Becoming Buddhists: The emergence of a prestigious temple

Enying Zheng

Abstract
How does a novel organizational prototype come about and succeed to the point where it becomes recognized as an icon? To address this question, this article examines the organizational emergence of a prestigious temple. Drawing on interviews and content analysis of 6320 blog entries between 2006 and 2018, we identify how an organized way of practicing Buddhism emerged in China and trace its founding monks to students from two elite universities. We argue that organizational emergence—in this case the rise of a prestigious temple and what it stands for—was manifested by identity claims of “who we are” to audiences. Declaring “who we are not” prior to establishing this temple, the founding monks subsequently claimed their organizational identity in three distinct stages: who we are in this temple, who we are as a temple, and who we are as Buddhism. As these identity claims were recognized by the audiences, a novel Buddhist organization emerged. This article contributes to an organizational perspective of religious study and provides a focused case with sufficient temporary variations to explore how identity claims facilitate organizational emergence. It has important implications for understanding incremental yet fundamental institutional changes, as it provides a template of organized religion that nurtures social skills for self-organizing. More broadly, these insights contribute toward developing a vibrant civil society.
INTRODUCTION

Buddhist revival in China is phenomenal: starting from a near zero presence in the late 1970s, Buddhism has skyrocketed to more than 13,000 temples and 200,000 monks and nuns by the end of the 2000s. Research has attributed its rise to pragmatic considerations such as attracting foreign investment and boosting tourist revenues by local governments under the tenet of economic development (Chan & Lang, 2011; Lu & He, 2014). However, these Buddhist organizations have not experienced the categorical transformation that their peers in Taiwan went through (Laliberté, 2013). Chen (2008) describes Buddhism in Taiwan being changed from a taken-for-granted and embedded religion to an explicit religion, that is, an articulated set of religious practices and beliefs that is a significant source of agency for a growing middle class. Central to this change is organizational emergence that recombines different elements of religious and secular organizations to accommodate Buddhist practices in a more orchestrated, religious, and engaging manner.

Organizing matters greatly, as it helps tap into, recruit, and retain desirable converts (Kanter, 1972; Lu, 2005). More than a physical place for performing rituals, modern religious venues nurture social interactions and activate organizational identity of “who we are,” especially for the new converts surrounded in this case by a sea of atheists. A revival in sheer numbers does not automatically generate the kind of Buddhist organizations that coordinate religious activities, infuse meanings, and carve out an organizational image. It takes a clear vision and social skills to usher organizational emergence (Fligstein, 2001), which do not come easily to Chinese living in an underdeveloped civil society. Easily accessible templates for learning self-organizing, however, are missing, especially for Buddhists. China has a tradition of non-congregational religions and the state has long been suspicious of organized belief systems (Chen & Williams, 2016; Fisher, 2011; Sun, 2017). Originating from India more than 2000 years ago, Buddhism has become a localized religion in China, subsumed by other central institutions such as ancestor worship. In fact, many Chinese practice Buddhism as a habit rather than a deliberate choice (Chen, 2008). In addition, the government’s atheist campaigns from the 1950s through the 1970s have hindered the transfer of intergenerational knowledge. Under such restrictive conditions, how does a novel organizational prototype of practicing Buddhism come about and succeed to the point where it becomes recognized as an icon? Answering this meso-level question has larger implications for understanding macro-level institutional changes. We argue that organizational emergence is accompanied and substantiated by making identity claims about “who we are” as the faithful. Throughout this identity-claiming process, organizational members selectively articulate and present to the outside world the central, distinctive, and enduring character of their organization (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Glynn, 2000). This is because emergent organizations (e.g., with novel forms, tasks, or activities, etc.) are often recognized and referred to by invoking their appealing attributes, actions, positions, or iconic leaders, the manifesting features of organizational identity. Thus, what members do and how they talk about their organization underscore the process of emergence.

Exploring the question of organizational emergence will redirect scholarly endeavors to an alternative paradigm that brings organized religions to the analytic fore. The underdevelopment of religious organizations in China is in large part due to the state’s restrictive policies (Koesel, 2013; Li et al., 2018; Sun, 2017). Accordingly, prior research views religious revival as a counterforce, zooming in how the faithful gather to bypass or confront the state’s interference. For example, Yang’s (2006) inspiring three-market theory categorizes varying extents to which religious sites and activities are sanctioned by the state, with the red market for complete compliance, the gray market for borderline conformity, and the black market for being strictly prohibited. Although extant scholarship has devoted considerable space to describe churches or temples, religious organizations and their organizational identity are taken for granted rather than being theorized explicitly (Ji, 2012; Koesel, 2013; Lu & Gao, 2017; but see Lu, 2005 for an
entrepreneurial perspective). Organizing matters for shaping "who we are" (Gioia et al., 2010). As the faithful organize themselves in a particular way and adopt a specific organizing model, "it signals its identity both to its own members and to others" (Clemens, 1993).

Adopting this organizational view, we study the emergence of a prestigious temple (to which we assign the pseudonym Dragon Temple to protect its privacy) in Beijing between 2005 and 2018. Our primary data source is 6320 blog entries covering 866 events or formal activities that the temple members participated in. Supplementary to this is the shifting pattern of the narratives presented at the same blog site. Additionally, 28 interviews conducted in 2006 provided the background information on the temple's founding monks, mostly from two elite universities. Monks with these educational backgrounds and status are uncommon, and it is an important testament to how effective the temple has been at appealing to a segment of society rarely reached by Buddhism. Our analysis of these data sources suggests that throughout the emergent process, the members made different identity claims at three distinct stages: (1) who we are in this temple—projecting the organizational identity on the unconventional choices made by the founding monks, (2) who we are as a temple—transferring individual status to an emerging Buddhist organization, and (3) who we are as Buddhism—having emerged as an organizational testimony of religion in modern China. As these claims evolved and became recognized, a unique religious organization of practicing and embodying Buddhism emerged.

To answer the research question of organizational emergence, the remainder of this article is as follows. We begin with a summary of organizational emergence through identity claims. We then introduce our research setting and methodology. The next section provides founding imprint of the temple. It is then followed by the analysis of how the temple emerged as a unique Buddhist organization. We conclude by discussing theoretical contributions and implications for institutional changes.

2 | ORGANIZATIONAL EMERGENCE THROUGH IDENTITY CLAIMS

Organizational emergence entails a process of becoming, which consists of the founding stage followed by continuous adaptations over time of a new organizational form (Chiles et al., 2004; Siggelkow, 2002). Prior research has centered on the aggregate level analysis, for example, an emergent type of firms or an alternative way of organizing voters across regions (Clemens, 1993; Haveman & Rao, 1997; Ruef, 2000). This is largely because of the available data and application of the quantitative approach to organizational research. It essentially captures a diffusion process, as the emergence of a recognizable organizational prototype is observed by a group of organizations sharing something uniquely similar (e.g., women's universities).

What remains understudied, however, is a key question: how does a novel organizational prototype come about and succeed to the point where it becomes recognized as a pioneer or icon? For an organization to become a socially recognized entity, its existence and uniqueness should be easy to define and communicate. For example, the rise of the Medici family and what it stood for provide a vivid example of organizational emergence (Padgett & Ansell, 1993). This and the emergence of other influential prototypes require considerable work, namely, the doing and talking by members to articulate "who we are" (Creed et al., 2010). In this sense, identity claims constitute a precursor to organizational emergence. While the literature is sparse on defining this term, here is the working definition for our purposes: identity claims are how members present their organization as a collective to others (and to lesser extent to themselves). These claims can take many forms from written and oral declarations to actions, and are important for giving people a sense of structure, purpose, and direction. Just as individuals endeavor to present themselves to others (Goffman, 1959), members of an emergent organization strategize and rehearse a unique identity for their organization backstage, and perform and present it onstage. Central to their identity claims is who they are collectively as an organization, and equally important is what it means to be an organization in society.

Given the motivation of securing uniqueness, organizational identity cannot simply be inferred from registration information or formal infrastructures such as a temple or a university. Well-established categories as such do not contain a selling point to catch the attention of a distracted public. How an emerging organization presents itself
to audiences becomes critical to its survival (Czarniawska & Wolff, 1998; Dutton & Dukerich, 1991). Just as social networks can serve as a prism of an actor’s social standing (Podolny, 2001), interactions with selected actors are crucial to convey an organizational identity. It is through what an organization does and with whom it does things together that people recognize its existence as a distinct entity.

To make their identity claims effectively, organizations have recently turned to social media tools. Presenting who they are, garnering audience attention, and gaining their approval all facilitate organizational emergence. Positive media coverage can give rise to celebrity organizations (Etter et al., 2019; Rindova et al., 2006). Achieving such approval influences both the way the members identify with their organization (Kjaergaard et al., 2011) and how external audiences view them.

Taken together, organizational emergence is underscored by identity claims made by the members to external audiences. To make their claims resonate, members selectively engage with and present certain social interactions. When organizational identity is claimed and evoked in practical performance, its meaning and relevance is reaffirmed as personal experience, which embodies organizational emergence (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

3 | RESEARCH SETTING AND METHODOLOGY

Since the mid-1990s, a Buddhist revival has swept rural villages and small towns of China, where the number of residents an average temple reached was between 315 and 444 (Goossaert & Palmer, 2011). In large cities, however, extensive temple rebuilding was slow for two reasons. One is that Buddhism does not possess aspects that a modern urban population finds appealing. The other reason is that land prices in urban areas have skyrocketed; building a temple—a compound in need of a large parcel of land—is cost prohibitive. In fact, the few existing temples in cities are often cultural scenes with a long history. It is against this backdrop that the Dragon Temple emerged in Beijing.

3.1 | From two elite universities to a prestigious temple

Founding monks of the Dragon Temple primarily came from two elite universities in Beijing—Stone University and Spring University (pseudonyms). Starting in the fall of 1996, a group of about 10 students there started to meet regularly to read the Confucian and Buddhist classics, having once met during an ad hoc lecture on a related theme. Unlike proliferating Bible study groups on campus hosted by foreign Christians (Wenzel-Teuber, 2017), this Buddhist group started off without a clear religious agenda. They explored Buddhism along with Confucianism and called on a variety of temples, even visiting prominent Christian churches.

The year 2000 marked a milestone as they became connected to Master Moon, an influential monk in Taiwan, who helped transform Buddhism there into a more organized religion through regular gatherings and action toward social and environmental issues. Among his many organizational innovations was hosting regular Buddhist retreats in monasteries for an unconventional profile of potential converts: college students, professionals, and businesspeople (Lee & Suh, 2017). Master Moon’s initial contact with the mainland was through the Grand Temple in Fujian province. The Buddhist group started to participate in Buddhist retreats there and attracted more students to join their regular gatherings back in Beijing.

The period between 2002 and 2004 marked a major crisis when several members left to become monks at the Grand Temple, which stimulated a heated debate over the group’s future development. Some advocated for a devoted religious career, while others preferred the status quo. In addition, the Stone University dismantled a related student association and has since been vigilant about religious activities on campus. The members at Spring University shifted their activities to reading the Confucian classics.

A return started in 2005, when those who became monks in Fujian province received a permit to establish their own temple in Beijing. The newly founded Dragon Temple soon became a prestigious Buddhist organization in terms
of its membership profile and engagement with charity matters. It adopted organizational repertories from both religious and secular worlds: hosting regular gatherings on weekends, organizing Buddhist retreats, and participating in professional conferences, among other activities. Around the same time, they registered a charity foundation as a separate entity, riding the tide with Buddhist philanthropy (McCarthy, 2017).

3.2 | Data and methodology

The emergence of the Dragon Temple was accompanied by the rising prominence of social media tools. Blog entries ranging between February 2006 and August 2018 from a Chinese social media platform constitute the primary data set for this article. The blog account was under the name of the temple's abbot, who assumed multiple leadership roles in the Buddhist community (e.g., he was also the abbot of the Grand Temple). It was managed by the Dragon Temple members, and mostly reported their stories and activities. There is a separate blog account under the temple’s name, initially created by a lay practitioner. Its content revolved around the Buddhist texts disseminated in a top-down lecturing mode. It also stopped updating information for more than a year and did not garner wide readership. We thus focus on the more actively used abbot’s blog account and analyze the entries that covered the Dragon Temple.

Using a total of 6320 blog entries, three research assistants and the author read and manually coded the content and cross checked our coding schemes for consistency. For each blog entry, our coding first distinguished between whether it covered events or narratives. An event was defined as a formal activity with an explicit agenda and identifiable organizational actors (e.g., a company). This means that regular visits by lay practitioners for rituals or weekend gatherings were not counted as events. Since the temple abbot held multiple leadership roles in several Buddhist organizations, the next step was to count those he participated in as the abbot of the Dragon Temple, when a blog entry covered his activities. Finally, we matched blog entries and events on a one to one basis. For example, for a series of blog entries reporting the similarly themed activities within a short period of time (e.g., the temple members visiting some US universities and religious sites in 2012), we counted a formal meeting with each specific audience in a designated venue as a single event. For a blog entry that mentioned several participants, we cross checked against other sources to identify whether they came for the same event or for separate meetings. Sometimes several blog entries described repeated encounters with an organization during a visit. This is especially the case for the temple linked charity foundation that paid recurring visits to its beneficiaries. We grouped such multiple visits to the same cities within a quarter as one event.

Appearing in a chosen event and blogging about it in detail gave audiences a concrete impression of what the temple does. Such identity claim would become informative when the event coparticipants are mentioned. We therefore categorized each of the coparticipants into four fields: religious, social, educational, or political. Our coding theme generated 866 events that involved a total of 1018 actors from the four fields, and annual distribution is shown in Figure 1.

We also examined other blog entries that contain narratives about the temple and its members. The writing explicitly made identity claims regarding who they are and what they do. Most narratives were presented at the beginning and end of our observation periods, whereas the events concentrated in the middle. We inductively coded key elements emergent from the blog content, and identified three distinct stages of identity claims between 2006 and 2018: (1) who we are in this temple, (2) who we are as a temple, and (3) who we are as Buddhism.

Besides the blog content, we rely on 28 semi-structured interviews conducted in 2006 to provide background information on the founding monks. Subjects with varying levels of familiarity with the temple offered a reasonable account of what happened from long before through right after the temple registration. As mentioned above, we should caution that some interviewees had already become estranged from the temple in 2006 but still tracked its development closely, while others were new converts and enthusiastic about their religious community. For the latter category, we did not systematically trace their affiliation with the temple over time, but blog content sometimes
provided corroborating evidence of considerable variation of their sustained identification with the temple (e.g., assuming an important leadership role or being not mentioned at all). In a nutshell, their narratives about the temple reflected divergent opinions at the individual level. Drawing on these materials, we first delineate a brief history prior to the temple’s founding and then focus on what happened as it developed into a prestigious Buddhist organization.

Before moving to the next section, a note of methodological choice is worth mentioning here. For qualitative research, there are two broad streams: descriptive (some call it interpretative) versus explanatory approach. There is no an inherently hierarchical order of which approach is necessarily better than the other. Our choice of a descriptive approach is closely linked to broader conceptual issues of organizational emergence and data availability. Instead of asking a why question informed by counterfactuals (e.g., similar students who failed to develop a Buddhist temple), a how question regarding organizational emergence is better suited to the rise of a prestigious temple that may usher categorical transformations for organized religion in China.

Admittedly, this methodological choice may not provide a conventional causal argument. But we believe that good description of under-studied phenomena is better than bad explanation of something we are yet to grasp, and could help readers make descriptive inferences. For example, subsequent studies may confirm or falsify our argument about organizational emergence by investigating whether identity claims by other faithful groups are crucial for the emergence of their own idiosyncratic religious organizations. With more such well-described cases, we could specify why identity claims matter by exploring the mechanisms such as resource mobilization or enhanced legitimacy.
4 | THE FOUNDING IMPRINT OF IDENTITY CLAIMS: “WHO WE ARE NOT”

The Chinese may be geared toward a collectivist culture, but individualization is indeed a major structural feature of the reform era (Yan, 2010). Intensive social engineering programs in the Mao era freed people from pre-modern affiliations such as tight-knit kinships, and the following economic reforms freed them from socialist collectives mainly through massive layoffs. During this unsettled period, college students, like others, sought to identify their desired self (Rofel, 2007), only with more accessible cultural repertories. They actively participated in various forms of self-development to fulfill their potential and find who they are.

It is against this background that the Buddhist group first came into existence in 1996. Its participants did not consider themselves as Buddhists. Nevertheless, their gatherings still provided opportunities to practice and improve organizational skills. For example, to develop an organizational basis on campus, they first founded the Vegetarian Association at Spring University in the spring of 2000, and deliberately advocated it as a healthy and sustainable dietary fashion and lifestyle in the West rather than associating it with Buddhism. Among other efforts, they convinced the university administration to designate a vegetarian food booth in a canteen. Waiting in line during a busy mealtime helped gather like-minded members, and provided a convenient space for themselves to meet regularly. Two more student associations focusing on Confucianism were later founded at each university in 2002, holding early morning gatherings to read the Confucian classics.

Throughout this process, they did not take on an explicit identity of being Buddhists. Mr. Jin began to practice Buddhism in high school, but did not regard it as a religion. According to him, “It is more like a philosophy instead of a religion. Christianity is different, requiring its believers to do missionary work and convert others. I think Buddhism has incorporated Confucianism into its theology and become more integrated with the Chinese culture.” For him, their activities at the elite universities resembled those of the ideal Confucian intellectuals—to become a better self through farming, reading, and thinking and being ready to serve the society. Vegetarianism substituted for farming, while early morning reading attested to that ideal. In a nutshell, university surroundings crystalized an emergent identity of “who we are not,” being so close to but separate from an implicitly referent group of other students zealously pursuing success in the secular world.

Buddhist retreats at the Grand Temple further strengthened their articulation of “who we are not” by highlighting the difference between themselves and conventional Buddhists who have lower socioeconomic status. A retreat usually lasted a few days, consisting of several modular sessions. In a typical session, a group leader first laid out a theme such as anger control, others then took turns to criticize themselves, and the team summarized how Buddhism as they were practicing could help overcome their character flaws. With extensive emotional exposure to a closely-knit session group, many learned to declare who they are not in comparison with other Buddhists. Mr. Yu, a doctorate student at Spring University, mentioned: “We are different from popular religions, neither are we like other Buddhist denominations such as Chan and Pure Land. They are simply practicing rituals, reciting simple words, and kowtowing and so on.” This difference was well received by other retreat participants, as affiliation with the elite universities signaled a stark contrast to the conventional image of Buddhists as backward. The incumbents in the Buddhist community too recognized their status and potential, and their support mattered greatly for founding the Dragon Temple.

5 | BECOMING BUDDHISTS: “WHO WE ARE” IN, AS, AND AROUND A TEMPLE

As mentioned in the research setting section, it was a temporary and strategic arrangement for some Buddhist group members to become monks at the Grand Temple between 2002 and 2004. In fact, two returned to Beijing in late 2003 to prepare for the building of the Dragon Temple, obtaining a permit in 2005. The location choice of Beijing suited the group’s founding imprint well, as the city is known for higher education, high-tech, and all sorts of professional services. In terms of resource mobilization, an influential monk who already assumed multiple leadership roles
in other Buddhist organizations became the temple's abbot. There were two pivotal sponsors. Each had practiced Buddhism for a long time but was unsatisfied with the many thriving existing temples that were too commercial. The sponsors trusted the Buddhist group members as inspiring leaders for an envisioned temple—being spiritually authentic and modern, and provided considerable financial support. Mr. Zhou used to be an active Buddhist group member at Spring University, and commented on this choice of Beijing with enthusiasm: "The abbot is a genius. ... Beijing is different, attractive to so many well-educated young professionals and rich people. I think it is the primary reason why they moved back to Beijing."

This consideration paid off as many became intrigued by the founding monks' academic background. This novelty even attracted their university alumni with equally high status in the secular world. Mr. Wen graduated from Spring University but did not know about this group until 2005. His initial contact with Buddhism was a trip to a famous temple, accompanying his friend. "After spending time with the Buddhist study group and now looking backward, ... He (that friend) is a businessman, and what he does is to trade with Buddha. He offered money to the Lama Temple to get blessed. He barely knew about Buddhism; neither did he spend time learning it." Many were similarly motivated, visiting the temple and then joining study groups near their home. With a unique founding imprint (i.e., mainly students-turned monks), a new temple and what it stands for was in the making. In addition to these anecdotal stories, the blog content demonstrated how the temple members made sense of and presented the temple to the outside world. Their blog-based identity claims evolved through three distinct stages as the temple emerged into an iconic religious organization.

5.1 | Who we are in this temple

The first stage of their identity claims, featured by who we are in this temple, came in the period between February 2006 and December 2009. As a newly founded temple with limited tangible resources, the founding monks initially associated with elite universities became its most valuable intangible asset. Accordingly, the blog content revolved around their narratives. A total of 3091 blog entries during this period recorded 176 events, with the remaining content focusing on how the temple members made sense of their unconventional choices and adapted to an organized religious life in this temple. For example, a series of 17 blog entries in 2006 published selected diary entries on their struggles as newly converted monks. Take the ninth entry for example, (B1; see Table A1 in appendix). It mentioned a monk trying to internalize the abbot's teaching on the interplay between Buddhism and society: "you are a member of the society, and you have to adapt to its rules. To promote Buddhism, we need to make our sangha accepted by society. The more believers we convert, the greater benefit we contribute to society."

The effort to be more engaging and transformative was called on repeatedly at this stage. In another example, some monks were criticized by the abbot for their impatience while working with construction workers to build temple facilities. In response, the monks promised to reexamine their mindset and to reclaim themselves through manual labor (B2).

In addition to these reflective narratives, the monks also explained their choices explicitly to their families. A blog entry in early 2006 published a letter from a monk to his father (B3), in which he refuted the stereotype of monks as irresponsible, arguing instead that they could better help others by giving up material pursuits. Similarly, a blog entry (B4) in late 2009 published a letter from a monk to his young son. Knowing his son was a sports fan, he used an analogy of becoming a spiritual athlete to explain his choice; he was, he said, pursuing the impossible in the spiritual field. Although many stories revolved around monks and active lay practitioners, these narratives naturally led to the questions of why they all came to this temple and what is unique about this temple.

Identity claims were also reflected by how the temple selectively learned from a variety of sources of self-organizing. Addressing the growing presence of Christianity in rural China (B5), the abbot attributed this success to a localization strategy, and praised Christian clergies for their extensive missionary work. He then linked it to the Buddhist doctrine of "attracting the believers through pragmatic concerns first and then leading them to (the level of) Buddhist wisdom." Highlighting an integration of Buddhism and Chinese culture as a comparative advantage,
he urged the monks to be more engaged in social issues. Similar examples theorizing Buddhism with implicit or explicit references to competing religions became frequent topics of the blog posts. Over time, an impression was formed that high-status Buddhists were gathering in this newly founded temple to practice authentic Buddhism in a modern way.

Beyond narratives, a closer look at the events at this stage suggests the temple continued to target converts with high socioeconomic status, one of the key features of its organizational identity. For example, most of the events in the social field involved the charity foundation, and one of its programs offered a free homemade breakfast to passersby. Indeed, it started off from a major business center (far away from the temple) full of well-educated professionals and entrepreneurs. This recruiting rationale was explicitly acknowledged by the abbot when explaining to his disciples why he flew business class—to introduce Buddhism to the rich people who sit next to him. Similarly, visitors from the educational field were featured intensively in the blog, with Spring and Stone universities appeared 20 times out of a total of 40 events in this field. Students and professors at several overseas universities, and those in the part-time master of business administration (MBA) programs were frequent visitors. Contrary to what one might have expected, 32 out of the 40 events in the political field were organized by the local Bureau of Ethnic and Religious Affairs (BERA), as routine activities rather than having specific agenda. Relatedly, most of the participants in the religious field were Buddhist organizations, mainly attending events organized by the local BERA.

Taken together, both the monks and the temple were newcomers to the Buddhist community and to society at large, and it was necessary for them to make identity claims centering on who we are in this temple. The unprecedent choices they made (from students at elite universities to monks) and the temple they were building were two sides of the same coin, signaling the uniqueness of themselves and the singularity of the temple.

5.2 | Who we are as a temple

A second stage of identity claims took place between January 2010 and December 2014, during which the blog content shifted away from extensive coverage of narratives of self-reflection to documenting temple events. The organizational identity claimed during this stage was geared to who we are as a temple—an integration of tradition and modernity in a more organized way of practicing Buddhism. The temple had become a prototypical bureaucratic organization with monks with different seniorities, active lay practitioners, and rank-and-file volunteers. While specific information on finance is not available, money seemed not to be a major concern, judging from the construction process, free meals offered to the public on Buddhist holidays, and the occasionally available information disclosed by the charity foundation. Others recognized its identity claims as the temple garnered enormous attention and discussion.

As the temple was emerging as an iconic Buddhist organization, its members participated in many activities/events (n = 559), fairly distributed across four fields. These activities provided participants with concrete experiences of what the temple is. The 158 actors from the educational field involved with 75 unique institutes, among which Stone and Spring university appeared 45 times in total. As in the previous stage, the temple had become a popular option for MBA students on course-related field trips, and a recurring theme of their visits was social responsibility. For example, a group of MBA students committed to funding a charity program to sponsor underprivileged students at an elementary school. Meanwhile, more systematic programs targeting college students were developed (e.g., weekend camps). A series of blog entries published diaries of the participating students in 2010. A student from Stone University commented positively with an explicit comparison to other Buddhist temples (B6): "I went to a famous temple nearby and was shocked by the monks there who constantly played with their cellphones. ... [In contrast,] here you have employed advanced IT tools for better use (not for leisure), promoting Buddhism through integration (with social issues) and charity programs."

To further distance themselves from conventional temples, blog content at this stage highlighted the organized aspect of practicing Buddhism. This identity claim was received by various audiences. For example, the temple
attracted many political field actors (N = 136). The training program attendees of minority political parties visited the temple in early 2010 (B7), highlighting the unique organizational experience of learning Buddhism there. In response, the abbot attributed the temple's success to being in Beijing, which made an atypical Buddhist organization possible. In another blog entry reporting a conversion ritual (B8), the abbot emphasized organizing as a key defining feature of modern Buddhism: "unlike other ritual-dominant conversions, ours only suggests a starting point, just like registration for school. We will learn Buddhism together here at the temple on weekends and in study groups over weekdays." Beyond the domestic audiences, the temple also drew attention from overseas religious visitors, mainly from influential Buddhists in southeastern Asia.

While the identity claims of who we are as a temple were naturally brought up and reified when visitors came to the temple, it took considerable identity work to convey these claims outside of the temple. This was particularly the case when the monks appeared at professional conferences. During this stage, the focus of engaging with the social field shifted away from the charity foundation (62 out of 132) to social media actors (n = 29) and to attending information technology (IT) conferences. For example, a monk attended a global conference on the digital library in 2010 (B9). With a background in computer science, he still felt nervous because he was now "wearing a Buddhist robe," and worried about how others would interpret his appearance. Friendly gestures by the host and some participants helped a lot. He felt further relieved upon reading how other internet users commented on his participation in a generally positive tone. Two years later, several monks attended a mobile developer conference and navigated the situation with ease. They even shared this experience with dry humor (B10) as they excerpted some comments from media coverage of their participation, with some reports acknowledging the temple's background while others doubting their motivation. In the same blog entry, they claimed their organizational identity by explaining their participation: to understand cutting-edge technologies for future application to the temple, to approach potential Buddhists who are high level talents, and to showcase modern Buddhism. This identity claim was well received, as they later organized successful Buddhist retreats for IT professionals.

Identity claims as such were also observed when the monks visited specific organizations and became the focal point. In a trip to Europe in 2013, a monk gave a lecture at a university in Lisbon (B11). When addressing a question about integration, he used the selective utilization of technologies as an illustration. On the one hand, they lived a simple, low-maintenance life within the temple and did not even have their own cell phones or computers. On the other hand, when they were assigned tasks, they could utilize advanced technology effectively for the greater good. This decoupling helped develop a new image of what it means to be authentic and modern Buddhists.

As temple members learned to explain who they are as a Buddhist organization, anecdotal stories from those outside the temple also proliferated. In response, the temple selectively posted media coverage of itself and its monks on its blog. For example, a series of entries in 2011 reported a business executive's impressions of the temple (B12), initially published elsewhere. In this blog entry, he first contrasted the Dragon Temple with over-commercialized temples in China and then compared these with his experience of religions in the U.S. His basic point is that the temple learned some organizational principles from Christian churches but maintained its superior existence by incorporating Chinese culture as its tenet. Similarly, a blog entry in 2014 published a note by a participant of a Buddhist retreat held for IT professionals (B13). The author compared the temple to Apple, Inc. In this opinion, both featured talent-driven innovation. In contrast, other temples were portrayed as mass production lines, like Foxconn. When the actors skillfully deploy such analogies to describe emergent organizations, it reflects institutional changes that are happening in the society at large (Leblebici et al., 1991). In our study, this meant the rise of a temple for others to learn to organize their Buddhist practices or religious activities more broadly.

5.3 | Who we are as Buddhism

The final stage of identity claiming occurred between January 2015 and July 2018, characterized by who we are as Buddhism. It essentially defines what the temple and Buddhism should look like in modernizing China. At this stage, a
noticeable difference was the shrinking effort put into identity claims. At the previous stages, temple members spent considerable effort to claim their organizational identity (e.g., engaging in lengthy blogging covering what they did and what they thought in even greater detail), trying to convey who they are to the outside world. At the final stage, however, most of the blog entries (440 out of 571) simply cited the media coverage of the temple, refraining from editing or adding comments. This is in large part because the temple had already made their identity claims successful and transitioned to a more settled period (Swidler, 1986). Take a blog entry in 2016 for example, (B14). It reported on a visit from chief information officers who attended a training program at Spring University. Rather than detailing the explicit agenda of their visit or theorizing about Buddhism and IT as a typical blog entry in the previous stages would do, this one simply mentioned the who, what, where, when, and why elements. The same was found to be true in the original media report, which did not explain the uniqueness of the temple in detail. Instead, eye-catching labels were attached to the temple as a self-explanatory fact or common-sense knowledge, such as the temple being the one with the strongest research potential or having monks with the highest academic degrees.

The way the blog entries cited media reports suggests the emergence of a novel Buddhist organization, which also underscored their process of becoming Buddhists. Initially (in 2010), the monks attended IT conferences without knowing how others would react to their appearance. Since 2015, however, they rarely talked about such worries. Instead, they promoted numerous IT projects through these events (e.g., a digital library on Buddhism). In a blog entry in 2017 (B15), they mentioned making a robot monk that could answer common questions about Buddhism. This was made possible by the IT professionals they encountered at professional conferences and were later recruited through the Buddhist retreats. In fact, frequent mentioning of IT, big data, and artificial intelligence characterized this stage's blog content. For instance, a blog entry in 2017 made it explicit by asking why the elite IT professionals supported the temple with enthusiasm (B16). In answering the question, the blog enumerated the monks' alma mater, majors, degrees, and prior work experiences, all representing a desirable profile.

An uneven distribution of a total of 125 events across different fields was also suggestive of the changing identity claim at this stage, to present itself as the embodiment of Buddhism in contemporary China. The temple shifted its attention exclusively to the social field actors \( (n = 76) \), concentrating on the activities about artificial intelligence and big data. A noticeable change happened in the educational field actors, with a lower percentage of the events taking place in this field \( (n = 20, 15.9\%) \). Moreover, neither Stone or Spring Universities was mentioned often during this stage. This transformation was not only in frequency, but also in the interaction patterns. At the early stages, the events were characterized by mutual visits and focused on discussing Buddhism and Chinese culture. With time, these shifted to unidirectional visits to the temple by the students to experience an organized religious life there. Similarly, a shrinking number of the events characterized the religious field \( (n = 20) \) and the political field \( (n = 10) \).

Although the political element was less visible in identity claims previously, it loomed large during this stage. For example, a disproportionate coverage of poverty alleviation activities by the temple members resonated with the Chinese state's policy agenda. In addition, considerable blog space during this stage was devoted to the “go out policy” that is similar to the going global strategy by Chinese firms. Two connected Buddhist temples were founded in Africa and Europe, with their abbots originating from the Dragon Temple. Many blog entries talked about these temples, detailing their interactions with Chinese and with locals there. Although they were not counted in quantifying the events involved directly with the temple under study, these spinoff organizations corroborate the Dragon Temple's organizational identity of embodying Chinese Buddhism, for both insiders and outsiders, and from both domestic and foreign angles.

6 | CONCLUSION: BECOMING BUDDHISTS

This article investigates the question of how a novel organizational prototype come about and succeed to the point where it becomes recognized as a pioneer. It explores the emergence of an iconic Buddhist organization between 2005 and 2018, underscored by three distinct stages of identity claims: who we are in this temple; who we are as a
temple; and who we are as Buddhism. The temple’s emergence was against the backdrop of multifaced institutional constraints: a tradition of non-congregational religion, societal prejudice against Buddhists, state regulation, and competing religions. In making their identity claims, the temple members selectively attended and reported events, and presented their self-reflective narratives as well as presenting selective media coverage of the temple.

Throughout this process of organizational emergence, their multi-episode identity claims were analogous to the three distinct levels of becoming Buddhists. At the first level, "when you see a mountain (or river), it looks like a mountain (river)." This highlights the importance of intrinsic happiness, which was mainly expressed by the temple members' narratives of who they are in a newly founded temple. Envisioning an alternative way of pursuing happiness, they crafted a spiritual place. It was through their deliberate choices that a temple began to emerge. It then comes the second level, "when you see a mountain (river), it does not look like a mountain (river)." This level suggests the importance of recognizing broader appeals such as knowledge, freedom, and justice, concepts that extend beyond personally felt happiness. This corresponded to the second stage when the members actively linked their temple to social causes through participating in various events and anchored their identity claims through who we are as a temple. At the third and highest level, "when you see a mountain (river), it still looks like a mountain (river)." This means the reason why these things are important should ultimately be due to their contributions to happiness at the societal level, that is, morality and harmony. The final stage of organizational identity claims echoed this aspect, as the temple went beyond the individual stories of the new converts and had occupied a niche in the religious landscape, being escalated to embodying the Buddhism of contemporary China.

This research makes two theoretical contributions. First, it enriches sociology of religion by examining organizational emergence, that is, the entrepreneurial creation of a Buddhist temple that points to a more organized way of practicing Buddhism. Extending scholarly insights gained in the U.S. context (Chaves & Tsitsos, 2001; Warner, 1993), we highlight how Buddhists in modern China made their organizational identity claims as they gradually learned to organize their religious practices. While prior research adopts a state-centered view and takes religious revival in China as a counterforce, we take state intervention as given and shift to the faithful themselves. Understanding how they learned to live an organized religious life under the state's watchful eyes provides additional insights on the interplay between individuals, religion, and society. This offers a prism to think about the spiritual and organizational demand of a growing middle-class population in an individualized society (Yan, 2010).

Secondly, our case study of the rise of a prestigious temple extends the existing literature on organizational emergence. By the very definition, organizational emergence is about the process of becoming, which is often recognized and realized through identity claims. This case that spans approximately 20 years provides enough temporary variations in delineating how organizational members claimed their identity by selectively engaging in activities and presenting narratives to the external audiences. It links to a growing interest in organizational identity, but treats identity claims as ontological testimonies of organizational emergence. We know that an (novel) organization came about in the first place through its members' doing and talking; this is the actual work of making identity claims. To make this successful, considerable work is needed. This, in our empirical setting, evolved from transferring high status of the founding monks to the temple they developed, and ultimately to the organized religion they practiced. This helps advance our knowledge of how identity claims could be successful in channeling the rise of new organizational forms and the ensuing disruptive innovations they may generate.

These meso-level theoretical contributions also have important implications for macro-level institutional changes. The emergence of the Dragon Temple as an iconic religious organization calls for attention to incremental yet fundamental changes in China. As of this writing in 2023, the temple continues its mission, and more organized temples and Buddhist groups are active in urban China (Ji, 2012; Johnson, 2017). The temple was not only a religious organization for practicing Buddhism, but also became an "organization-generating" organization (Selznick, 1957) that birthed a charity foundation with influential sponsors and volunteers acting together. Additionally, a network of Buddhist study groups, albeit informal, also offers opportunities for self-organizing. The emergence process thus enabled the members to experiment with a different route to gaining legitimacy and to find who they are. In a highly contested arena like religion in China, a change in self-organizing vis-à-vis confrontation with the state could be less...
provocative yet more effective, perhaps even fundamental in ushering in the rise of a vibrant civil society. It provides resources, space, and framing to align like-minded people, who gain social skills through participation. Accumulative changes in scale and across fields and socioeconomic statuses may trigger social transformations in the long run, in religion and in other fields too.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT
There is no perceived conflict of interest.

ORCID

Enying Zheng https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6326-0905

REFERENCES


APPENDIX

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<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
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<td>Collection of reflection by monks #9</td>
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<td>A monk's letter to his son</td>
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<td>Learn from rural churches</td>
<td>B5</td>
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<td>From a Buddhist retreat participant</td>
<td>B6</td>
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<td>Visitors from the minority political parties</td>
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<td>A temple held conversion ritual</td>
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<td>Experience at a seminar on digital library</td>
<td>B9</td>
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<td>Report on a European trip #13</td>
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<td>B14</td>
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<td>Oct 2017</td>
<td>A robot monk</td>
<td>B15</td>
<td>Narratives</td>
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<td>Why is the Dragon Temple so attractive to IT elites</td>
<td>B16</td>
<td>Narratives</td>
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