



Edited by Catherine Gomes, Lily Kong and Orlando Woods

Religion, Hypermobility and Digital Media in Global Asia

Faith, Flows and Fellowship

Amsterdam
University
Press



Amsterdam
University
Press

Religion, Hypermobility
and Digital Media in Global Asia



Amsterdam
University
Press

Media, Culture and Communication in Migrant Societies

International migration for work, study, humanitarian and lifestyle reasons is increasingly commonplace, representing an unprecedented movement of people, globally. With these transnational mobilities comes the emergence and establishment of migrant societies with their own distinctive cultures and socialities. These migrant societies however are not necessarily oriented to particular fixed ethnic nor national identities. Instead, they may be formed through other identity signifiers such as feelings of commonality of specific experiences. Migrant societies, moreover, may not be confined to geographical boundaries but due to the digital turn where media and communication technologies and products are ubiquitous parts of everyday life, may exist transnationally in the digital environment. This book series is dedicated to engaging and understanding the role, impact, breadth and depth of culture, media and communication practices in and across migrant societies. The series showcases high quality and innovative research from established and emerging scholars to engage readers in exciting and informed conversations on migrant societies.

Editorial Board

Sun Sun Lim, Singapore University of Technology and Design, Singapore

Jolynna Sinanan, University of Sydney, Australia

Cheryll Soriano, De La Salle University, The Philippines

Jonathan Y Tan, Case Western Reserve, USA

Raelene Wilding, LaTrobe University, Australia

Raminder Kaur, University of Sussex, UK

Leslie Butt, University of Victoria, Canada

Alma Maldonado, CINVESTAV, Mexico

Ellen Carm, Oslo Metropolitan University, Norway

Muchativugwa Hove, North-West University, South Africa

Elisa Costa-Villaverde, Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Spain



Amsterdam
University
Press

Religion, Hypermobility and Digital Media in Global Asia

Faith, Flows and Fellowship

*Edited by
Catherine Gomes,
Lily Kong
and Orlando Woods*

Amsterdam University Press



Amsterdam
University
Press

Cover illustration: Hill Tan, Singapore Management University

Cover design: Coördesign, Leiden

Layout: Crius Group, Hulshout

ISBN 978 94 6372 893 5

e-ISBN 978 90 4855 210 8

DOI 10.5117/9789463728935

NUR 670

© The authors / Amsterdam University Press B.V., Amsterdam 2020

All rights reserved. Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this book may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the written permission of both the copyright owner and the author of the book.

Every effort has been made to obtain permission to use all copyrighted illustrations reproduced in this book. Nonetheless, whosoever believes to have rights to this material is advised to contact the publisher.



Amsterdam
University
Press

Acknowledgements

No project like this can take place without the support of a community. We would like to thank our supportive Amsterdam University Press commissioning editor Maryse Elliot for believing in this project. We are also very grateful to Joanne Heng for casting an eagle eye over the manuscript and Padmapriya Padmalochanan for putting together the index. Thanks also go out to Chantal Nicolaes, Sarah de Waard and Mike Sanders who worked on various stages of this manuscript.

We especially would like to thank each and every one of our authors for the hard work that they have put into developing their chapters. Thank you Francis Lim, Sng Bee Bee, Anna Hickey-Moody, Marissa Willcox, Han Zhang, Junxi Qian, Tan Meng Yoe, Jonathan Y. Tan, Justin K.H. Tse, Hyemin Na, Kamaludeen Mohamed Nasir and Robbie Goh. It is not hyperbole to say that we could not have done this without you. We also acknowledge the support of the Lee Kong Chian Chair Professorship Fund and two Singapore Ministry of Education grants (Award Numbers: 17-C242-SMU-005 and MOE2018-T2-2-102) in enabling the completion of the manuscript. Lastly, and on behalf of all our authors, we would like to thank all the research participants that so willingly shared with us their stories of mobility, media and faith. Without them, much of our work here would not have been possible.

Catherine Gomes

Lily Kong

Orlando Woods



Amsterdam
University
Press



Amsterdam
University
Press

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	5
List of Illustrations	9
Introduction	11
<i>Catherine Gomes, Lily Kong and Orlando Woods</i>	
Section 1 Community Creation: The Role of Digital Media in Faith-Based Groups	
1. The Creation of Digitally-Mediated Christian Migrant Communities in Singapore	27
<i>Orlando Woods</i>	
2. The Blog as a Platform for Spiritual Heritagging and Family Reconciliation: A Case Study	47
<i>Tan Meng Yoe</i>	
3. Material Expressions of Religious Culture	65
<i>Anna Hickey-Moody and Marissa Willcox</i>	
Section 2 Connectivity Through Faith: Maintaining Transnational Connections Through Religion	
4. This-worldly Buddhism: Digital Media and the Performance of Religiosity in China	95
<i>Han Zhang and Junxi Qian</i>	
5. Forging Chinese Christian Digital Fellowship: Social Media and Transnational Connectivity	123
<i>Francis Lim and Sng Bee Bee</i>	



Section 3 Preaching the Faith: The Rise of Digital Pastors and Preachers

6. The Global Appeal of Digital Pastors: A Comparative Case Study of Joseph Prince, and Brian and Bobbie Houston 149
Catherine Gomes and Jonathan Y. Tan
7. The 'Open Letter to the Evangelical Church' and its Discontents: The Online Politics of Asian American Evangelicals, 2013-2016 179
Justin K.H. Tse
8. Preacher Playlist: Reception and Curation of Celebrity Pastors in the Korean Diaspora 203
Hyemin Na
9. Virtual Rohingya: Ethno-Religious Populism in the Asia Pacific 223
Kamaludeen Mohamed Nasir
- Afterword 247
Robbie B. H. Goh
- Index 253



List of Illustrations

3.1	A future city, developed in a Manchester primary school in 2018.	70
3.2	A future city, made in a Manchester primary school in 2018.	71
3.3	A future city, made by a church group in Adelaide.	72
3.4	'Evil Queen' self-portrait made by a girl in Adelaide Church youth group.	78
3.5	'Picture of anger' made by a boy from Adelaide Church youth group.	78
3.6	Materialising religion, a map of important things, made by a girl in a London primary school.	85
5.1	Mixing of media types.	130
5.2	Intercontextuality: Prayers and Origami.	133
5.3	Transnational fellowship and solidarity on WeChat.	135
5.4	Reflections on Bible passage and teaching of catechism.	137
5.5	Reflections on Bible passage and teaching of catechism.	137
5.6	Commentary on society and morality.	137
5.7	Commentary on society and morality.	137





Amsterdam
University
Press

Introduction

Catherine Gomes, Lily Kong and Orlando Woods

Contemporary society is evolving at a pace never experienced before. Existing human processes of movement and settlement are becoming more frequent, whilst advances in technology have given rise to new processes of digitally-mediated connection, community-building and content-creation. Religion intersects with all of these processes; guiding them, and being transformed by them in turn. Indeed, in the two decades or so since Rudolph's (1997, p. 1) observation that 'religious communities are among the oldest of the transnationals', research into the role of religion amongst diasporic and migrant communities around the world has 'exploded' (Johnson 2012, p. 95). Such scholarly interest stems from the fact that 'people seem to carry religion with them more easily than they do for many other, less portable cultural clusters', and that 'religion, under certain conditions, acquires particular weight as an anchor of collective identity and distinction in diasporic situations' (Johnson 2012, p. 95; see also Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004; Kong and Woods 2018). These two characteristics of religion – its portability and its anchoring effects – elevate its importance in an ever-shifting world of hyper mobility. By 'hyper mobility' we refer to the fact that not only are more people moving between countries than ever before, but that the pace of movement between countries, and the volume of connections, interactions and engagements (or, collectively, 'flows') between places has increased massively as well. Whilst movement equates to mobility, it is these increases in the pace of movement and the volume of cross-border flows that equates to *hyper* mobility. Hyper mobility is enabled by digital media.

Digital media enable people to be instantaneously connected to other people anywhere in the world (Gomes 2016). As Cheong et al. (2014, p. 7) note, 'information and communication technologies are often cited as one major source, if not the causal vector, for the rising intensity of transnational practices'. Importantly, digitally-enabled connections are not just based on verbal and non-verbal communication, but on the sharing of digital content as well. In this sense, not only do digital media nullify the restrictions of

Gomes, C., L. Kong and O. Woods, Religion, *Hypermobility and Digital Media in Global Asia: Faith, Flows and Fellowship*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020

DOI 10.5117/9789463728935_INTRO



Amsterdam
University
Press

space and time, but so too do they offer the potential for new forms of person-person, person-organisation and person-content engagement. The proliferation of digital media has therefore brought about a transformation in the ways in which people communicate and connect with others. Additionally, this proliferation has also impacted faith-practising migrant communities, often with the intention of portraying them and their religions negatively (for instance viral social media hoaxes on Islamic practices interfering with Western traditions such as the 'Christmas lights banned' hoax in Australia which claimed that Muslim residents in Cardwell, North Queensland found Christmas lights offensive). In view of the fact that 'everyday life takes place on the Internet' (Beneito-Montagut 2011, p. 718), they have caused social relations to increasingly be digitally-mediated. Increasingly, they have also come to augment the ways in which religion is consumed, experienced and understood, which has caused the study of religion in/and digital media to become a 'vibrant and valid area of scholarly inter-disciplinary investigation' (Campbell 2012, p. 4). Indeed, to the extent that 'transnational migration is a process rather than an event' (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004, p. 1012), so too do digital media provide a lens through which the world is viewed and lived, rather than just a channel or platform for communication. In recognition of these developments, the overarching aim of this book is to bring understandings of transnational religion into conversation with understandings of digital religion through an empirical focus on the people and places that constitute 'Global Asia'.

Asia in/and the world

As Asia rises, mobilities associated with Asian populations have escalated (Ong 1999). The notion of 'Global Asia' is a reflection of this increased mobility, and refers to the presence of Asian peoples living in ostensibly non-Asian countries, and, contrariwise, the presence of non-Asian peoples living in Asian countries. Importantly, our notion of Global Asia goes beyond territory, and embraces the wide-ranging socio-cultural influences of Asia on the rest of the world. These influences have, over many decades of intermixing, play an important role in shaping Asian identities, communities and cultures; which have, in turn, come to inflect upon the experience and praxis of religion amongst the communities that comprise Global Asia. Indeed, the diversity of religious landscapes that are found through Asia are reproduced throughout Global Asia in new, increasingly innovative – and sometimes disruptive – ways. Underpinning these processes is the



fact that Asian societies are some of the most digitally advanced in the world, which has important ramifications for the cross-border practice of religion. For example, Cheong et al. (2014, p. 8) note how ‘globally dispersed Chinese populations rely on digital media to enable the exchange of various resources and sustain ties to their physical church, *jia*,¹ or spiritual home, thus transcending national borders’. Indeed, as much as the emergence of Global Asia contributes to greater diversity in the world, so too have digital media served to catalyse such processes.

The movements and circulations of Asian people and Asia as destination are a result of differing motivations (economic, lifestyle, work, study and humanitarian) and due to the accessibility of available, cheaper and sometimes questionable (e.g. refugees and asylum seekers taking to leaky boats) transport. In the past four decades, the increasing migration and mobility of Asians, in addition to Asia becoming a destination, has resulted in not only in changing ethnoscares but has also lead to transformations and disruptions in the socio-cultural landscapes of place not only outside Asia but also within Asia. However it is digital media which, in the past 20 years and more specifically the phenomenal rise of (and dependence on) social media in the last decade, have allowed unprecedented connectivity between people and place; thus defying the limitations of distance and time as well as transformed the migration experience. As Gomes and Yeoh (2018, pp. xiii-xiv) point out:

[D]igital media play a crucial role in transforming [the migration] experiences, not only for transnational mobile subjects but also those they have left behind. Digital media in its various forms, in other words, functions as an apparatus in transforming the different aspects and levels of the transnational migration experience, whether the experience may be permanent, transient, economic, forced, precarious, based on unexpected opportunities or by self-design.

Gomes and Yeoh (*ibid.*) further observe that digital media not only create new understandings of the migration experience but also allow for new forms of agency to be facilitated. Digital media moreover alter relationships as part of the migration experience.

Digital media play an important role in both enforcing yet also overcoming diversity; they can be both an equalising and disequalising force. In this capacity, they augment processes of transnationalism, and can contribute new

1 In this case, *jia* loosely refers to the global community of Taoist believers.

understandings of the ways in which transmigrants negotiate and overcome difference. For a long time, the concept of 'social fields' has been deployed to explain the 'multiple interlocking networks of social relationships through which ideas, practices, and resources are unequally exchanged, organised and transformed' (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004, p. 1009). Whilst social fields enable the empowerment of migrants when overseas, the concept was forged in a pre-digital age. As much as transnationalism recognises the existence of multiple, often criss-crossing ties and interactions that link people, groups and ideas across national borders, digital media serve to amplify and expand such ties. Digital media constitute a space of becoming and belonging that gives new meaning to Levitt and Glick Schiller's (2004, p. 1002) observation that integration and the maintenance of transnational ties are 'neither incompatible nor binary opposites'. Spaces of digital media are those that we immerse ourselves in and surround ourselves with, and that, increasingly, we use to engage the social and cultural worlds in which we live. They are spaces of simultaneity in which space and time play subordinate roles to the reality of being instantly and always connected to anybody, anywhere. These spaces have given rise to what we call a 'digitised society'; a society that overcomes the constraints of place-bound belonging through new avenues of connection and experience.

From transmigrants to digitised societies

A digitised society is one that straddles digital and physical space, and which interacts with the world through the lenses of digital media. It speaks to Levitt and Glick Schiller's (2004, p. 1003) call for scholarship to overcome the migrant/non-migrant dualism, and, in doing so, to bring about a 'reformulation of the concept of society'. A digitised society builds on the premise that we all live in a world in which everyone, to some extent, and to varying degrees, experiences some form of dislocation. Dislocation could result from the experience of 'alternative' reality that is brought about by digital media (and which, in this case, would result in a degree of dislocation from the 'physical' realities of the real world), or from the experience of migrating across borders and the experience of life in a new country. Importantly, therefore, in a digitised society individuals do not need to be migrants in order to feel dislocated from their physical surroundings. Digitised societies are those in which 'movement and attachment is not linear or sequential but capable of rotating back and forth and changing direction over time. The median point on this gauge is [...] *simultaneity* of connection' (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004, p. 1011; emphasis added; see also Georgiou 2014). Thus, in providing channels through which the



world is lived, observed and understood, and through which social relations are forged, maintained and complicated, digital media underpin the shift towards a digitally-mediated understanding of society; a digitised society.

To date, scholarship has most noticeably explored the empowering potential of digital media for migrant communities through the concept of 'digital diasporas'. Such work reveals how digital technologies have facilitated the processes of settlement and belonging amongst long-term migrant communities (Brinkerhoff 2009). Indeed, whilst digital diasporas are shown to 'sustain vibrant cultural and political connections locally and nationally, but also transnationally' (Georgiou 2014, p. 81; see also Morley 2000), they do so within a framework of stasis (or settlement) rather than movement (or mobility). Moreover, the digital technologies that are engaged with – such as online forums, mailing lists and bulletin boards – appear outmoded and anachronistic in a digitally-mediated world of Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat. In view of this rapidly evolving digital landscape, 'research increasingly cites the need for greater care in how we conceptualise the Internet as social space' (Parham 2004, p. 204; see also Crang et al. 1999). That aside, the simultaneity of current forms of digital media have a blanketing effect on society; they provide an anchor, a point of connection to a trans-territorial digital space of communication, content and belonging. They are, in other words, a new form of 'locality' that covers and collapses territory into digital space. Digitised societies are, in this sense, those that live in the real world, but experience it through the augmented lenses of digital media. These lenses provide the opportunity for new forms of connection and new forms of belonging. As Georgiou (2014, p. 97) puts it:

These are media encouraging collective identities to emerge and connect, identities that bring together different individuals and groups into horizontally accessible spaces, that challenge pre-existing hierarchies between minorities and majorities or between community leaders and other members of minorities.

Indeed, as much as digital media enable new forms of community to emerge, and pre-existing hierarchies of organisation to be challenged, so too do they change the ways in which we engage with and experience the real world. As a cultural form that includes aspects of community, organisation and practice, religion has been transformed by digital media just as much as people have. Thus, in recognising the existence of a digitised society, we must also recognise the existence of new forms of digitised religion that have emerged in response to the changing demands and needs of their communities of believers.



From 'cyber-religion' to digitised religion

Religion moves with people, and when people move, the ways in which they engage with religion changes. A vast array of scholarship has focused on how human mobility can 'extend religions into new places and situations of practice, sometimes invigorating them, sometimes threatening them, always transforming and remaking them' (Johnson 2012, p. 95; see also Kong and Woods 2018; Gomes and Tan 2015), yet consideration of the 'extension' of religion into the digital domain remains a relatively more recent endeavour (see Kong 2001, 2006). In the mid- to late-1990s, 'cyber-religion' was used to describe the transposition of religion onto the nascent frontier of cyberspace – that new dimension of reality that was starting to be engaged with by an increasing number of individuals, albeit on an *ad hoc* and proactive, outcome-oriented basis. For example, the embrace of technologies such as Second Life enable the creation of online workshop experiences via digital avatars, thus revealing how the Internet has become a 'tool to extend a church's offline ministry into online spaces' (Campbell 2012, p. 1). This was before the Internet became ubiquitous as it is today, and before digital media became embedded within the lives of most. In more applied terms, Dawson (2000, p. 29; emphasis added) uses the term 'cyber-religion' to describe 'those religious groups or organizations that exist *only* in cyberspace', which itself reveals how the Internet provided possibilities for new forms of religious engagement, experience and entrepreneurialism.

As the Internet became a more everyday and everywhere phenomenon, so too did scholarship become more attuned to the complexities of religion in/and the Internet. For example, Helland (2000; see also Helland 2002) advanced the terms 'religion online' and 'online religion' to distinguish between the replication of offline practices online, and the creation of new forms of online religious practices. Importantly, online religion was 'lauded for empowering its members to re-form rituals and bypass traditional systems of legitimation or recognised gatekeepers and the opportunities it provided to transcend normal limits of time, space and geography' (Campbell 2012, pp. 2-3). As such, online religion can be viewed as a catalyst for new, more fluid and flexible understandings of religion to emerge. Subsequently, Helland's (2000) distinction has become increasingly blurred in the advent of digital media. This has given rise to the latest category of understanding – that of 'digital religion', which refers to the 'technological and cultural space that is evoked when we talk about how online and offline religious spheres have become blended or integrated' (Campbell 2012, pp. 3-4). Not



only has this witnessed an applied understanding of digital media on and to religious practices, but also deeper theoretical engagement with ‘the actual contribution “the digital” is making to “the religious”’ (Hoover 2012, p. ix). With this, comes a need to better understand the unique understandings and experiences of how digital technologies augment, mediate and sometimes distort the meanings of religion.

‘Digitised religion’ is the latest stage of this quarter century-long evolution, and engages specifically with the ways in which digital media are changing the ways in which religion is practiced, understood, proselytised and countered. Digitised religion builds on the premise that digital media are ‘more than simply vehicles for culture but rather are [...] active components in its production’ and thus ‘catalyse religious mutations’ (Gauthier and Uhl 2012, p. 53). Yet, digitised religion differs from digital religion in that it is a direct response to a digitised society. Thus, it is no longer sufficient to recognise the fact that religion is becoming increasingly digitally-mediated; instead, we must consider how religion is ‘digitised’ through its appropriation by digitised societies. Digitised religion is religion that is viewed, encountered and experienced through the lens of digital media. It is the coalescence of lived religious practices and digital cultures into a ‘hybridised and fluid context requiring new logics and evoking unique forms of meaning-making’ (Campbell 2012, p. 4). For example, many churches now create and share content by recording and/or streaming their services through digital distribution platforms; a form of digital religion. These forms become digitised when we recognise the fact that it is not just churches or religious leaders that are sharing their religious products through digital platforms, but their congregations are doing so as well. This reflects an ‘exten[sion] and alter[ation of] religious practice for many’ (Campbell 2012, p. 1), with digitised religion being a more informal, more user-centric and more empowering experience of religion.

As such, digitised religion plays a particularly important role amongst migratory and mobile population groups. It enables them to not only be able to connect to their faith – whether dormant, latent, emergent or (newly) established – wherever they are physically located, but also to interpret and engage with their physical, social and cultural surroundings through the lenses of digital media. Such a mixing of content creators and consumers in and from different places foregrounds the need to develop new understandings of how religion and people intermix in ways that lead to the forming or dissolution of new forms of boundary. As such, there is a need to understand the new forms of religious encounter, community and power that emerge at the nexus of faith, flows and fellowship.



New religious formations at the nexus of faith, flows and fellowship

In recognising the advent of digitised religion, there is a need to critically engage with what this means for pre-existing assemblages of religious encounter, community and power. This is important, as relatively little is known about how the digital narratives of the transnationally mobile are 'influenced by social discourses of power' (Kienzl 2014, p. 67). Specifically, digitised religion represents the ongoing shift towards the dismantling of traditional hierarchies of religious power, and their replacement with newer, and more democratic experiences of religion. We say 'democratic' in view of the fact that digitised religion is often susceptible to the same ordering logics as other digital cultural forms. Visibility can be a function of the number of likes, clicks and shares, whilst traditional forms of authority and authenticity can be diluted or challenged by the relativising effects of being transmitted through digital space. In this sense, digital media are 'neither neutral instruments of communication nor ideological superstructures legitimising ideologically infrastructural domination'; instead, they '*shape* culture, including religion' (Gauthier and Uhl 2012, p. 54; original emphasis). Digitised religion is as emancipatory as it is appealing; it provides options for individuals to engage with religion on their own terms, in ways that may or may not be acceptable to more established sources of religious authority. Indeed, to the extent that digital media 'normatively shape religion today', digitised religion 'consecrat[es] the break from traditional regulations of and shift[s] religion towards a radically different horizontal regulation operated through public opinion and expectation, typical of our globalised consumer societies' (Gauthier and Uhl 2012, p. 54).

Being plugged into – and a function of – 'globalised consumer societies', digitised religion has a strong grounding in new community formations. It locates religion within digital space, and thus renders it liable to the claims and (mis)appropriation of people that exist beyond or outside of more formal congregational arrangements. It makes religion vulnerable. Just as the 'democratisation of information pursued by the Internet erodes traditional and State authority', then so too is religion 'no longer catered, produced, and debated within traditional institutions and national boundaries but rather on a transnational level with an idealized [...] community' (Gauthier and Uhl 2012, p. 65; see also Woods 2018). Digitised religion loses – to some extent – the authority and established materiality of the physical world, and becomes liable to democratisation. Through



democratisation, it can be deployed to serve the purposes for which the 'idealised' communities within which it is embedded desire. This can have profound implications for more traditional or pre-existing formations and logics of religious organisation, as authority in the real world does not necessarily translate to authority in the digital world. Given that digital media 'essentially serves an ideological function', then anyone can participate in the 'reproduction and legitimisation of social structure and their underlying domination logics' (Gauthier and Uhl 2012, p. 55). The fact is that:

To enter the World Wide Web is to enter a world of competition where players are levelled [...] the Vatican has no advantage on the Web with respect to religious and spiritual affairs. It must fight for visibility and interest as much as anyone else (Gauthier and Uhl 2012, p.56).

The point is that digital space 'levels' the playing field. As much as it overcomes the limitations of space and time, so too does it predicate the need for social relations to be reassembled according to the logics of digital organisation. Thus, to the extent that we live in a digital age, then so too is the 'appropriation of digital and social media is central to the self-production' of religious organisations, as it 'enables them to be incarnated in such a way that they are perceived and experienced as identifiable unities around the world' (Cheong et al. 2014, p. 11). These could be for instruction, for belonging, for connection, for empowerment, or for a host of other reasons. For example, Cheong et al. (2014, p. 8) have shown how a transnational Taiwanese spiritual organisation – Tzu Chi – is 'co-constituted or "coproduced" as a socio-technical network by different social actors through the appropriation of digital media and mediated communication, including Facebook'. These idealised communities become more nuanced when they are comprised in whole or in part by migrants. Irrespective of the extent to which they are integrated into digitised society, migrants are more likely to 'employ territorial identifications, engaging their creative forces in the use of things, bodies, words, and acts to deal with a perceived spatial crisis, to close or dwell in a gap between "here" and "there" in ways that are socially consequential' (Johnson 2012, p. 103; see also Edwards 2013; Georgiou 2014). It is not just social relationships that are transformed by such 'spatial crises', but individuals relationship with their religion as well. These more fragmentary understanding of people, place and religion define the nexus of faith, flows and fellowship in Global Asia, and underpin the contributions that follow.

Structure of the book

This collection brings together, for the first time, a diversity of case studies across the migration, religious and digital media spectrum which decipher the ways in which individuals and groups use digital media to facilitate expressions of faith to give meaning and anchor their migrant experience. It spans nine chapters, separated into three thematic sections, that are distinguishable through their respective foci on the role of digital media in enabling or hindering the formation of community, connectivity across borders and the preaching of faith.

The first section titled 'Community Creation: The Role of Digital Media in Faith-based Groups', comprises three chapters, and examines how digital media can contribute to the creation or disruption of online and offline religious communities. Orlando Woods starts by exploring how Asian migrants to Singapore forge various types of faith-based online communities to help them cope with the upheaval of dislocation. In doing so, he highlights the enduring tensions between being here and there, and being online and offline. Francis Lim and Sng Bee Bee continue the focus on the role of digital media in enabling China's religious revival, but explore it from the perspective of Chinese Christians. In particular, they problematise the enabling role of digital media by contextualising it within China's political environment and Internet regulatory regime. Finally, Anna Hickey-Moody and Marissa Willcox provide a different take on the migrant-religion-digital media nexus by looking at the impact of digital media on religiously observant migrant communities in selected secular cities in Australia and the United Kingdom. They do this by using a mixed-methodology approach including child-centric art-based practice, to understand how migrant children and their parents respond to negative media depictions of their religions.

The second section titled 'Connectivity through Faith: Maintaining Transnational Connections through Religion' comprises two chapters, and looks at how digital media are deployed to maintain transnational connections through religion. Han Zhang and Junxi Qian start with a discussion of a topic of great importance in recent years – the religious revival in China. They interrogate the transmission of this-worldly-Buddhism from Taiwan to mainland China. In doing so, they highlight the role of digital media in enabling this transmission, and the seemingly paradoxical role of Buddhism therein. Tan Meng Yoe explores this dynamic from the opposite perspective, by considering how blogging enabled a Malaysian-Chinese Christian blogger to cope with migration to New Zealand. This movement is articulated as a form of physical and spiritual exile from Malaysia, with



the blog constituting a sort of virtual pathway through which geographical separation can, in some way, be reconciled.

The third and final section titled 'Preaching the Faith: The Rise of Digital Pastors and Preachers' comprises four chapters, and examines the role of digital media in enabling religious leaders and activists to cross boundaries and exert some degree of influence. Catherine Gomes and Jonathan Tan explore how new patterns of congregation can emerge in response to the creation of digital pastors. By exploring the influence and appeal of Brian and Bobbie Houston – the New Zealand-born founders of Hillsong – and Joseph Prince – the Singapore-born founder of New Creation Church – they explore the ways in which digital marketing and branding is used to shape and expand the appeal of these digital pastors. Justin K.H. Tse takes the idea of religious influencing through digital media, and explores it through the prism of online politics. Contrary to cyberspace being a medium through which difference can be transcended, he instead demonstrates how it can be used to reproduce differences between the Anglo-American and Asian-American evangelical communities. Hyemin Na delves into the case of Asian-American Christian communities in more detail, by focusing on how Korean-American Christian women living in the U.S. incorporate religious digital media produced in South Korea into their everyday lives. In doing so, she highlights how these women exert a form of spiritual authority over the ways in which they curate and consume these media. Finally, Kamaludeen Mohamed Nasir explores the role of digital media in enabling forms of transnational religious activism. Drawing on the recent plight of the Rohingya in Myanmar, he shows how Muslim leaders in Myanmar, Bangladesh, Malaysia and Australia used digital media to make a case for the acceptance and integration of the Rohingya into their own respective communities.

Altogether, these chapters highlight some of the nuances that emerge at the intersection of digital media and hyper-mobility. In some instances, digital media can help overcome the dislocations that arise as a result of hyper-mobility; in others, they enforce them. While the major organised religions of Buddhism, Islam and to a lesser extent Hinduism are represented in this collection, it is Christianity which dominates much of the discussion. However, rather than seeing this as a drawback, this collection is really a 'first step' to unpacking and understanding the faith, flows and fellowship nexus. With the unprecedented numbers of people circulating transnationally into Asia, within Asia and into Asian diasporic communities outside Asia together with their ubiquitous reliance of digital technologies, this book provides us with a glimpse of the significance of faith in today's world.



The chapters thus are united in their focus on Asian communities, but are unique in terms of their empirical insights into the ongoing evolution of faith, flows and fellowship in Global Asia.

Postscript

While we were completing this collection in early 2020, the significance of religious instruction and observance in the digital space became even more profound. The world at this time was gripped by an unprecedented health crisis in the form of COVID-19. Emerging first in the Chinese city of Wuhan, the virus soon spread far and wide resulting in travel bans, self-quarantine, social distancing and in-country lockdowns. This meant that religious gatherings for worship were disallowed thus making the digital space even more significant for religions as people sought solace from real world happenings. For many, it is the first time their lives have been disrupted in such a way; for some, it has prompted the search for comfort and reassurance in religion to offset the growing sense of uncertainty and threat felt throughout the world. Whether the digital space will grow in importance and substance for world religions is yet to be seen. For now, it is providing the environment for meaningful engagements between religious leaders, preachers and instructors with the faithful, some of whom are finding themselves immobilised within their homes, and socially distanced from their friends and families. In such times, the intersections of the digital and the religious find renewed meaning as the basis for hope, continuity and resilience in an increasingly volatile world.

References

- Beneito-Montagut, R. (2011) 'Ethnography goes Online: Towards a User-Centred Methodology to Research Interpersonal Communication on the Internet', *Qualitative Research*, 11(6), pp. 716-735.
- Brinkerhoff, J.M. (2009) *Digital Diasporas: Identity and Transnational Engagement*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Campbell, H.A. (2012) 'Introduction: The Rise of the Study of Digital Religion', in Campbell, H.A. (eds.), *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, London and New York: Routledge, pp. 1-21.
- Cheong, P.H., Hwang, J.M. and Brummans, B. (2014) 'Transnational Immanence: The Autopoietic Co-Constitution of a Chinese Spiritual Organization through Mediated Communication', *Information, Communication & Society*, 17(1), pp. 7-25.



- Crang, M., Crang, P. and May, J. (1999) *Virtual Geographies: Bodies, Space and Relations*, London: Routledge.
- Dawson, L. (2000) 'Researching Religion in Cyberspace: Issues and Strategies', in Hadden, J.K. and Cowan, D.E. (eds.), *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promises*, New York: JAI Press, pp. 25-54.
- Edwards, B.H. (2003) *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Gauthier, F. and Uhl, M. (2012) 'Digital Shapings of Religion in a Globalised World: The Vatican Online and Amr Khaled's TV-preaching', *Australian Journal of Communication*, 39(1), pp. 53-70.
- Georgiou, M. (2014) 'Diaspora in the Digital Era: Minorities and Media Representation', *Journal on Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe*, 12(4), pp. 80-99.
- Gomes, C. (2016). 'Introduction', in Gomes, C. (eds.), *The Asia-Pacific in the Age of Transnational Mobility: The Search for Community and Identity on and Through Social Media*, London: Anthem Press, pp. 1-16.
- Gomes, C. and Tan, J. (2015) 'Christianity as a Culture of Mobility: A Case Study of Asian Transient Migrants in Singapore', *Kritika Kultura*, 25, pp. 215-244.
- Gomes, C. and Yeoh, B.S.A. (2018) 'Introduction', in Gomes, C. and Yeoh, B.S.A. (eds.), *Transnational Migrations in the Asia-Pacific: Transformative Experiences in the Age of Digital Media*, London & New York: Rowman & Littlefield International, pp. xi-xxv.
- Helland, C. (2000) 'Online-Religion/Religion-Online and Virtual Communities', in Hadden, J.K. and Cowan, D.E. (eds.), *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promises*, New York: JAI Press, pp. 205-223.
- Helland, C. (2002) 'Surfing for Salvation', *Religion*, 32(4), pp. 293-302.
- Hoover, S. (2012) 'Foreword: Practice, Autonomy and Authority in the Digitally Religious and Digitally Spiritual', in Cheong, P.H., Fisher-Nielsen, P., Gelfgren, S. and Ess, C. (eds.), *Digital Religion, Social Media and Culture: Perspectives, Practices and Futures*, New York: Peter Lang Publishing, pp. vii-xi.
- Johnson, P.C. (2012) 'Religion and Diaspora', *Religion and Society: Advances in Research*, 3, pp. 95-114.
- Kienzl, L. (2014) 'Digital Participatory Culture: Transnationality, Fandom & Diversity Religion and Gender in German-Written Fan Fiction and Fan Forums', *Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet*, 6, pp. 66-89.
- Kong, L. (2001) 'Religion and Technology: Refiguring Place, Space, Identity and Community', *Area*, 33(4), pp. 404-413.
- Kong, L. (2006) 'Religion and Spaces of Technology: Constructing and Contesting Nation, Transnation, and Place', *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, 38(5), pp. 903-918.
- Kong, L. and Woods, O. (2018) 'Mobile Bodies, (Im)mobile Beliefs? Religious Accord and Discord as Migratory Outcomes', *Social Compass*, 65(2), pp. 149-167.

- Levitt, P. and Glick Schiller, N. (2004) 'Conceptualizing Simultaneity: A Transnational Social Field Perspective on Society', *International Migration Review*, 38(3), pp. 1002-1039.
- Morley, D. (2000) *Home Territories: Media, Mobility and Identity*, London: Routledge.
- Ong, A. (1999) *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Parham, A.A. (2004) 'Diaspora, Community and Communication: Internet Use in Transnational Haiti', *Global Networks*, 4(2), pp. 199-217.
- Rudolph, S.H. (1997) 'Religion, States and Transnational Civil Society', in Rudolph, S.H. and Piscatori, J. (eds.) *Transnational Religion and Fading States*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, pp. 1-26.
- Woods, O. (2018) 'The Digital Subversion of Urban Space: Power, Performance and Grime', *Social & Cultural Geography*, DOI: 10.1080/14649365.2018.1491617.

About the authors

Catherine Gomes is an Associate Professor in the School of Media and Communication at RMIT University. Her work contributes to the understanding of the evolving migration, mobility and digital media nexus. She is a specialist on the Asia-Pacific with Australia and Singapore being significant fieldwork sites. She has authored and edited 7 books.

Lily Kong is the President and Lee Kong Chian Chair of Social Sciences at Singapore Management University. Her research focuses on social and cultural change in Asian cities. She has studied topics including religion, cultural policy, creative economy, urban heritage and conservation, and smart cities, and has won numerous research and book awards from various institutions such as the Association of American Geographers and the Singapore National Book Development Council.

Orlando Woods is an Assistant Professor of Humanities at Singapore Management University. His research interests span religion, digital technologies and urban environments in/and Asia. He holds BA (First Class) and PhD degrees in Geography from University College London, and the National University of Singapore, respectively.

