

Article

# Adaptation to Third-Party Payments: Statistical Analysis of Digital Donations Made to Donglin Monastery

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the adaptations Buddhism has made to digital payment methods in the context of the Chinese mainland. To provide the audience with a relatively comprehensive understanding of the general context in which the new method of donation is applied, this paper first introduces the development and digital landscape of the internet and third-party payments in the Chinese mainland. Then, statistical analysis is used to make large-scale claims by analyzing 1328 donation records made to Donglin Monastery in Mount Lu with the statistical software SPSS to determine whether the digital donation method is linked to the purpose of donations, or the amount of money being donated, and to what extent it substitutes for traditional donation methods.

**Keywords:** online religion; Chinese Buddhism; virtual religious groups; digital donations; third-party payment; Buddhism and technology; religious economics; Buddhist economics

## 1. Introduction

As digital payments gain traction in China, monasteries are adapting to accommodate donors who have transitioned away from cash (Liu 2020). What are the features of digital payments in the Chinese market, and how do such features fit into Buddhist donations? To what extent do certain monasteries rely on this new payment method? In terms of the purpose and amount of the donation, do donations made through digital payment methods differ from those made through traditional payment methods? This study aims to answer such questions with a focus on analyzing donation records made to the Donglin Monastery<sup>1</sup>.

Academic investigations of virtual religious groups started in the 1990s (Rheingold 1993). After the categorization of religious presence online—Christopher Helland distinguished “online religion” and “religion online” in (Helland 2000)—scholars in religious studies focused on communities using the new media (Cheong 2009; Campbell 2010) and the joining of online and offline religious communities’ communications and practices (Campbell 2016). Scholars in Buddhist studies started to explore this topic in the 2010s, with a focus on new media (Grieve and Veidlinger 2014). In the field of Chinese Buddhism, Natasha Heller explored the usage of the “Buddha-recitation device” and how it is shaped by the Pure Land tradition (Heller 2014); Sun Jing studied the propagation methods and effects of Chinese Buddhist groups using new media (Sun 2016); Francesca Tarocco showed examples of clerics spreading Buddhist teachings through blogging and WeChat (Tarocco 2017); and Qi Liu explored the innovation, malpractice, and supervision of Buddhist digital donations in China (Liu 2020). In general, studies on the adaptation of Chinese Buddhists to modern technology are limited in size (mostly articles rather than books) and mostly exploration investigations documenting novel cases occurring in contemporary China.

This paper will not only illustrate the Buddhist adaptation to digital payments but also quantify the extent of this evolution, assessing the degree to which the new donation method has supplanted traditional methods. To provide the audience with a relatively comprehensive understanding of the general context in which the new method of donation is applied, this paper first introduces the development and particular qualities of the internet and third-party payments in the Chinese mainland. Then, statistical analysis is used to



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make large-scale claims by analyzing 1328 donation records made to Donglin Monastery in Mount Lu with the statistical software SPSS to check whether the digital donation method is linked to the purpose of donations, or the amount of money being donated, and to what extent it substitutes for traditional donation methods.

## 2. The Act of Giving in Chinese Buddhism

### 2.1. 供 (Offering) or 施 (Donation)?

This paper analyzes the act of laypeople giving money to monasteries and monastics by means of third-party payments. Although the term “donations” is used in the title, there are two terms in Chinese for the practice of giving that cannot be used interchangeably: *gòng* 供 (offer or offering) and *shī* 施 (donate or donation). *Gòng* 供, when used as a verb, means putting incense, candles, and so on in front of the image, sculpture, or memorial tablets of gods, Buddhas, or ancestors to show worship (DICASS 2006, p. 480, “供”). The indirect objects (recipients) of *gòng* include Buddhas, gods, ancestors, and the three treasures. Phrases related to it are *gòng-yǎng* (ibid., “供养”; Tzu-Yi 1989, p. 3065, “供養”), *gòng-pǐn* (DICASS 2006, p. 480, “供品”), etc. *Shī* 施 refers to the behavior of donating (ibid., p. 1230, “施”; Kleman and Yu 2010, p. 665, “施”), the indirect objects of which include hungry ghosts and poor people. Its relevant phrases are *shī-zhěn* (ibid., “施診”; DICASS 2006, p. 1230, “施診”) and *shī-è-guǐ-huì* (Tzu-Yi 1989, p. 3831, “施餓鬼會”).

A widely used idiom, *shàng-gòng-xià-shī* 上供下施, “to offer upwardly, to donate downwardly”, provides an efficient way to distinguish between the pair. That is, the subject of *gòng* is inferior to its indirect object, while the subject of *shī*, on the contrary, is superior to its indirect object. *Shàng-gòng-xià-shī* has appeared in many Buddhist texts, especially in commentaries. Jizang 吉藏 (549–623 CE) (Cai 2012) wrote: “to offer upwardly to the three treasures, to donate downwardly to everyone” (上供三寶下施一切) in *Wéimójing luèshū* 維摩經略疏 (Jizang, cf. X19.343). Hongzan 弘贊 (1611–1685 CE) (Tzu-Yi 1989, p. 1926, “弘贊”) wrote: “to offer upwardly to all Buddhas, to donate downwardly to the masses of sentient beings” (上供諸佛下施群生) in *Fóshuō fānwǎngjīng púsàjiè luèshū* 佛說梵網經菩薩戒略疏 (Hongzan n.d., cf. X38.0695).

As seen from these examples, when applying the distinction between *gòng* and *shī* to the hierarchy of creatures in Buddhist cosmology, in general, Buddhists use *gòng* to describe their offerings to enlightened beings (Buddhas, arhats, bodhisattvas, etc.) (Rambelli 2004, p. 466) and *shī* for donation to beings in the six paths<sup>2</sup> of the rebirth cycle, including three superior paths: divinities, jealous gods, and humans; and three inferior paths: animals, hungry ghosts, and hells. It is worth noting that the term *gòng* is also used when the indirect object is divinities who can assist or protect Dharma and Buddhist practices. Therefore, we find the usage of *gòng-hùfǎ* 供护法, to offer to the “guardian devas” or “Dharma protectors or defenders”.

The giving from laypeople to the Sangha is another interesting exception—laities address this act as a “*gòng*”, while the monastics address it as a “*shī*”.<sup>3</sup> This exceptional case, in addition to being explainable in terms of the honorific speech system, is also justified within the Buddhist cosmology. On the one hand, 僧 (*sēng*, Sangha) is one of the three treasures and is highly respected in Buddhist communities. On the other hand, monastics are still trapped in the same path of the rebirth cycle as the laity.

Thus, though using the term “donation” in this paper, the topic we are studying is not only within the scope of “donation”. Notably, in many other cases, these digital transactions can be called offerings. The term ‘donation’ is used because the emphasis of our discussion is on the methods of monetary transaction, not how much merit is guaranteed by offering to one of the three treasures.

### 2.2. The Advocation of the Practice of Giving

In Chinese Buddhism, the act of giving is of significant importance. Doctrinally, the perfection of giving, known as *Bùshīdù* 布施度, is considered a remedy for greed and is ranked at the top of the six perfections. *Dù* 度, translated from the Sanskrit term “*pāramitā*”,

refers to the practice accomplished by a Bodhisattva in Mahāyāna Buddhism. This term has been interpreted in various ways, including “perfection”, “reaching the other shore”, and “crossing the river”. These interpretations suggest that by accomplishing the required practice, one can cross from the endless cycle of rebirth (this shore) to the liberated world (the other shore) (Kawamura 2004; Tzu-Yi 1989, p. 1901, “布施”). In addition to *dù* 度, *pāramitā* can also be transliterated as *bōluómi* 波罗蜜 or *bōluómiduō* 波罗蜜多. The most common group of perfections are the *liùdù* 六度 (six perfections), including *bùshī* 布施 (giving, Sanskrit: *dāna*), *chíjiè* 持戒 (ethical behavior, Sanskrit: *śīla*), *rěnrǔ* 忍辱 (patience, Sanskrit: *kṣānti*), *jīngjìn* 精進 (endeavor or effort, Sanskrit: *vīrya*), *chándìng* 禪定 (contemplation or meditation, Sanskrit: *dhyāna*) and *bōrě* 般若 (wisdom, Sanskrit: *prajñā*) (ibid., p. 1273, “六波羅蜜”). In addition, *pāramitā* comprises other groups, such as the group of ten *pāramitās* and five *pāramitās* (ibid., p. 499, “十波羅蜜”; p. 1116, “五波羅蜜”). The compositions of each group vary according to the context being discussed, but the perfection of giving is always included (ibid., p. 345, “波羅蜜”).

As well as playing a significant role in Buddhist ideology, resources given by the laity are vital to the economy of the monastery, especially after the Land Reform in 1951, when monasteries in mainland China lost their ownership of the land.<sup>4</sup> During the Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE) and Song Dynasty (960–1279 CE), monasteries developed many commercial methods for agriculture, money lending and land leasing. Later, in the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644 CE) and Qing Dynasty (1644–1912 CE), land ownership became the primary source of income for large Buddhist monasteries (we should also note that the vast majority of Buddhist temples in Chinese history were small- to medium-sized temples with no profitable land<sup>5</sup>). This source of funding, however, ceased to exist after the Land Reform. *The Measures for Financial Supervision and Administration of Religious Venues* issued by the State Administration for Religious Affairs listed six types of incomes for religious venues, none of which are related to monastic land (Article 14). After the economic reform in 1978, monasteries adapted to the market economy and started to earn income by relying on entrance fees, property given by believers, and other businesses such as selling candles and incense (Ji and He 2014)<sup>6</sup>. Among the three pillars of monastery revenue, in addition to entrance fees, the rest can all be contributed to the act of giving.

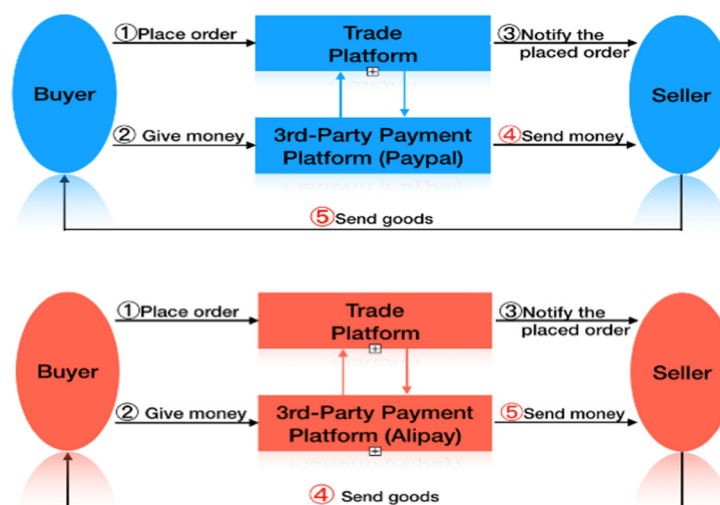
### 3. Third-Party Payment in China

#### 3.1. Definition of Third-Party Payment and How It Works in China

Third-party payment (第三方支付) refers to a payment service provided by an institution that is independent of the two parties involved in a traditional transaction: the buyer and the seller. In 2015, the [People’s Bank of China \(2015\)](#), the central bank of the People’s Republic of China and a department of China’s State Council, introduced the *Measures for the Online Payment Business of Non-Banking Payment Institutions* (非银行支付机构网络支付业务管理办法). According to these measures, online payment services enable payers and payees to make long-distance payments using a public network without the need for physical interaction between their electronic payment devices, such as computers or mobile terminals (Article 2). Third-party payment providers, which are non-banking institutions that offer these services, work in cooperation with banks and provide services based on the banks’ payment and clearing systems.

There are currently two major third-party payment models in China. One model, exemplified by PayPal, serves as a trading mediation center, while the other, represented by Alipay, functions as temporary storage for payments. As shown in Figure 1, when purchasing goods online, the initial process is the same for both models: after placing an order, the buyer makes the payment through a third-party payment platform. The difference arises in the second half of the process. With PayPal, the seller receives the payment first and then sends the goods. However, with Alipay, the seller is notified of the order and sends the goods without receiving payment. The money remains in Alipay until the buyer receives and verifies the goods. Once the buyer confirms receipt of the goods, Alipay transfers the payment to the seller to complete the transaction. Despite PayPal

announcing a partnership with Baidu, one of China’s largest internet companies, in 2017, the Alipay model has continued to dominate the Chinese market.



**Figure 1.** The difference in the payment process between Alipay and PayPal.

### 3.2. The Development of the Third-Party Payment Industry in China

The development of China’s third-party payment industry can be divided into three stages: the establishment of the payment model between 2002 and 2005; the rapid expansion of online payments between 2005 and 2012; and the mobile payment era starting in 2012. We will introduce each of them in chronological order.

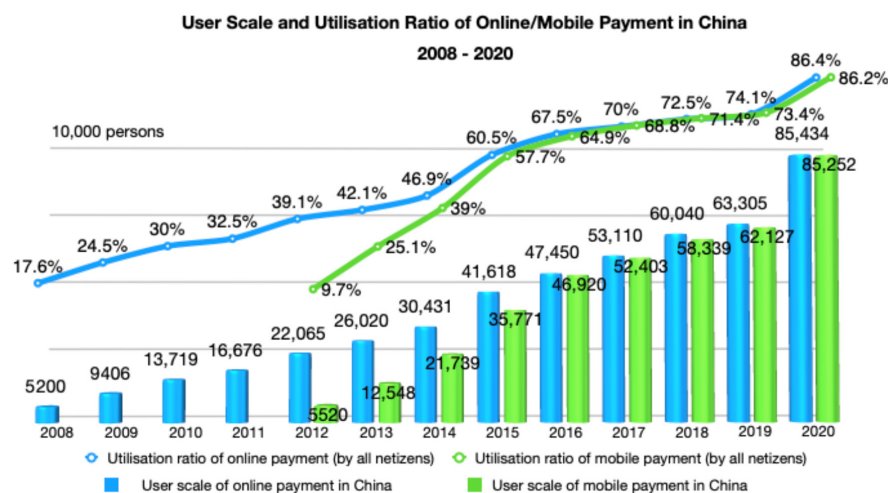
#### 3.2.1. The Establishment of the Third-Party Payment Model

Before 2002, online inter-bank transactions in mainland China were not possible due to the lack of a unified interface among retailers. This issue was resolved with the establishment of China UnionPay in 2002. Between 2002 and 2005, third-party payment companies were subsidiaries of banks. These companies served as payment gateways, managing the banking–Internet interface, connecting retailers to banks, and linking retail transactions to the online banking system for further payment operations (Li 2012, pp. 32–33). This gateway mode involved initial business cooperation between bank card payments and internet payments.

With the popularization of the internet in China, online trading has shown great potential, as has online payment. Alibaba, a Chinese e-commerce company, recognized mistrust between buyers and sellers as a major barrier to online transactions and launched Alipay in December 2004 to address this issue (ibid., p. 33). As introduced in Section 2.2, Alipay secures online transactions by only releasing money to the seller after the buyer verifies the goods. This guarantee service has since become a fundamental service of third-party payment platforms in China.

#### 3.2.2. Rapid Expansion of Online Payments

The Chinese market quickly embraced third-party payments. As shown in Figure 2, the number of online payment users grew rapidly between 2008 and 2020, reaching 854 million by December 2020 and accounting for 86.4% of all Chinese netizens. Among online payments in China, the number of transactions handled by third-party institutions far exceeded that handled by banks. According to the (People’s Bank of China 2019), during the second quarter of 2019, banking financial institutions processed a total of 53.671 billion electronic payment transactions (including internet payment, telephone payment, mobile payment, ATM, POS, and other electronic payments), while third-party payment institutions handled 177.777 billion online payment transactions (including internet payment and mobile payment).



**Figure 2.** Scale and utilization ratio of online/mobile payment in China 2008–2020.<sup>7</sup>

The rapid adoption of third-party payments in Chinese society was evidenced not only by the alarming growth in the number of third-party payment users but also by the relative lack of concern among Chinese netizens regarding online payment security. According to the Report on Network Payment Security in China released in 2012, third-party payments have become the most popular type of online payment in China, covering 79.2% of online payment users (CNNIC 2012, p. 9). The report also compared concerns about online payment security among internet users in China, Japan, the United States, and Sweden. The percentage of Chinese netizens who “did not worry at all” was the highest at 43.4%, while only 20% of Swedish netizens, 12% of US netizens, and 1% of Japanese netizens chose the same response. Additionally, the proportions of Chinese netizens who expressed concern or extreme concern were the lowest, at only 2% and 7.7%, respectively (pp. 25, 26).

### 3.2.3. The Advent of the Mobile Payment Era

Based on Chinese netizens’ trust in online payments, the growth in the scale of mobile payment users was even faster. Mobile payments, which were initiated in China in 2012, are based on smart terminals and mobile networks. As shown in Figure 2, from 2013 to 2016, the number of users of mobile payments increased by more than 100 million each year. The number of users of mobile payments reached 583 million by the end of 2018, accounting for 71.4% of Chinese netizens. According to the 2019 *China Mobile Payment Development Report* by the (State Information Centre of China 2019), as of the first half of 2018, the penetration rate of mobile payments among mobile phone users in China reached 92.4% (p. 8).

After its establishment, mobile payments quickly became a major player in online payments. In 2014, the ratio of transactions made through nonmobile online payments to those made through mobile payments was 67:33. Within just four years, this ratio changed to approximately 27:73 in 2017 (p. 8). Mobile payment increased so significantly that it had a substitution effect on its nonmobile counterpart.

In the development of mobile payments, QR code payments have played an important role. QR code, short for quick response code, is a type of matrix barcode that contains data and can be read by imaging devices such as cameras. QR code payment services allow payers and payees to complete transactions by reading each other’s payment codes with mobile terminals (People’s Bank of China 2017). According to the (Payment & Clearing Association of China 2018), 89.5% of mobile payment users reported that QR code payments were their most commonly used payment method. QR code payments have gained widespread acceptance among consumers in China, resulting in a significant number of people not carrying cash and even some merchants refusing to receive cash. The People’s

Bank of China had to issue an announcement to stop merchants from accepting only digital payments (People's Bank of China 2018).

#### 4. Donations through Digital Payment Platforms in the Donglin Monastery

##### 4.1. Combining Merit Boxes with QR Code Payments

The prevalence of digital payments has made it difficult for monasteries to accept donations with one of the main funding sources, merit boxes. Merit boxes, also known as “Gong De Xiang 功德箱”, are commonly found in contemporary Chinese Buddhist monasteries. The appearance of merit boxes can vary based on specific tradition and culture. Typically, it is a rectangular box made of wood or metal, painted red, positioned at the entrance of a religious hall or near the statue being worshipped.<sup>8</sup> It may be decorated with religious symbols and images such as a lotus flower and promotional text for donations such as “widely planting fields of blessings (*Guang Zhong Futian* 广种福田)”, or simply bear the Chinese characters of “Gong De Xiang”. The box traditionally features a locking mechanism to secure the donations collected and a slot on the top for the insertion of donations, which is designed to accommodate both coins and bills. When people visiting the monasteries no longer carry cash, the donations received by the merit boxes are inevitably undermined.

To accommodate donors who have transitioned away from cash, monasteries had to adapt. One of the major adaptations is to combine traditional merit boxes with QR code payments. A simple way is to print out the QR code of the monastery's third-party payment account and stick it on traditional merit boxes. Scanning the QR code with mobile phones, donors will be directed to the payment page for transferring money to the monastery's third-party payment account. There, donors can enter a donation amount, payment password, and complete the donations. We can also find some monasteries using digital merit boxes. The digital merit box usually has a large monitor that shows the QR code of the monastery's payment accounts. Donors can donate by scanning the QR code with their mobile phones, as well as inputting their names, wishes, and messages. Immediately after the donation, the donor's name, donation amount, and message will then be displayed on the screen of the digital merit box in real time.

These digital merit boxes are not manufactured by the monastery but are purchased from technology companies. One such company is Hongtuzhongchuang Beijing Technology Limited Company (宏图众创北京科技有限公司, commercial registration number 110105021534048). Originally established in 2016 to develop a catering management system, Hongtuzhongchuang expanded its business to include digital merit boxes after 2018. Hongtuzhongzhi states that “traditional merit boxes accept only cash, but as we all know, it is the world of mobile payments... if we do encounter a situation where digital payments are not accepted, there is really no way to make donations” (Hongtuzhongchuang 2020a, 2020b). The company provides not only the equipment for the merit box, but also the money management system behind it. Following the donation, the donor's WeChat or Alipay account will be automatically linked to the monastery's official WeChat account, and the donated funds will be immediately transferred to the monastery's account. The cost of these digital merit boxes, as listed on the company's website, ranges from CN¥ 12,800 to 19,800 (Hongtuzhongchuang 2018).

Which of these two combinations is more commonly used? Though monasteries such as the Shaolin Monastery (少林寺) in Mount Song, Henan province, have adopted digital merit boxes, and Hongtuzhongchuang also claimed to have customers in several provinces, overall, digital merit boxes are relatively uncommon at present. The application of digital merit boxes at the Bailin Chan Monastery (柏林禅寺) in Zhaoxian, Shijiazhuang, was reported on 7 April 2023, to be the first monastery in Hebei Province to adopt a digital merit box. It is a lot more common to find QR code stickers on merit boxes. Donglin Monastery, the main subject of our analysis in this paper, has adopted this approach.

#### 4.2. Introduction of the Donglin Monastery

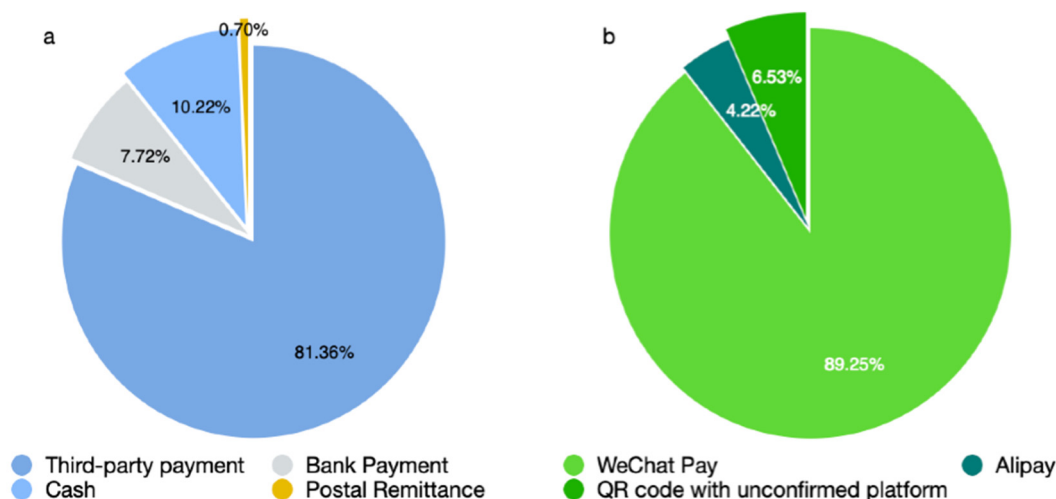
Donglin Monastery in Mount Lu, Jiujiang, Jiangxi Province, was founded in 386 CE during the Eastern Jin Dynasty. It is famous because Ven. Huiyuan 慧远 (334–416 CE)<sup>9</sup>, one of the most influential monks in Chinese history and the first patriarch (初祖) of the Chinese Pure Land tradition, lived here. The monastery is therefore credited as the origin of Pure Land Buddhism (淨土祖庭) and is very respected by Chinese Buddhists. The monastery is on the list of the 142 “National Key Buddhist Temples in Han Chinese Area (汉族地区佛教全国重点寺院)” released by the State Council of the PRC in 1983. Its acting abbot, Ven. Da’an (大安, *Dà’ān*, Big Easement), born in 1959, was a professor at the University of International Business and Economics and a visiting professor of the China Buddhist Academy before being ordained in 2001 (Donglin Monastery 2017). Ven. Da’an’s Buddhist master, Ven. Chuanyin (传印, *Chuán-yìn*, Transmission seal), was the president of the 8th Buddhist Association of China<sup>10</sup> (2010–2015) and was the honorary president of the association after 2015 and until his death in March 2023 (The Buddhist Association of China 2017a).

Donglin Monastery shows a high acceptance of new technology products. The monastery has not only its own website but also official accounts on both Weibo and the WeChat open platform. Furthermore, while a usual monastery in mainland China has only one WeChat official account, Donglin Monastery owns three for different purposes: ‘Donglin Monastery in Mount Lu of Jiangxi’ (江西庐山东林寺, WeChat ID: jxlsdonglins) to share information about Buddhist practice; ‘Virtue Farmland of Donglin Monastery in Mount Lu’ (庐山东林寺福田, WeChat ID: lsdonglinsi) to collect donations; and ‘Ven. Da’an Talks about Pure Land’ (大安法师讲淨土, WeChat ID: daanfashi) to spread the Dharma teaching of Ven. Da’an. Among the three accounts, the earliest one (ID: daanfashi) was created on 1 July 2013, and the most popular one owned approximately 284,952 subscribers up to 10 January 2020, according to Xiguaji Data, a data monitoring website that estimates the subscription numbers of WeChat accounts by analyzing their article views, likes, and comments.

#### 4.3. Analysis of the Donations of the Donglin Monastery

On the official website of this monastery, there is an online inquiry page, ‘Merit Names’ (功德芳名, *Gōng-dé Fāng-míng*), which, according to the website, records all the donations to the monastery unless the donor requested not to.<sup>11</sup> By searching for a donor’s name, this page will show all donation records with donor names matching the given prefix in the past three months. The records also include the donation date, method, and purpose (Donglin Monastery in Mount Lu). By searching for different Chinese names on the inquiry page (more than 6 months between searches), a total of 1308 donation records (1282 valid and 26 invalid due to the lack of payment method records) from 30 May 2019 to 27 July 2021 were collected.

The sources of donation in Donglin Monastery fall into four categories: cash, postal remittance, bank payment (including bank card payment and bank transferring), and third-party payment (including Alipay, WeChat Pay, and QR code payment with unconfirmed platform<sup>12</sup>). As shown in Figure 3, of the valid records, third-party payments accounted for 81.36% of the total number of donations, with 1043 donations. Bank payments accounted for 99 donations, cash for 131, and postal remittance for only 9. Notably, between 30 May and 29 July 2019, third-party payments accounted for 95.62% of total donations. Within the third-party payment category, WeChat Pay dominated with 89.25% of transactions during those three months, while Alipay accounted for 4.22% and QR code payment with unconfirmed platforms accounted for 6.53%. In summary, third-party payments were the overwhelming source of donations, with WeChat Pay being the dominant platform within that category.



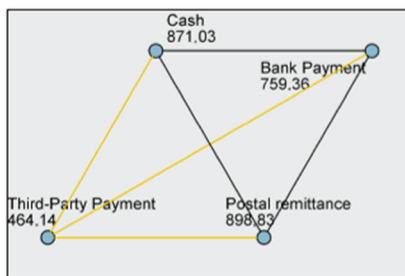
**Figure 3.** Overview of the number of donations to Donglin Monastery in terms of payment sources: graph (a) shows four categories of all donation sources, and graph (b) shows sources within third-party payment donation.

From the perspective of donor purpose, all recorded purposes accepted by the Donglin Monastery can be made through third-party payments. The variety of recorded donation purposes included performing Buddhist rituals (普佛), offering to the three treasures (供三宝)<sup>13</sup> and private ancestral tablets (牌位), animal protection and charity (慈善护生), Sutra Printing (印经), general construction work (基建), donations allocated to the pure land garden (净土苑专项认捐), preaching education (弘法教育)<sup>14</sup>, and donations to the audiovisual center (视听中心) (Donglin Monastery 2022)<sup>15</sup>. All the above-mentioned donation purposes can be and were performed with third-party payment methods in the Donglin Monastery.

Using the payment method as the grouping variable, Figure 4 shows the results of a Kruskal-Wallis test of records between 30 May and 29 July 2019 to compare the donation amount pairwise. The nodes connected by yellow lines in the figure are statistically significantly different, and the nodes connected by black lines are not significantly different. From the figure, we can see that there is no statistically significant difference in donation amount among bank payments, cash, and postal remittances; however, the differences between third-party payments and the other three payment methods are statistically significant. Since the data of the four variables are not normally distributed, we compared the median values of the variables. The median donation amounts of the four donation methods from highest to lowest are CN¥300.00 (cash), CN¥300.00 (postal remittance), CN¥95.50 (bank payment), and CN¥5.00 (third-party payment). This shows that the donation amount made by third-party payment platforms is much smaller than that made by the other three methods. In conclusion, regardless of the donation purpose, third-party payments, especially WeChat Pay, have made a large substitute for traditional payment methods when the donation amount is small.



Pairwise Comparisons of PaymentMethod



Each node shows the sample average rank of PaymentMethod.

Sample1-Sample2	Test Statistic	Std. Error	Std. Test Statistic	Sig.	Adj.Sig.
Third-Party Payment-Bank Payment	295.225	58.937	5.009	0.000	0.000
Third-Party Payment-Cash	406.891	66.867	6.085	0.000	0.000
Third-Party Payment-Postal remittance	434.695	157.977	2.752	0.006	0.036
Bank Payment-Cash	-111.666	88.215	-1.266	0.206	1.000
Bank Payment-Postal remittance	-139.470	168.129	-0.830	0.407	1.000
Cash-Postal remittance	-27.804	171.070	-0.163	0.871	1.000

Each row tests the null hypothesis that the Sample 1 and Sample 2 distributions are the same. Asymptotic significances (2-sided tests) are displayed. The significance level is 0,05.

Figure 4. Pairwise comparisons of the four donation methods received by Donglin Monastery.

### 5. Concluding Remarks

In summary, the development of the internet and the large scope of mobile payment users have provided the basis for digital donations. With third-party payment, the online payment service provided by nonbanking institutions, being fully integrated into Chinese people’s lives, there is evidence of Buddhist monasteries and monastics in contemporary China adapting to the new ways of donating provided by this service. By analyzing the donation data, we found that, in the Donglin Monastery in Mount Lu, regardless of the donation purpose, third-party payments, especially WeChat Pay, have made a large substitute for traditional payment methods (bank payment, cash, and postal remittance) when the donation amount is small, and among third-party payments, WeChat Pay overwhelmed the other platforms.

While the statistical analysis of digital donations made to Donglin Monastery has provided valuable insights into the evolving landscape of online religion and third-party payments in Chinese Buddhism, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. Even though the broader payment environment is the same, each monastery operates within its unique context, with varying fundraising strategies, donor demographics, and cultural influences. The data collected for this study were limited to Donglin Monastery, and comparable data from other monasteries were not readily available. As such, future studies should aim to gather data from a diverse range of monasteries to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of digital donations on Buddhist practices in China. Exploring whether similar patterns exist in other monasteries is a crucial direction for future research.

Furthermore, the study raises intriguing questions about the factors influencing digital donations, such as the dominance of WeChat Pay and the tendency for small donation amounts. From the monasteries’ point of view, it is also worth investigating how much their popularity is affected by having available to their followers these modern methods of donating. While these are complex and interesting avenues for further investigation,

the lack of existing literature and comprehensive data hinders conclusive arguments at this stage.

For future research on these topics, it is important not to overlook the many variables that affect the number of donations received by monasteries. In addition to some of the more obvious economic variables (e.g., local inflation and economic development) and social factors (people not being able to visit monasteries on the ground during a period in the pandemic), we should also pay attention to variables that are unique to the religious donations. Whether the monastery has initiated donation projects over a time period that is particularly attractive to devotees (e.g., the construction of the world's tallest statue of Amitabha), whether the monastery has focused on large-scale fundraising events over a period of time, and the form of the fundraising are all factors that we will take into account. Understanding the impact of digital donations on the overall number of donations is also a significant area for future exploration. Economic variables, the appeal of donation purposes to donors, and the efforts of monastics in fundraising all play a role in shaping donation patterns, highlighting the multifaceted nature of this topic.

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## List of Abbreviations

CINIC	China Internet Network Information Center
DICASS	Dictionary Editing Room, Institute of Linguistics, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (中国社会科学院语言研究所词典编辑室)
SPID	Statistical Report on Internet Development in China
T	Taishō edition (CBETA)
X	Xuzangjing (CBETA)

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> For an introduction to Donglin Temple, see Section 4.1 of this article.
- <sup>2</sup> While some of the Buddhist schools preserve five destinies, most Chinese schools speak of six paths, *liudào* 六道, that comprise the three superior paths: divinities, jealous gods, and humans; and the three inferior paths: animals, hungry ghosts, and beings of hells (Tzu-Yi 1989, p. 1298, “六道”).
- <sup>3</sup> Monastics address people who give or have the potential to give them property or food as *shī-zhǔ* (施主), a word that can be translated into English as ‘the person who donates’, ‘patron’, ‘benefactor’, or simply ‘donor’. According to the Modern Chinese Dictionary and the Oxford Chinese Dictionary, *shī-zhǔ* is ‘how monks address people who donate to Buddhist monasteries’, which ‘generally refers to laypeople’ (DICASS 2006, p. 1230, “施主”; Kleeman and Yu 2010, p. 666, “施主”).
- <sup>4</sup> In addition, monastery income was usually tax-exempt (Luo 2003).
- <sup>5</sup> By citing the work of scholars such as Holmes Welch (1968), some scholars took for granted the assertion that farm rents were the main source of income for monasteries. However, we should not ignore Welch’s research methods and interview subjects;

monks came from large monasteries at the time. Gernet's work (Gernet 1995) shows that (1) the vast majority of land held by monasteries was not always available for cultivation; (2) land with economic value was only available to large monasteries and not at all to small ones; and (3) the number of small temples and Buddha halls in Chinese history was much larger than that of large monasteries. Therefore, farm rents should be considered as the main source of income for large monasteries, not for the majority of the monasteries in Chinese history in general.

<sup>6</sup> Although it was not mentioned by Ji, monasteries in Ji's article referred to those in China's mainland. Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan do not apply the land policies in China's mainland.

<sup>7</sup> The data in this graph come from the Report on Network Payment Security in China and the 32nd, 34th, 36th, 38th, 40th, 42nd, 43rd, and 45th Statistical Report on Internet Development in China (CNNIC 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020).

<sup>8</sup> It is important to note that there are more than just Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and Buddhist-related deities enshrined in current Buddhist monasteries; deities such as the Dragon King (*Longwang* 龙王), the God of Wealth (*Caishen* 财神), the King of Medicine (*Yaowang* 药王), Fox Immortals (*Huxian* 胡仙 or 狐仙), and so on can be enshrined in Buddhist monasteries and have their own offering tables and merit boxes. Located on Mount Fenghuang in Fengcheng, Liaoning Province, the Chaoyang Monastery 朝阳寺 enshrines these aforementioned four. Although some of these objects of worship seem more aligned with the stereotype understanding of Taoism, many of them possess their own unique religious culture.

<sup>9</sup> Huiyuan 慧远 *Hui-yuǎn* (334–416 AD), one of the most influential monks in Chinese history, is a disciple of Dào-ān 道安, another eminent Buddhist master in the Eastern Jin Dynasty. After Dào-ān dismissed all the disciples, Hui-yuǎn came to Mount Lu and lived in Donglin Monastery after the monastery was built. Hui-yuǎn advocated the practice of *niàn-fó* 念佛 (recollection of the Buddha) and devoted himself to Amitabha. He is regarded as the first patriarch by the Pure Land tradition in China.

<sup>10</sup> The Buddhist Association of China (中国佛教协会) was established in Beijing in 1953. It has local branches in each Chinese province and city and is thus far the only national Buddhist organization in mainland China (The Buddhist Association of China 2017b).

<sup>11</sup> Prior to 2023, the page displayed the description shown in the main text (Donglin Monastery 2019). After the website was revamped in 2023, the page explicitly stated that it no longer included records of cash donations (Donglin Monastery 2023).

<sup>12</sup> As the source of donation, some of the Donglin records write '扫手机', which literally means to 'scan the mobile phone', to refer to scanning the QR code on the mobile phone to pay through a third-party payment platform. Since no specific third-party platform is shown, we translate that as 'QR code payment with unconfirmed platform'.

<sup>13</sup> Donation purposes labeled by Donglin Monastery as '供三宝' (offering to the three treasures), '供僧' (offering to monastics), and '供大安法师' (offering to Ven. Da'an) are all categorized here as offering to the three treasures.

<sup>14</sup> The preaching education team of Donglin Monastery is responsible for organizing activities such as summer camps, preaching training, and meditation classes for laypeople (Donglin Monastery "东林莲社 [Lotus Society of Donglin]").

<sup>15</sup> The audio-visual center of Donglin Monastery is responsible for the production and distribution of audiovisual materials, and the maintenance of Ven. Da'an's website see <http://www.daanfs.cn> (accessed on 25 August 2023).

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**Note: For Chinese literature, the ones with original English titles are denoted by parenthesis, the ones translated by the author are denoted by brackets.**

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