

## A COMPARATIVE LINGUISTIC STUDY OF MONASTIC SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS IN CHINA AND THAILAND

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**Abstract:** Advancements in media technology have significantly reshaped the sharing and consumption of religious teachings, especially as Buddhist monks increasingly use social media platforms like Weibo in China and Facebook in Thailand to preach and engage with their followers. Some monks have gained considerable influence on these platforms, attracting large followings. While previous studies have noted the growing presence of monks on social media, their specific behaviors and strategies have not been extensively explored. This study addresses this gap by examining the practices of Buddhist monks in China, which is home to around 80% of the global Buddhist population, and Thailand, where approximately 93-94% of the population practices Theravada Buddhism. Using a qualitative content analysis approach, the study analyzes the posts of eight prominent monk influencers—four from each country—between January 2017 and December 2019. The research findings reveal key differences in the content and strategies employed by Chinese and Thai monks. Chinese monks, such as Ven. Yancan, tend to share content related to their daily lives, social interactions, and public service activities, positioning themselves as social activists. In contrast, Thai monks primarily focus on Buddhist teachings, practices, and rituals, with less emphasis on secular topics. Additionally, Chinese monks are more likely to use multimedia formats, such as videos and live streaming, for real-time engagement, while Thai monks prefer textual content and speeches, focusing on delivering sermons and reflections. Public service activities also vary, with Chinese monks organizing large-scale charity events, such as donations and educational initiatives, while Thai monks engage in smaller, more localized acts of service, like offering food and aid to the community. These differences highlight the influence of cultural and political contexts, such as China's strict policy regulations and Thailand's structured monastic oversight. The study underscores how social media has expanded the reach of Buddhist teachings, allowing monks to transcend geographical boundaries and challenge traditional religious hierarchies. By adapting to new media, Buddhist monks are able to connect with younger, digitally engaged audiences and remain relevant in an increasingly digital world, offering valuable insights into the evolving landscape of religious communication in the digital age.

**Keywords:** Buddhism, China, comparative study, monk influencers, religious communication, social media, Thailand

### INTRODUCTION

The rise of social media marks a defining feature of the new media era. Unlike traditional

mass media—such as newspapers, radio, and television—where content is primarily curated and produced by professional editors,

emerging social media platforms rely on user-generated content (Kaplan, 2015). Social media is a series of online media that allows people to communicate and share content based on participation, openness, communication, dialogue, community, and connectivity features (Lu & Ma, 2022). Social media enables unprecedented content creation and sharing, transforming interpersonal interactions through real-time information exchange (Obar & Wildman, 2015). Social media, which spreads quickly and forms spontaneous, interest-based communities, is particularly popular among young people. Popular social media include TikTok, Facebook, Twitter, and Snapchat, represented by international short videos, while TikTok, Kuaishou, WeChat, and Sina Weibo are present in China. These platforms have become important tools for mass communication, especially among the youth.

The rise of social media has significantly transformed the landscape of mass communication. In comparison to traditional media, which exhibits notable limitations in timeliness and content depth, social media has emerged as a more dynamic and immediate platform. While traditional media retains unmatched depth and authority, its advantages are becoming increasingly marginalized in the fast-paced, fragmented era of digital consumption. The younger generation, in particular, has become heavily reliant on social media for both acquiring information and expressing themselves. This shift presents a critical concern: it has led to the emergence of generations that struggle with basic skills, such as engaging with books, discerning between opinion and factual knowledge, and distinguishing reliable information from misinformation.

This shift in how information is consumed and shared, particularly through social media, mirrors the evolution of religious communication throughout history. Just as Buddhism transitioned from oral traditions to more formalized structures with the advent of scriptures and later media technologies, modern digital platforms now play a pivotal role in spreading Buddhist teachings. With the advent of technologies like movable type printing and broadcasting, Buddhism, like many other traditions, has adapted to new forms of media. From the early dissemination of Buddhist teachings through scriptures and

murals to the emergence of modern digital media, the adaptation of Buddhist communication has continued to evolve in response to the technologies available at the time. In this context, new media, emerging from the development of the internet, represents the latest phase in this evolution, fundamentally transforming the way religious messages are communicated in the digital age.

In China, with the combination of Buddhism and local culture, there have been more Chinese ways of communication, such as the opera "Mu Lian to Save the Mother" and many Buddhist Praise sutras. This is the primary way for Buddhism to spread in medieval times. Since modern times, in addition to publishing and printing, based on the development of audio-visual and communication technology, broadcasting has also become an essential means of communication in the traditional media era before the emergence of Internet technology. Furthermore, new media, which is relative to traditional media such as newspapers, outdoors, radio, and TV, refers to the media forms that emerge under new technology support systems, such as digital magazines, digital radio, cell phone SMS, mobile TV, internet, digital TV, and so on. The new media era, which the academic community has not fully defined, refers in this paper to the era when digital media is prevalent, and more specifically refers to the new generation with social media as the core of communication after the development of Internet technology. In this research, the new media era refers mainly to about thirty years since the 1990s—when the widespread use of the Internet and new media technologies profoundly and gradually changed the world.

In today's digital age, social media is a vital platform for information, expression, and influence, shaping lifestyles, values, and beliefs, with Buddhism also adapting to this shift. In this context, some famous monks have also started using social media to spread Buddhist teachings and wisdom, attracting many fans and followers. In China, numerous monasteries and priests are scrambling to open websites and create APP accounts on the Internet to communicate themselves and their groups better. Buddhism has gained a certain voice on the Internet, too. Among the more influential Ven.s, such as Ven. Yancan, whom Chinese

officials officially recognize as the number one Buddhist vlogger. Ven. Xuecheng, former president of the Buddhist Association of China, operates microblogs in multiple languages, and monasteries that consciously manage and run their online and offline images, such as Hangzhou Lingyin Temple and Shanghai Jade Buddha Temple. Similarly, Laliberté (2024) in his work argued that "Buddhism(s) for this World," originating in early 20th-century China, focuses on reforming Buddhism to make it socially relevant. While expanding their influence on the Internet, these monasteries and priests have inevitably changed Buddhism's overall image and communication. However, this change may not be all that we expected. This is, of course, one of the implications of this paper's research. Buddhist websites, blogs, social media, and other online platforms can be used to spread Buddhist teachings and values and convey the message of Buddhism to a broader audience. In the early stages, Dharma teachers did not have a clear concept of this concept, and the methods used were not unlike traditional media. However, Buddhism has its characteristics that place specific demands on communication methods. Noted in his work, Laliberté (2024) believed that there is an urgent need to understand and appreciate the evolving landscape of Buddhism in the modern world, particularly in the context of digital technology and global communication.

With regard to the overall sorting out of the relationship between Buddhism and new media, such literature is relatively abundant. For example, *Social Media and the Practice of Lay Buddhists in Contemporary China* by Feng (2019) explores the impact of the new media era on the way Buddhist groups interact with their followers; *The Weakening and New Changes of Classical Communication Theory in the Context of Internet Information* co-authored by Zhou and Wang (2016) proposes that Internet information dissemination has given rise to the weakening and new changes of classical communication theory, and classical communication theory gradually fails in the new media era, which warns about the contemporary communication of Buddhism from the side. Significantly, *Buddhism, the Internet, and Digital Media: The Pixel in the Lotus* was edited by Grieve and Veidlinger (2018). The book is a work of such research in

systematically sorting out the relationship between Buddhism and new media. The authors systematically "consider the ways Buddhism plays a role and is present in digital media through a variety of methods including concrete case studies, ethnographic research, and content analysis, as well as interviews with practitioners and cyber-communities" to explore the "development, proliferation, and perception" of Buddhism in the virtual world and social media, how it works and has an impact, and provides precious insights (Grieve & Veidlinger, 2018).

Studies on the phenomenon of Buddhism adopting new media technologies for its own and cultural communication are particularly rich and constitute the bulk of the literature on Buddhist communication in the new media era. Huang and Li (2011), in their *The New Media Landscape of Contemporary Buddhist Communication*, focused on the use of new media technology in Buddhism as a whole. Li and Du (2019) discuss the phenomenon of "circling" of online communication in Buddhist culture and explore the problem of how to break down the class barriers caused by the identity, information, socialization, and discourse power of different social classes in the process of Buddhist communication. Chen (2021) wrote in her article, *The Development of Buddhism's Sinicization in the New Media Era - Taking the Use of New Media in Buddhist Monasteries as an Example*, that the principles, bases, and practices of Buddhism in practicing the ideology of "earthly Buddhism" by using virtual network space to spread information in a more grounded way are systematically reviewed. It is also suggested that the free and open nature of the new media platform and the different communication subjects and purposes of communication have made Buddhist culture take on complex forms of communication.

However, from the perspective of the monastic celebrity phenomenon in social media, the literature, and studies exploring the spread of Buddhism in the new media era, there are only a few articles when searching well-known academic literature databases. Among them, Li (2018) in his work *The Communication of Buddhism in the New Media Era - Taking the Phenomenon of Ven. Yancan Going Viral as an Example*, and Fan (2015) work's *A Preliminary Exploration of the Weibo*

Communication of Contemporary Buddhist Culture - Taking Ven. Yancan's Weibo as an Example are focused on Ven. Yancan, the once most well-known celebrity monk on Chinese social media, analyzing the process and reasons for this monk's fame and its revelations for Buddhism's communication in the new media era. In addition, Ren's work (2012) *A Preliminary Exploration of the Characteristics and Effectiveness of Contemporary Buddhist Weibo Communication Model: An Analysis of Ven. Xuecheng's Weibo Content as an Example* explores the characteristics and communication effects of opinion-leading monastic celebrities in adopting social media for self-expression.

In the new media era, Buddhism is inevitably faced with the problem of how to deal with the spread of social media. There are already many monasteries in economically developed areas, and the younger generation of Buddhist monks, active or passive, have become online celebrities on social media. The existence of well-known Buddhist monks in social media must also impact the image of Buddhism. However, the presentation and consequences of this influence are not necessarily controllable or positive. In Thailand, where Buddhism is a dominant religion, monks' social media use is shaped by official policies, public opinion, and traditional Buddhist practices. China is a secular country where communist thought occupies the mainstream. Buddhism is more restricted by policies and the general public here, and the influence of Buddhism itself has been significantly weakened. These are two completely different social environments, even at both ends of the spectrum. Over the past two decades, influential monks like Master Yancan, known for his philosophical teachings, Master Haitao, renowned for his charity work, and Master Wudan, a prominent meditation instructor, have gained significant online followings in China. There are also celebrities in Thailand who have received much attention on social media, such as Phra Maha Paiwan Warawanno, Phra Maha Sompong Talaputto, Phra W. Wachiramethi, Phra Sakda Suntharo, Phra Ajahn Jayasaro, and Phra Payom Kalayano.

China and Thailand are essential inheritance countries of Buddhist culture, with

a long history of Buddhism and rich Buddhist resources. Famous monks on social media in China and Thailand have their characteristics and styles and face different opportunities and challenges. However, no single study has paid attention to the role and significance of social media in contemporary society by comparatively analyzing the influence of famous monks on social media in China and Thailand. In general, previous studies have focused more on either Buddhism as a whole or the study of the phenomenon of monastic places. It may be that the phenomenon of monastic celebrity in social media is a perspective that has not been given much attention by scholars and masters within the Church, both in China and abroad. Alternatively, the academic community may have concerns about the unintentional offense of Buddhist doctrine and precepts in the research, resulting in the practice and results of research on the phenomenon of monastic celebrity in social media, which is relatively not abundant.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze how monks use social media, including the topics and types of content posted, analyze the ways monks create a social media presence, including frequency of content posted and interactivity, and comparatively analyze the role of monastic influencers on social media in China and Thailand. This study is important because it fills a gap in research by focusing on how monks use social media, a topic that has received little attention. It helps us understand how religious teachings and practices are adapting to the digital age, especially as social media becomes a primary tool for communication. By analyzing the strategies monks use on platforms like Weibo and Facebook, this study explores how monks are influencing public opinion and engaging with followers, particularly younger generations who rely on these platforms for information. Comparing monks from China and Thailand also offers insight into how different political, social, and cultural contexts shape their social media presence and interaction. Additionally, the research sheds light on the impact of social media on religious authority and authenticity, showing how monks navigate the balance between their spiritual roles and online personas. This analysis is essential for

understanding the evolving role of religion in the digital age.

## METHODS

This study employs a qualitative content analysis approach to investigate the activities of monastic influencers on social media, focusing on Buddhist monks from China and Thailand. By comparing their thematic content and engagement patterns. This study aims to analyze the communication of famous influencer monks on social media in China and Thailand.

Four Chinese monks and four Thai monks were selected as participants, including Ven. Yancan, a Chinese monk with 41.81 million followers and 62,090 tweets, and a Thai monk influencer whose identity has been anonymized to maintain ethical standards. These individuals were chosen due to their significant online presence and active engagement on social media platforms such as Weibo and Facebook.

The data collection process spanned posts published between January 2017 and December 2019. A purposive sampling method was applied, focusing on the most interactive posts from each monk. For Ven. Yancan, 10,297 posts were extracted and analyzed, while a comparable dataset was curated for the Thai monk. Only publicly available posts were included to ensure ethical compliance, and sensitive or private content was excluded.

A deductive coding framework guided the thematic categorization of content into four main domains: Buddhist teachings, practices, moral codes, and secular topics. Posts were analyzed to identify recurring themes and differences between the two monks' content. Interaction metrics, such as likes, shares, and comments, were examined to evaluate audience engagement and response. A comparative analysis was conducted to highlight the frequency of posts in each thematic category and the variations in interaction patterns between the Chinese and Thai monks. This approach provided insights into audience preferences and the monks' influence within digital spaces.

However, the study acknowledges limitations, including its reliance on public posts, potential cultural and linguistic biases in theme interpretation, and the inability to generalize findings beyond the selected monks.

Ethical approval was secured, and all data were anonymized where necessary to respect participants' digital and cultural contexts.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Thai and Chinese Social Media Monastic Influencers

The study attempts to categorize the content posted by the study participants broadly. Specifically, the content of their postings can still be categorized into the broad categories of Buddhist teachings, practices, moral codes, and secular topics.

### Social Media Activities of Chinese Monks Influencers

Ven. Yancan is the most famous person on Chinese social networks. He is the vice president of the Hebei Provincial Buddhist Association, the president of the Cangzhou City Buddhist Association, and the abbot of the Shuiyue Temple and several other temples in Cangzhou City. On January 6, 2010, Ven. Yancan registered to open a Sina microblog. Currently, he has 41.81 million followers and 62,090 tweets - two extremely remarkable numbers, the former illustrating his enormous influence on the Chinese Internet, the latter reflecting his dedication and diligence in running a social network. Because it is difficult to process such a massive amount of posted information, this study limits the time frame of data collection to January 2017 to December 2019.

During this period, Ven. Yancan posted a total of 10,297 messages on a variety of topics, including Buddhist, Chicken Soup for the Soul, moral codes, and secular topics. Ven. Yancan posts content that leans more toward secular topics. Of his ten most interactive blog posts, only three were related to Buddhism or celebrating the birthdays of three bodhisattvas. All the other blog posts were on secular topics—most of Ven. Yancan's blog posts are of this style.

The second person is Ven. Jiqun. According to his Chinese Facebook page, he "graduated from the Chinese Academy of Buddhism in 1984, is a 10th generation practitioner of the Taoist school, an honorary Doctor of Letters from the Buddhist and Pali University of Sri Lanka, and an invited researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences"(Shi, 2017). He pays great attention to using the Internet for Dharma propagation. He

has created his website and posts on the Chinese social media platform Sina Weibo. He has also opened accounts on overseas social media platforms such as Facebook (in English and Chinese), Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr, LinkedIn, and even YouTube, TikTok, and other social media platforms under the name "Master Jiqun" in Chinese or English. It is possible that Ven. Jiqun does not consider LinkedIn suitable for Dharma propagation and has abandoned this platform. Ven. Jiqun's management of Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and Twitter is also not ideal, but he still insists on updating these accounts. Ven. Jiqun's operation of the Weibo and Facebook platforms has been very successful, posting the exact content of his writings, reflections, life lessons, and blessings at a very high frequency. His content should be run by a team of professionals, often with beautifully processed images, and posted as often as once daily. Ven. Jiqun's social media accounts are positioned to post all sorts of spiritual insights and Buddhist teachings, so the theme of his postings is text. On top of his microblog, the text is the centerpiece, and pictures and videos are mostly to accompany the text. Even the use of text alone can meet his positioning needs. Therefore, the proportion of pure text content on Ven. Jiqun's Weibo reaches 33.81%, the highest among the four.

The third person is Ven. Wudan, a Ven. whom the writer is familiar with in reality. Wudan is a young man of the 1990s with multiple identities: a monk, a writer, a temple abbot, a dharma teacher, and an enthusiast of Zen tea culture. He specializes in reinterpreting ancient Chinese classic literature from a monk's perspective, combining the teachings of Chinese Buddhism with local Chinese culture. As a result, he has become a well-known monk writer. As a young generation, he is also very good at promoting himself through the Internet and social networks. The theme of his microblog, which focuses on sharing his daily life, shares his life and practice in the monastery and when he goes out.

The fourth Ven. is Ven. Yongxin, the Abbot of the Shaolin Temple, is one of China's most famous temples. Ven. Yongxin and his Shaolin Temple were the first religious group in China to reach out to and use the Internet to promote and propagate the Dharma. In the 1990s, the Internet began spreading in China, and the general public had never seen a computer or the Internet. At this time, Shaolin Temple had already launched its website because of the huge influence of the Shaolin Temple, Ven. Yongxin was also a Buddhist celebrity on the Internet in China, and his every move was followed. However, in the early days, he spread himself more through Shaolin Temple's platforms and channels and did not open his account. Along with the expansion of his influence, he was also riddled with controversies and negative news.

As the abbot of a large monastery, it was inevitable that he would speak out for his monastery and Buddhism. He started as a lowly monk and worked his way up to become the president of the Buddhist Association in his province of Henan, where he also served as vice president of the Chinese Buddhist Association. The political position did not completely cover up many conflicts. He has been forced to step into the spotlight at times because of conflicts between the monastery and the local government, because of public statements by his disciples, and so on.

It was not until March 2018 that he opened a personal account on Sina Weibo. He was the latest of the four to open a Weibo account and the one with the lowest number of posts. He usually posts Buddhist-related teachings and Zen stories, ethical guidelines, and news about his famous monastery in his account. Overall, his tweets fall into bland monk accounts with little personality. However, because of the vast influence he and his monastery have, his account still boasts a whopping 827,000 followers. His most popular thread, a cultivation epiphany posted in March 2018, has 9,713 interactions. His blog posts are far more interactive than Ven. Yancan.

Table 1: Information posted on Weibo of the four Chinese Monks

Monk	Yancan	Jiqun	Wudan	Yongxin
Created	Jan-06-2010	Sep-01-2009	Feb-09-2011	Mar-20-2018

Followers		41.81 million	1.12 million	4.01million	8.27 million
Total Uploaded		62090	7,818	6123	3326
Posts Read		1770 million	155.28 million	235.46 million	82.15 million
Uploaded		10296	2189	3410	1236
Photos	Number	7509	1396	2953	1097
	Percent	72.93%	63.77%	86.60%	88.75%
Videos	Number	1568	1396	211	42
	Percent	15.23%	63.77%	6.19%	3.40%
Texts	Number	1217	740	245	97
	Percent	11.82%	33.81%	7.18%	7.85%

Table 1 reveals the activity of the four Chinese monks on Weibo which shows distinct patterns in their engagement. Monk Yancan, with 41.81 million followers, posts the most, with 62,090 uploads. In contrast, Monk Jiquan has 1.12 million followers and 7,818 posts, while Monk Wudan and Yongxin have fewer posts, at 6,123 and 3,326, respectively. In terms of content, Yancan primarily posts photos (72.93%), followed by Wudan (86.60%) and Yongxin (88.75%). Jiquan, however, shares 63.77% of his content as videos, while Yancan posts only 15.23% videos. Text posts are minimal across all monks, especially for Wudan and Yongxin, where they make up 7.18% and 7.85%, respectively. This reflects differing content strategies among the monks with Yancan focusing on a high volume of photo posts and Jiquan emphasizing videos, while the others maintain a higher proportion of photo content but use fewer videos.

### Social Media Activities of Thai Monks Influencers

"Phra Methee Vajirodom" or "V. Vajiramedhi", Assistant Abbot of Wat Phra Singh, Chiang Rai Province, President of the Vimutthayalai Foundation and Director of the Vimuttayaalai Institute. Who is considered to be the leading monk of Thailand? Based on table 1, It was found that the Facebook page "Phra Methi Vajirodom-V. Vajiramedhi," which was created on November 11, 2009, has

as many as 6.01 million people liking the page and 6.11 million people following it. Phra Methee Vajirodom's twenty most popular Facebook entries are all in the video category. The topics of these videos range from his reflections on life, time, and practice to recordings of his participation in charity and giving events, previews of Buddhist prayer events, and more. Overall, 75% of the content he posts falls into the Buddhist-related category.

"Phrakhru Sangkharak Sakda Suntharo" or "Phra Sakda" of Wat Rai Pa Thammaphimuk, Trat Province, is a preacher who has been famous for a long time. The Facebook page "Phra Sakda Suntharo", created on November 17, 2014, has over 3.50 million followers.

"Phra Thep Patcharayanmuni" or "Phra Achan Chayasaro" of Ban Rai To Si Monastery, a foreign monk who came to be ordained in Buddhism with "Luang Pu Cha" of Wat Nong Pa Pong in 1980. A gentle style of preaching resulted in a large number of disciples. The Facebook page "Dhamma by Phra Ajahn Jayasaro" was created on December 28, 2012, and there are 250 thousand people who click to follow it.

"Phrakhru Baidika Suphot Suwachano" or "Luang Phi Doraemon" of Wat Khao Noi, Rayong Province, Phra Sai Rapper It is very famous for singing chants in a new style, "Rap + Lae" style, including making stickers "Sobong

Racing Thailand" until it creates color for teenagers who turn to temples in this era. The Facebook page " Sathu Sodhom Luang Phi Doraemon " was created on July 18, 2017, and

has 410 thousand followers. As for the YouTube channel "Sathu Sodhot", created on October 13, 2011, has 321 thousand followers and 535 videos uploaded.

Table 2: Information posted on Facebook of the four Thai Monks

Monk		Vajirodom	Sakda	Chayasaro	Suwachano
Created		Nov-11-2009	Nov-17-2014	Dec-28-2012	Oct-13-2011
Followers		6.11 million	3.50 million	250 thousand	410 thousand
Uploaded		2304	1917	1107	70
Photos	Number	2169	1832	1102	30
	Percent	94.14%	95.57%	99.55%	42.86%
Videos	Number	153	67	4	38
	Percent	6.64%	3.50%	0.36%	54.29%
Texts	Number	125	76	5	2
	Percent	5.43%	3.96%	0.45%	2.85%

The table provides an overview of the social media activities of four Thai monks, showcasing distinct approaches to content creation and engagement on Facebook. Phra Vajirodom stands out as the most influential, with his page created in 2009 and boasting 6.11 million followers, the highest among the four. His consistent engagement is reflected in his 2,304 uploads, predominantly photos (94.14%). Videos, though only 6.64% of his total posts, play a significant role in his popularity, especially as his most-viewed entries are video-based. Phra Sakda, whose page was established in 2014, has gained a substantial following of 3.50 million. Like Phra Vajirodom, he focuses heavily on photo content, which constitutes 95.57% of his posts, supplemented by videos (3.50%) and a small number of text entries (3.96%). This traditional approach has helped him build and sustain a broad audience.

Phra Chayasaro, known for his gentle preaching style, maintains a smaller but dedicated audience of 250,000 followers since creating his page in 2012. His content strategy is highly photo-centric, with 99.55% of his posts being images, emphasizing a minimalist and consistent communication approach.

Videos and text posts are rare, accounting for only 0.36% and 0.45%, respectively. In contrast, Luang Phi Doraemon adopts a highly innovative approach, leveraging multimedia to appeal to younger demographics. While his page, created in 2011, has 410,000 followers—a moderate number compared to the others—his emphasis on videos (54.29%) and creative content like rap-style chants makes him unique. Photos make up 42.86% of his posts, while text entries are minimal at 2.85%, reflecting his preference for engaging, dynamic content.

Overall, the monks' content strategies highlight diverse methods of connecting with followers, ranging from traditional photo documentation to modern, video-driven formats. This variety demonstrates their adaptability in using social media to convey Buddhist teachings and engage with contemporary audiences effectively.

**Social Media Content of Chinese and Thai Monks**

The 100 most interactive blog posts of Ven. Yancan and Phra Methee Vajirodom, who have the most significant followers in both countries, were used for the comparison



analysis, respectively. Blog posts were comparatively analyzed. Among the top 100 blog posts, Ven. Yancan, a Chinese monk, posted non-Buddhist, non-moral, missionary, and secular topics in 53% of the posts,

compared to only 31% of the Thai monks. We further categorized the secular topics into public charity (including donation, culture, and education), social interaction, and other secular topics. This is shown in the chart below.

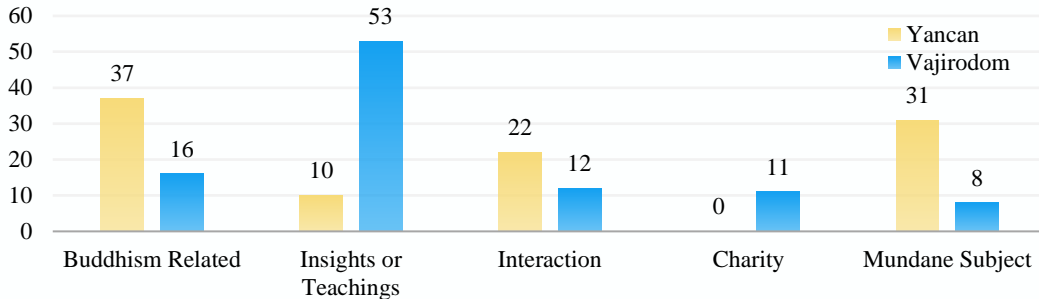


Figure 1: Top 100 Blog Posts Topic Comparison between Ven Yancan and Vajirodom

Figure 1 above compares the types of content posted by two Thai monks, Yancan and Vajirodom, on their social media. Yancan focuses most on mundane topics, with 31 posts, followed by 37 posts about Buddhism. He also has 22 interaction posts but none about charity. This shows he mixes spiritual and everyday themes while interacting with his audience. Vajirodom, on the other hand, focuses mainly on insights and teachings, with 53 posts in this category. He has fewer Buddhism-related posts (16) and interaction posts (12). However, he includes 11 charity posts, showing his involvement in social activities, and only 8 posts on mundane topics. In summary, Yancan balances everyday and spiritual content, while Vajirodom focuses more on teachings and charity.

### Social Media’s Interactions Pattern and Communication Strategies of Chinese and Thai Monks

Chinese monks invested more effort in social networks, which can be concluded from the vast volume of messages they posted and the higher frequency of their interactions.

Ven. Yancan had the highest frequency of information posting among the four. During the study period, Ven. Yancan posted a total of 10,296 messages, an average of 65.79 messages per week. This may be because this is the leading way in which Ven. Yancan maintains his online following. However, the honor of having the most interaction does not

belong to Ven. Yancan. Thailand's Phra Methee Vajirodom's most popular post had 418,559 interactions. That is 2.37 times the number of interactions of second place Ven. Yancan. Especially when you consider again that the number of followers of Ven. Yancan is a whopping 41.81 million, which is 6.84 times more than Phra Methee Vajirodom (6.11 million), this seems to indicate the volume and frequency of posting. Furthermore, even the ultra-high number of followers is only a necessary guarantee for the emergence of popular postings and not necessarily the cause of their success.

Based on the result of the study above the analysis between Ven. Yancan and Phra Methee Vajirodom reveals distinct approaches to digital engagement. In terms of posting frequency, Ven. Yancan is notably more active, sharing three to four posts weekly, demonstrating consistent interaction with his audience. In contrast, Phra Methee Vajirodom posts less frequently, with an average of one to two posts per week, reflecting a more selective strategy. The content types also differ significantly; Ven. Yancan balances religious teachings, motivational quotes, and community-focused posts, often accompanied by visually engaging elements like images and infographics. Meanwhile, Phra Methee Vajirodom emphasizes detailed Dharma talks and philosophical reflections, favoring text-heavy posts that appeal to audiences seeking deeper spiritual insights.

The levels of interaction with their audiences further highlight their differing styles. Ven. Yancan actively engages with his followers, frequently responding to comments and encouraging discussions, which fosters a sense of community and accessibility. Conversely, Phra Methee Vajirodom interacts less directly, prioritizing content dissemination over conversational exchanges. Regarding audience engagement, Ven. Yancan employs interactive strategies such as live sessions, polls, and questions to encourage participation, effectively bridging the digital divide and cultivating a stronger connection with his audience. On the other hand, Phra Methee Vajirodom relies on the depth and contemplative nature of his content to maintain a loyal following, catering to a niche audience interested in profound spiritual exploration. Hence, it reveals the unique digital media strategies of each monks influencers and their impact on their followers.

The results above reveals that social, cultural, and political environments of China and Thailand play pivotal roles in shaping the social media strategies of the monks' influencers. In China, a country marked by its tightly controlled digital landscape and unique social media ecosystem, platforms such as WeChat and Weibo dominate the online space. Religious figures like Ven. Yancan must navigate these platforms within the boundaries set by government regulations that closely monitor religious discourse to ensure alignment with state policies. As a result, people often create accessible, motivational, and community-oriented posts that appeal to a broad audience while remaining within the permissible themes set by the authorities (Vala & Huang, 2019; Zhang, 2017).

In contrast, Thailand enjoys a more open digital environment, with platforms like Facebook and Instagram widely used by the public. Thai society places a high value on the Buddhist Sangha, viewing monks as moral leaders and cultural custodians. The cultural significance of the Buddhist Sangha enables monks to engage in deeper philosophical discussions and share spiritual insights that resonate with the public, thereby reinforcing the central role of Buddhism in shaping Thai identity (Jitsaeng & Tuamsuk, 2022). However, the Thai government's historical use of censorship and control over digital platforms

further complicates the ability of monks and other public figures to engage in overt political commentary, thus they must balance their spiritual missions with the realities of a restrictive political environment (Feldstein, 2021).

The social media activities of Ven. Yancan and Phra Methee Vajirodom show how religion is adapting to modern trends in China and Thailand. These monks' online strategies reflect broader changes in how religion is practiced and how religious leaders engage with the public in their countries.

In China, Ven. Yancan's use of motivational messages and visually appealing content meets the needs of a more urbanized and secular audience. His approach shows how Buddhism is being reshaped to provide practical guidance for people dealing with the pressures of modern life. By encouraging interaction with followers online, Ven. Yancan is creating a more personal and community-driven form of religious practice, reflecting a broader trend toward making spirituality accessible in a busy, fast-paced society.

In Thailand, Phra Methee Vajirodom's focus on traditional teachings and values shows the continued importance of Buddhism in Thai culture. At the same time, his use of social media to reach younger audiences demonstrates how monks are balancing tradition with the need to stay relevant in a digital world. This approach reflects Thailand's open religious environment, where Buddhism continues to play a central role in daily life while embracing modern communication methods.

Overall, the monks' social media strategies highlight how religion is evolving in response to societal changes. Ven. Yancan's approach reflects the need for spirituality in a rapidly modernizing China, while Phra Methee Vajirodom's activities maintain Thailand's strong Buddhist traditions while adapting to new ways of connecting with people. These examples show how religious leaders are using social media to stay relevant, build communities, and engage with the public in meaningful ways.

### **Social Media's Interactions Pattern and Communication Strategies of Chinese and Thai Monks**

It is found that although monks in both countries actively use social media to interact with their followers, their interaction patterns and content strategies differ. As shown Table 1 in terms of posting frequency, Chinese monks posts daily or several times a week. Their content ranges from inspirational quotes accompanied by professional visuals to live-streamed meditation sessions and personal reflections. Another example shows, a single week's analysis of Yanchan's WeChat posts, one of Chinese monk, shows consistent engagement with followers, averaging around 3-5 posts daily. In contrast, As shown in Table 2, Thai monks' posting is more sporadic, with updates ranging from once a week to several times a month, typically focusing on significant events or teachings. Their posts, such as live-streamed sermons or coverage of temple activities, emphasize depth over frequency, targeting specific religious milestones.

In terms of content types, Chinese monks blends traditional Buddhist themes with modern motivational ideas, often framing teachings around concepts like stress relief and life balance, and likei. For example, Ven Yanchan's short video series on mindfulness offers practical advice for urban professionals, combining calming visuals and accessible language. Chinese monks are also likelier to share content about their daily lives, public service activities, and social interactions. Meanwhile, Thai monk, Phra Methee Vajirodom's content adheres more closely to traditional Buddhist doctrine. Thai monks share more content related to Buddhist teachings and practices. Their posts frequently feature sermons, chanting sessions, and images of temple rituals, reinforcing Buddhism's role in maintaining cultural heritage. While Ven. Yanchan uses modern graphics and trendy aesthetics to engage a younger, more secular audience, Phra Methee Vajirodom leans on the sacred and ceremonial to connect with his followers. From these comparison, we can conclude that Chinese monk more closely resembles a social activist in monastic garb, while Thai monk is more in line with the traditional monk image.

Furthermore, when comparing to their interaction levels, Ven. Yanchan's digital footprint demonstrates a high degree of engagement. As shown Table 1, Ven Yanchan has the highest number of followers about

41,81 million people. His followers actively comment, share posts, and participate in live Q&A sessions, with some of his videos receiving thousands of likes within hours. This interactive approach highlights his ability to foster a sense of community online. On the other hand, Phra Methee Vajirodom's engagement, while less dynamic, is meaningful within the Thai context. For example, his live broadcasts of temple ceremonies often attract hundreds of viewers who use the comment section to offer blessings or share gratitude.

In summary, Ven. Yanchan's strategy exemplifies a modern, practical adaptation of Buddhism tailored to urban Chinese audiences, prioritizing frequency, accessibility, and interaction. In contrast, Phra Methee Vajirodom maintains a strong connection to Thai cultural traditions, using social media to preserve religious values and foster community among devotees. These differences reflect the broader societal and cultural landscapes of their respective countries, with Ven. Yanchan embracing modernization and secularization while Phra Methee Vajirodom remains rooted in tradition.

In the modern world, monks are no longer just religious leaders, and their role on social media is changing. Although monks in both countries have many followers on social media, their roles and influence among their followers differ. Ven. Yanchan's example illustrates that monks can be social activists, public figures, and internet celebrities. This diversity of roles reflects the new opportunities and challenges that social media offers religious leaders.

There is a noticeable disparity in the influence of renowned monks on Chinese and Thai social media. This disparity is not limited to the magnitude of influence but extends to interaction methods and information dissemination modes. Differences in cultural, religious, and political backgrounds between the two countries likely contribute to this variance. These elements profoundly shape influential monks' behavioral trends and sway on social media.

While both nations have deep-rooted Buddhist traditions, the role of religion in daily life and on social media varies. China's intricate religious landscape and diverse culture make its monks' social media content more varied,

whereas Thai monks primarily concentrate on Buddhism's fundamental teachings.

China and Thailand differ significantly in culture, politics, religious influence, and economic progress. Monks from both nations confront various challenges in the public domain of social networks. In China, monks predominantly face pressures from policy regulations and public sentiment. Conversely, in Buddhist-majority Thailand, the government's oversight of Buddhism and public tolerance are more lenient. Monks in Thailand are often more concerned about scrutiny from their monastic peers.

Differences in content strategies are also evident when comparing Ven's online behaviors. Ven Yancan and Phra Methee Vajirodom. Thai monks post content related to Buddhist practices and teachings, while their Chinese counterparts often discuss daily life, cultural events, and social welfare initiatives.

It could be that China's relatively stringent policy regulations combined with lax monastic oversight lead to a more communal online presence for its monks. They venture beyond the conventional monk image because monastic community oversight is mainly ineffective. On the other hand, the strong influence of Thailand's Sangha Council, akin to a Council of Elders, dictates the actions and words of younger monks offline and online, making them appear more traditional and reserved than their Chinese peers.

Regarding online influence, both Ven. Yancan and Phra Methee Vajirodom transcend their roles as religious leaders, taking on broader social and cultural roles on social media. Their active online presence, especially on social media, signifies the rejuvenation of age-old Buddhism in today's era. As younger generations increasingly turn to the internet and social media for information and lessen their visits to monasteries, Buddhism must adapt to maintain its societal role and influence.

Furthermore, the strategies employed by Monastic influencers in Thai and China, are different which are influenced by the background information on their cultural, political, and social contexts. In China, the revival of Buddhism among urban professionals has led monks to focus on modern, secular themes such as mindfulness and personal growth. This shift is necessitated

by the Chinese government's emphasis on "sinicization," which encourages the adaptation of religious practices to align with state ideologies. Research indicates that religious organizations in China, including Buddhist institutions, have adapted their online presence to navigate these political constraints, often prioritizing content that resonates with contemporary societal interests while avoiding overt religious messaging (Xu & Campbell, 2021; Zhang, 2017). For instance, Zhang's study highlights how Chinese monks utilize platforms like Weibo to engage with a tech-savvy audience, emphasizing motivational content that aligns with urban professionals' aspirations (Zhang, 2017). This strategic adaptation reflects a broader trend where religious authorities leverage social media to reinforce their practices while complying with governmental regulations (Xu & Campbell, 2021).

Conversely, in Thailand, where Buddhism is deeply integrated into the national identity, monks enjoy greater freedom to promote traditional rituals and community-focused activities through social media. This cultural context allows for a more open expression of religious practices, as evidenced by the emphasis on local festivals and community engagement in monks' social media posts. Research has shown that social media serves as a powerful tool for religious expression in Thailand, enabling monks to reach diverse audiences and foster a sense of community among followers (Agarwal & Jones, 2022). The integration of social media into religious practices reflects the adaptability of Buddhism in response to the cultural dynamics of Thai society, where religious identity is closely tied to national identity.

The political environment further differentiates the strategies employed by monks in these two countries. In China, the restrictive political landscape compels monks to navigate a complex environment where overt religious expression is discouraged. This necessitates a focus on secular themes that align with state-sanctioned narratives, as highlighted in studies examining the online presence of religious organizations in China (Xu & Campbell, 2021). In contrast, the Thai political context supports the promotion of Buddhism, allowing monks to engage more freely with their audience and advocate for

religious practices without fear of reprisal (Agarwal & Jones, 2022).

Socially, the preferences of the audience in each country also shape the monks' social media strategies. In China, the emphasis on frequent, motivational updates caters to an audience that seeks quick, digestible content that fits into their fast-paced lives (Zhang, 2017). This aligns with findings that suggest social media use can enhance socio-affective factors in learning and engagement, indicating that the informal context of social media can significantly influence user motivation (Brubaker & Haigh, 2017). In Thailand, however, the focus on traditional practices and community engagement reflects a deeper connection to cultural heritage, where followers value content that reinforces their shared identity and communal ties (Agarwal & Jones, 2022).

In summary, the social media strategies of monks in China and Thailand reveal how Buddhism adapts to differing societal dynamics in each country. In China, monks focus on modern, secular themes that align with government restrictions, while in Thailand, they promote traditional practices that reflect the cultural significance of Buddhism in national identity. This comparative analysis underscores the adaptive nature of Buddhism in response to varying cultural, political, and social contexts.

In conclusion, this research offers invaluable insights into monks' behavior on social media and the underlying cultural and religious dynamics. While social media grants monks a novel interaction platform, upholding genuine religious tenets and values remains challenging. These insights will be instrumental for forthcoming religious studies and formulating social media strategies.

### **Specific Communication Strategies**

The findings show that although Chinese and Thai monk influencers generally play an important role in social media, they employ different communication strategies due to differences in cultural, political, and social contexts. The differences in these strategies are manifested in the choice of content, communication methods, and forms of interaction.

First, in terms of content selection, both Chinese and Thai monastic influencers tend to

publish content related to Buddhist teachings and practices, such as sutra interpretations and meditation instructions. However, the specific content they post varies due to their audiences' different cultural backgrounds and needs. For example, Chinese monk-influencers focus more on content about meditation and mindfulness, aligning with the growing interest in mental well-being in urban Chinese society, where stress and anxiety are prevalent due to rapid modernization and urbanization (Jin & Ryu, 2022). In contrast, Thai monk-influencers focus more on disseminating Buddhist myths and rituals, which resonate with the Thai cultural context that values traditional practices and community-oriented spirituality (Budiyanto & Taridi, 2021).

Second, Chinese and Thai monastic influencers also show different characteristics regarding transmission methods. Chinese monk-influencers are more inclined to use multimedia communication, such as pictures and videos, which aligns with the broader trends in media consumption in China. The Chinese audience is increasingly engaged with visual content, which is often more appealing and accessible in the fast-paced digital environment of the country (Yiengprugsawan et al., 2010). Meanwhile Thai monk-influencers focus more on text and speech, reflecting the traditional communication styles that resonate with their audience. This preference may be rooted in the cultural significance of oral traditions and written texts in Thai Buddhism, where teachings are often conveyed through sermons and written scriptures (Schedneck, 2022). This difference may be related to the audience's media consumption habits in the two countries. It also reflects the monk influencers' mastery of media and usage habits. Furthermore, it indicates their adaptability to the preferences of their respective audiences, which is crucial for effective communication in the digital age.

In addition, monks in China and Thailand also differ regarding public service activities. Chinese monks are more inclined to organize large-scale public welfare activities, such as charity auctions and medical clinics. It can be linked to the Chinese government's emphasis on social welfare and community engagement, which encourages religious organizations to participate in broader societal issues (Yang et al., 2019). In contrast, Thai monks focus more

on daily public welfare activities, such as giving food and providing help to people experiencing poverty. This approach reflects the deeply ingrained cultural practices of generosity and community support in Thailand, where monks play a vital role in the social fabric by addressing immediate needs within their communities (Yiengprugsawan et al., 2010). This is mainly due to the two countries' different social environments and cultural backgrounds, leading to differences in monks' understanding and practice of public welfare activities.

Finally, Chinese and Thai monastic influencers also differ in terms of interaction. Chinese monk influencers focus more on real-time interactions with their audiences using live streaming and Q&A, which cater to the audience's desire for immediate feedback and connection in a rapidly evolving digital landscape (Wang et al., 2023). In contrast, Thai monk influencers focus more on communicating and interacting with their audiences through social media platforms. This method aligns with the cultural context in Thailand, where social media serves as a platform for community building and sharing teachings in a less immediate but equally meaningful manner (Schedneck, 2022). This difference may be related to the engagement and interaction needs of the audiences in the two countries and also reflects the monk influencers' emphasis on and ability to utilize different forms of interaction.

In summary, this study compares the similarities and differences in the social media practices of Chinese and Thai monk influencers. These similarities and differences reflect the influence of cultural, political, and social contexts on social media communication strategies. Therefore, when utilizing social media for religious communication, the cultural background and needs of the audience should be fully considered when choosing appropriate communication strategies and media forms. At the same time, religious leaders and practitioners should continuously update their communication concepts and techniques to adapt to the changes in the new media era.

The findings of this study offer practical insights for religious leaders, social media strategists, and researchers. Religious leaders can use social media to expand their reach by

adopting interactive formats like live streaming, as seen with Chinese monks, while also maintaining a balance between traditional teachings and modern communication methods, as Thai monks do. They can also use platforms to promote community involvement through public service activities. Social media strategists should adjust their approaches to local cultures and preferences, using engaging formats like videos and live streams to enhance audience interaction. Highlighting everyday life and social contributions can help create a relatable and trustworthy online presence. It is also needed for other researchers to explore more into how different religious traditions use social media, the long-term impact on religious engagement, and ethical considerations in digital religious communication. By adopting these strategies, stakeholders can maximize social media's potential for outreach, engagement, and cultural preservation.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study explores how Buddhist monks in China and Thailand use social media to engage with followers, shaped by their cultural, political, and social contexts. With their vast reach and influence, monastic influencers spread their teachings, bringing the Buddhist message to a broader audience. Chinese monks blend secular themes such as mindfulness with spiritual teachings to connect with a younger, urban audience while adhering to government regulations. Their use of multimedia and focus on public welfare reflect societal and state needs, but they face challenges like censorship and balancing online engagement with monastic life.

In contrast, Thai monks emphasize tradition and community, posting less frequently but with deeper content that preserves Buddhist rituals and cultural heritage. They face challenges in reaching younger audiences and maintaining authenticity while following the Sangha Council's regulations.

These differences show how Buddhist leaders adapt to their environments while staying true to their teachings. Chinese monks engage in social activism, appealing to a secular audience, while Thai monks focus on cultural continuity. Both groups face challenges in

maintaining authority online and bridging generational divides.

Their endeavors highlight the adaptation and harmonious coexistence of religion, culture, and technology while offering spiritual solace and insights to shape modern society positively. As social media's popularity and influence surge, monks have adaptively harnessed these platforms for teaching and advocacy, encountering several challenges. While this study provides valuable insights, several areas require further exploration. First, a comparative study examining the role of other religious figures across different regions could broaden our understanding of how cultural and political contexts shape digital religious practices globally. Additionally, the role of social media

in religious practices among non-monastic Buddhist communities or other faith traditions could provide a more nuanced perspective on the intersection of religion and digital technology.

Hence, this study reveals that monks on social media highlights how religious practices are changing in the digital age. Both countries demonstrate Buddhism's adaptability, with their unique approaches shaped by sociopolitical and cultural contexts. This study has implication for religious institutions and leaders, this study offers insights into the evolving nature of religious communication in a digital world. Monks who can effectively integrate modern themes with traditional teachings may foster a more inclusive and engaged online community.

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