daily to read the daily devotionals on the homepage. I have also subscribed to get short stories updates.

You can see the biographies of famous saints, bible movies, and articles about their lives online. The biographies are very interesting and beneficial for my spiritual development.

In particular, several respondents mentioned how their Internet use enables them to acquire sermons by certain pastors, to whom they previously had limited access. Here, some respondents indicated that the increased connections to a number of religious leaders online were helpful for spiritual growth, although a few were less enthusiastic about listening to unfamiliar pastors. Several comments touched on the positive aspects of accessing religious teachings online:

In the past, when you want to listen to the preaching of a certain pastor, you have to wait. . . . Even if he comes for a day or two, he cannot say very much. On the Internet, I can listen to sermons whenever I want. It is very convenient.

I am more focused when I listen to sermons online as I feel that the pastor is just preaching to me. I wear my headphones and stay focused on what he is preaching.



But in church, it is very tough to concentrate, as someone may cough, and another may sneeze during the service. If something comes up, I can stop the recording and listen to the sermon later . . . if there are certain parts that are harder to understand, I can listen to it again to gain a deeper understanding.

Every pastor and their main areas of emphasis in religious teachings are different. For example, one may emphasize the power of prayer; another may emphasize personal spiritual experiences. Therefore, I feel that listening to various sermons online helps my faith and increases my Bible knowledge.

According to Leonardi (2003), minority ethnic populations align their perceptions of the Internet with their cultural values regarding good communication. Specifically, in the case of religious communication, some emerging research points to how Christian email-based communities frame the Internet within a sacramental world-view (Campbell, 2005). Interestingly, some respondents interviewed here reinterpreted the Internet by altering its semantic associations to spiritualize this communication medium. For example, one respondent stressed that the Internet is “not a technology” but a “weapon of spiritual warfare” for believers to use as “a sword to bring truth to the world.” A few others referred to the Internet as an “investment” where believers are to use their time online wisely to “reap optimal spiritual growth.” In line with this reinterpretation, these respondents expressed that they do not participate or will limit their participation in electronic chat rooms and forums, as they deem these applications to be “very time-consuming” and thus a “bad stewardship” of time. One respondent said that electronic chat rooms are an “inappropriate” technology as it “generates too much confusion” which may lead to heresy and doubts about one’s faith. Consequently, some of the respondents will “read postings,” “criticisms and comments about their religion,” but will “not join the forum,” or “reason with non-believers” as online interactions are perceived to be less helpful than weekly church meetings for spiritual conversion. As one respondent explained, “I feel that it is very difficult to use the Internet to spread the gospel to a non-believer, especially in a textual form. It is very difficult to convince the other party through online discussions.”

With regard to the global exchange of religiously related remittances, the Internet is conceived as particularly significant as it is “an international place that allows a huge amount of information flow and exchange,” “connecting people from all over the world.” Many indicated that they relied upon religious information online in their daily lives and have connected to multiple sources and organizations in various countries including the United States, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. In addition, a number of our respondents agreed that the Internet is well suited for the search and exchange of religious information as it is relatively more difficult to censor information online as compared to other traditional media. Several respondents maintain that they could find ways to “get around” imposed controls and restricted informational access. For example, two interviewees said:

It is not easy to restrict it, because the Internet is open and big. Even if there are restrictions, you can find a way to go around it, and find the information that you need.

The best part about the Internet is that it provides you with a free source. However, it can never replace the pastor's preaching. But during your spare time when you wish to obtain some information, for example in China where some information from overseas are censored, you can go online. In the past, it is very difficult to locate spiritual books in China but now you can easily find some of them online.

Given the rising adoption rates of the Internet among different groups in the world, transmigrants are perceived to be increasingly active and enthusiastic agents in using and shaping the Internet for international communication. Yet our study indicates that the appropriation of the Internet is socially situated, and in this case, religious information seeking is related to both local and transnational contexts in certain aspects of Internet use. In some instances, religious information seeking online exists in the context of the local church in which meaning and consumption of religious information takes place. Several participants mentioned their dependency on interpersonal relationships to locate religious websites, although the Internet enables autonomous quests for religious knowledge. We found that some responses expressed a deep trust in their pastoral leadership and reliance on other local church members to help pinpoint and locate relevant online resources, with some interviewees in turn recommending resources to others. For example, two interviewees said:

In our church group, our brothers and sisters share their thoughts of websites which they think are good and they recommend the good ones to us.

I feel that in church, when I tell people that I visited a particular website, and if the people around me feel that the website is not good, they will tell me. I am sure if they know that the website is bad, they will not tell me, yes, that is good.

These responses reveal the intertwining relationships between online and offline contexts as religious Internet use is socially informed and shaped by interpersonal influences that the interviewees believe to be reliable.

Furthermore, besides local influences, online religious information seeking is also influenced by transnationalism, particularly a change in the context of information seeking. Many interviewees agreed that they were keenly aware of the difference in transnational fields in terms of religious diversity and tolerance, although to a certain extent, the change in context may be more acutely perceived by recent immigrants. Freedom of religious belief is constitutionally protected in both Canada and China, yet several reports point to strong regulation, surveillance, fines, and even imprisonment of independent Christians in China who are not affiliated with state-approved associations that are supervised by an atheistic communist party (Madsen, 2003; Marshall, 2000). On the other hand, it has been recognized that the treatment of religious freedom in Canada and United States specifically privileges Christianity, in particular Protestantism (Beaman, 2003). Many interviewees said that they

experienced a significant difference in their faith practices and Internet connections when they relocated from China to Canada, a country which they perceived to be more open to the expression and practice of personal and religious freedom:

I became a Christian when I was still in China. However, I did not lead a life that was different from non-believers. For example, I did not have the courage to say grace openly when I was eating in public. . . . After coming here, there is more information to help me understand about my Lord and Savior. This is a huge turning point of my life. Now it's very convenient to search for information online. For example, I can quickly look for information about church history.

Occasionally, we would listen to Christian radio stations from Hong Kong and United States and realize that we are in a different world. We felt alienated when they talked about God, prayer or about their daily lifestyles. That's why we hardly tuned in to them. In addition, we rarely came across such information. In fact, the first time that I read the Bible was when I came to the United States. You cannot compare China to the United States or Canada. Here, we have a wide range of information on Christianity unlike China because of the government's restrictive policies.

In this way, our responses reveal that Internet adoption, particularly in this case, accessing religious information is shaped by respondents' previous experiences as lived in their past locales which allow for less scope for personal access and flexible appropriation of information online. Protestantism in contemporary China is growing but some house churches continue to experience intense persecution and regulation of their activities (Madsen, 2003; U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2008). In the absence of political and media regulations outside of China and the officially sanctioned "Three Self Patriotic church" (Aikman, 2003), some Chinese transmigrants are actively connecting to religious websites to obtain and in turn disseminate previously forbidden didactic instruction and publications.

#### *Internet Appropriation for Transnational Religious Communication and Ties*

Focus group respondents were asked about their perception of the word "church." The majority saw the church as *jia*, which translates into "family." The Church is more than just a *jiaotang* (a physical religious meeting place), "it is a *jiaohui*," which means networks of members that interact caringly with one another, implying the need to create and maintain transnational religious ties with their "fellow brothers and sisters" at home and worldwide. Our interviews reveal that Chinese immigrants use web-enabled applications quite intensively for a variety of relational goals, including email, Skype (Internet telephony), Instant Messenger, and the Webcam, to connect to their families and friends. Yet, with regard to religiously related ties to their home country, Internet use was less frequent and constrained as the participants were mindful of considerable Internet restrictions in the context of transnational religious communication.

As noted above, prior literature suggests that the Internet may expand international religious flows as distance and time for communication are significantly reduced. However, more frequent transnational ties are sometimes deliberately

curtailed to avert communication away from potentially controversial religious issues. For example, a number of interviewees believe that conventional email use is ineffective and even reject its use under some circumstances as it may destroy existing relationships or *guanxi* (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998) with other counterparts in China. One interviewee explained that in spite of his personal enthusiasm to proselytize, evangelism online is difficult, if not futile with home audiences who are either not interested, or are fearful of being involved in transnational religious networks (e.g., the banned *Falungong* in China). He said:

Sometime ago, I sent an email to my friend in China about my religion here. I told him that I now trust Jesus Christ, but after hearing about my new belief, he has disappeared and does not respond to my emails. We are no longer in contact with each other.

Other interviewees pointed out that although it is generally believed that regulation in China is not as strict as before, with the publication of the Bible and other religious materials, it is not the technological availability of information that matters but the social conditions surrounding media access. In this way, “situational context” is central to the co-cultural communication practices of these minority ethnic Christians (Orbe & Spellers, 2005). Two interviewees referred to how “phobia” and the “stigma of fear” restrain their online access to religious information:

If I am in China, and someone tells me that I can go online to this website and find a lot of information, I will go and look at it. But I would have some reservations about downloading the information there because of fear. When I download things here, I am not afraid that people will come and check what I have downloaded.

The information is all online, but you do not dare to go look at it, in case it becomes evidence against you. . . . If the police wants to check on you, they will check and take everything. They can say that they found this and that in your computer and where it came from, and the accusations against you will get longer [*sic*].

Given the difference in the transnational contexts of communication, several interviewees stressed the need to be circumspect about maintaining loose ties. A few said it was imperative to be “very careful” about online religious communication so they “have contacts, but not very close contacts . . . our contacts are much alerted [*sic*].” In this sense, although the Internet has been popularly touted to facilitate and strengthen the density of global online ties, a low frequency of exchanges here is perceived by our interviewees to be beneficial under certain circumstances. They are cautious to practice secrecy, and even exercise self-censorship so as not to jeopardize their relationships with other members living in a context that is less than tolerant of religious communication outside the officially sanctioned grounds. They said:

We have more freedom here. You can do or say anything you want here. The people in China do not want to have any trouble, and you do not want to cause them any trouble.

My job is related to the Internet so I know about [China's] regulations. As long as you are online, they [the police] can check on you. They know everything that you say or do. So, for their safety, we have to be careful.

One participant stated, "Your words should not spoil the relationship." In other words, a premium is placed on mutual trust (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998) between transnational members to engage in religious communication that enhances flows of religious information throughout the network and at the same time minimizes negative consequences on members in China.

Hence, in lieu of direct email communication, a number of interviewees explained that transnational religious ties are more efficaciously sustained by either indirect communication exchanges involving the Internet and other media and/or coded communication online. The above tactics are adaptations that take into account the surveillance and strict regulatory conditions in their home country. For instance, in the face of potential censorship, some interviewees alter the conventional notion of Internet use by practicing a tactic of "indirect" use where they "figure out how to send online religious content over" to their mainland Chinese counterparts. This is done by first obtaining the needed information online and then converting online data into other forms. Correspondingly, they bridge religious information between Canada and China by bringing other media such as CDs back when they visit their friends and families, or through laypersons visiting China, mainly because certain media forms are less subjected to rigorous customs inspection. Two interviewees explained:

People who can really help are the overseas Chinese who save religious information in their laptops or CDs then bring it over and show it to them. . . . People in China can check some information online but they cannot open certain religious websites on their personal computers or on public computers in cyber cafes.

For example, some brothers or sisters will tell me that there is this mp3 now, and they want to hear the particular preaching of someone. . . . Then I can go find it, and make it into a CD, and either send it to them or bring it to them when I travel to China. That is very convenient.

In this way, various immigrants providing a wider range of religiously related remittances that traditionally included books, artifacts, and pamphlets may act as new informational mediators in transnational religious networks. They serve as valuable transnational "proxy Internet users" on behalf of their counterparts in China who require religious materials that are either unavailable or cannot be freely accessed or downloaded. As such, restricted access experienced by friends of our participants to religious information is alleviated somewhat through alternative but complementary media use.

In other cases, transnational religious communication operates clandestinely, or as one interviewee puts it, like "underground networks," in terms of having to guilefully deploy codes in religious interactions online. A number of interviewees said that it is "very common for emails to China to be rejected," thus necessitating innovative

forms of indirect communication customized for religious purposes. For example, a few respondents regularly engage in the practice of not putting any content on emails, but rather sending information only in the form of attached files, as one interviewee explained: "A lot of emails with words like god, lord, or prayer get rejected. So I always send emails as an attachment and nothing happens."

Another adaptation of the Internet identified was the circulation of online content that has been coded to prevent the interception of direct communication in religious terms. One tactic is to specifically substitute religious terminology for other terms that have been agreed upon in advance by both parties, as one interviewee elaborated:

We have some friends in China that work in religious organizations, and when we send email to them, it is very special. Like when we say prayer, it is not prayer, and god is not god, but you use the word X or something like that. The email will not make sense [to non-members], but both parties can understand it.

In addition, certain religious communicative exchanges are deliberately composed as incomplete for recipients to decode or fill in between the lines, as one respondent said, "for example, if you send an email, you do not disclose your whereabouts." Another respondent related an incident that illustrated the need to flexibly react and creatively interpret information exchanges in order to protect religious communities meeting in private house churches:

One religious group in SH requested for me to meet them. . . . They then gave me a place to go. . . . After I had reached the place, they sent someone to tell me that their house was actually at SM. I know that they are very secretive, so I did not initially ask them the number or road name of their meeting place. They said that as long as someone goes to look for them at their home, a government officer will visit them the next day.

In the above instances, responses highlight how individual believers reinvent the Internet in multiple ways that embody resistance and "everyday creativity" to the dominant "discipline" restrictions (de Certeau, 1984) in transnational religious communication, particularly in response to China's regulation of the Internet and religion. Responses illustrate both the salience of inventive Internet appropriation by religious actors as well as the significance of transnational contexts for the exchange of religious-related remittances and maintenance of transnational relationships.

## **Discussion**

In her study of the history of 19th-century "new media" inventions like the telephone and electric light, Marvin (1988) noted that media are "not fixed, natural objects. . . . They are constructed complexes of habits, beliefs, and procedures embedded in elaborate codes of communication [and thereby carry] the seeds of subversion" (p. 8). In this way, the identification and explication of the behaviors of marginalized persons surrounding contemporary newer media access are valuable for understanding communicative responses to dominant societal structures that render some as outsiders (Orbe, 1998). This paper has sought to critically explore and assess how recent Chinese

Protestant transmigrants in Toronto culturally shape and appropriate the Internet for transnational religious communication. Given the popular belief that Internet may facilitate, even revive world religiosity beyond state borders and local houses of worship, an analytic examination of transnational Internet use helps to clarify the varied processes of new media appropriation contextualized within transmigrants' daily experiences of local and transnational media spaces. Our study reveals an acceptance and enthusiasm for the utilization of the Internet for religious information seeking, but a more restrained and cautious approach of the Internet toward the building of religiously related ties among Chinese transmigrants operating outside officially sanctioned religious organizations in China. The Internet is highly valued and used to connect to local and international websites for a range of textual and audio resources for personal spiritual growth, but mediated religious communication is also adapted to political contexts and socially situated needs.

In particular, with regard to transnational religious ties, our research points to interesting findings which are contrarian to conventional expectations that the Internet will accelerate international communication and increase cross-border interactions between transmigrants. The presence and adoption of the Internet does not automatically translate into an increase in international religious ties online, in the face of political and legal restrictions that constrain aspects of religious expression and Internet use. If the Internet is used, it is appropriated in varying levels in line with social norms operant in local and transnational contexts. Several respondents explained how they reinterpreted and adapted the Internet, and tactics deployed included the translation of online religious information into different technological forms, like portable CDs, sending "non-emails" with attachments, and exchanging coded messages negotiating face-to-face meetings. In this way, critical examination of the religious webs here contributes to the clarification of the function of religious beliefs in shaping international communication, extending research utilizing a spiritual shaping of technology framework to account for the non-use and domestication of the Internet.

In addition, findings here evince how contextual factors related to the accommodative management (Orbe & Spellers, 2005) of geopolitical sensitivities and nonstate legal orders between host and sending nations become significant for a critical understanding of Internet use, at least among the Chinese immigrants in Toronto. As de Certeau (1984) notes, resistance in the forms of media appropriation evinces how the "weak" may subvert laws imposed on them by the "strong" and create for themselves a sphere of communicative action as a mechanism to redistribute power. Our findings identified ways whereby the informal manipulation of old and new media forms of communication may disrupt the "logic" of institutionalized Internet regulation, consequently reconstituting new flows of communication across international borders previously constructed as impenetrable by formal laws.

More specifically, our interest on the social appropriation of the Internet suggests that the communicative behavior of Chinese religious transnational communities is influenced by artful bricolage tactics of "making do" (de Certeau, 1984), dependent on a network of relationships or what we may suggest as a form of "religious *guanxi*."

*Guanxi* (which translates into “relationships”) interaction is described by affective rather than strictly market and contractual exchanges between social and economic actors (Kipnis, 1997). Interacting members respond to community rewards and sanctions that operate through informal social mechanisms of trust and reciprocal obligations. Members are rewarded when they engage in reciprocal exchanges that in turn enhances social harmony and community stability. When interpersonal exchanges are nonreciprocal, this invokes the loss of trust among injured parties (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998). Punishment is swift in the form of social sanctions through a decrease in interactions and thereby loss in community standing. Furthermore, *guanxi* relations can operate across uneven social ranks since it is sustained by behavioral conducts, which are not embedded in any written or institutionalized codes.

The notion that *guanxi* relations underscore both community and transnational interactions among Chinese is popularly documented in the literature on Chinese capitalism (e.g., Park & Luo, 2001; Xin & Pearce, 1996). This literature suggests that *guanxi* bonds drive economic decisions in Chinese business networks. To the extent that this study points to the influence of social bonds and the premium placed on maintaining social and community harmony in transnational religious activities, there is reason to expect that the transnational religious communication of Chinese transmigrants examined here is also influenced by *guanxi*, where governance of social relations based on mutual trust and reciprocal understanding is not confined only to the economic sphere, but extends to the religious sphere as well. This is because religious communicative flows constituted from *guanxi* networks may be argued to be particularly effective in the context of legal deficits in China; in this case, this is the lack of legal protection for religious communication in China. The relevance of *guanxi* practices is that under conditions of uncertainty brought on by the absence of legal protection, personal relationships become an important community tool that substitutes for the lack of institutional support. Our interviewees stressed the need to maintain social harmony in their spiritual family or *jia*, both locally and transnationally, and care is taken to ensure that interacting members in China are not adversely affected by their Internet use for religious communication. As such, the Internet is often used in combination with other media, and online religious communication is augmented by offline religious communication especially when our interviewees visit their home country. This suggests that transnational religious communication also needs to be understood within the larger cultural fabric that social relations are embedded. Indeed, in some cases, for the transnational religious web to function at all, mediated religious communication involves direct interpersonal encounters, including unwritten codes of communication, to facilitate the exchange of religious remittances between agents in socially situated circumstances. In this sense, our study indicates that Chinese transmigrants’ appropriation of the Internet involves both consumptive and productive elements where Internet functions (e.g., email) are not only adapted but also reinvented for transnational religious communication.

Finally, a discussion of the limitations of the research and recommendations for future research is in order. In response to recent injunctions for studies to investigate



“transnationalism from below” embedded in immigrants’ daily milieu, our grounded research explored the transnational religious communication from the standpoint of recent Chinese immigrants who connect to the Internet in their everyday lives in Toronto. The interviews conducted come from a small sample of middle-class Internet users, and the results may not be applicable to other Chinese migrant groups. This may warrant more research to examine transnational communication in other contexts, and within other religious traditions. In addition, the findings here have uncovered how transmigrants are appropriating the Internet in varying levels of reinterpreting and adaptation, although results here did not point to instances of reinvention. Future research could extend the investigation to ferret out drastic alterations or new functions created by structural changes in religious communities. Furthermore, our paper highlights how religious *guanxi* may facilitate communication and points the way for added research to examine how widespread the influence of religious *guanxi* is on Chinese religious communication, both locally and transnationally. Beyond the domain of religious communication, these investigations should help contribute to a broadened conceptualization of Internet use and a deepened understanding of the role of cultural norms in the social shaping of newer and older media, in contemporary international communication increasingly mediated by communication technologies.

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