



## DEPICTIONS OF MONKS' SPIRITUAL JOURNEYS IN CONTEMPORARY THAI CINEMA 2005-2021

Anas Ahmadi

Faculty of Languages and Arts, Universitas Negeri Surabaya, East Java, Indonesia

Corresponding author E-mail: [anasahmadi@unesa.ac.id](mailto:anasahmadi@unesa.ac.id)

Received 31 July 2025; Revised 13 September 2025; Accepted 18 September 2025

### Abstract

**Background and Objectives:** Monks play an integral and important role in Thai society because monks in Thailand serve as spiritual teachers, guardians of tradition (Buddhism), and provide services to the community. The phenomenon of monks' integral and important roles in Thailand is not only evident in the socio-cultural realities of society but also in contemporary media narratives, namely Thai cinema. Monks in Thai film narratives appear in various narratives that are inseparable from socio-cultural phenomena in society. Therefore, this study aimed to critically examine how Thai films constructed the spiritual and social identities of monks, revealing the underlying tensions between traditional monastic roles and contemporary societal expectations.

**Methodology:** This study employed a qualitative method, utilizing six Thai films that represented Buddhist monks: *The Holy Man* (2005), *Pee Mak* (2013), *Arbat* (2015), *The Forest* (2016), *Pee Nak* (2019), and *The Medium* (2021). The research data took the form of visual, narrative, and script elements, all of which were relevant to the monk theme. At this stage, the researcher watched the film, read the script in-depth, and interpreted the visual symbols contained in the Thai film. The data analysis technique employed was the stages of identification, classification, reduction, exposition, and validation.

**Main Results:** The results of this study showed that the representation of monks in Thai films reflects three main dimensions. First, monks and exorcism rituals are presented as part of a complex spiritual role, where monks not only perform exorcisms through religious ceremonies but also face inner conflicts, social tensions, and serve as a bridge between the real and supernatural worlds. Films such as *Pee Mak* (2013), *Pee Nak* (2019), and *The Medium* (2021) demonstrate that exorcism rituals do not always succeed literally, but instead become symbols of human struggles against fear and inner imbalance. Second, monks and self-enlightenment are depicted as a lengthy process involving failure, moral transgressions, and profound reflection. The images of monks in *The Forest* (2016), *Arbat* (2015), and *The Holy Man* (2005) do not achieve holiness immediately, but rather through inner repentance, personal introspection, and taking social responsibility. Enlightenment in this context is humane and contemplative, not always achieved through formal rituals, but rather through awareness and the transformation of the heart. Third, monks and the spread of Buddhism are presented in the form of loving preaching. The monks in *The Holy Man* (2005)



and The Forest (2016) convey Buddhist teachings not only through sermons but also through real-life actions, such as helping the community, the oppressed, and giving hope to those who are marginalized.

**Involvement to Buddhadhamma:** This research explored the application of Buddhism in contemporary contexts (Thai Films), integrating modern scholarship with traditional Buddhist knowledge to develop wisdom and morality through Buddhism. Through contemporary films, global audiences can better understand and recognize Buddhist wisdom and morality from an aesthetic perspective.

**Conclusions:** The study concludes that Thai films represent the spiritual-anthropological journey of monks, with three main findings: 1) Monks as exorcists; 2) Monks with self-enlightenment; and 3) Monks and the spread of Buddhism. All three represent the spiritual-anthropological journey of monks in Thai films, with various obstacles that monks must face and overcome. The representation of monks in Thai films is inseparable from the projection of monks in the real world. The world of film and the world of reality are two entities.

**Keywords:** Monk, Spiritual-Anthropological Journey, Buddhism, Thai Contemporary Cinema

## Introduction

Buddhism in Thailand is a religion that constitutes the majority of the population, plays a significant role in society, and is supported by the government (McCargo, 2004); (Karimova, 2022); (Sombatpoonsiri, 2022). Shatnataphat (2024) emphasizes that Buddhism in Thailand has a profound impact on shaping culture, nationalism, government/politics, and spiritualism. Interestingly, although Thailand is considered a pluralistic and secular country, it still pays excellent attention to Buddhism there (Borchert, 2022). That is what makes Buddhism in Thailand a religion that has grown and developed rapidly until now. In the context of Buddhism, one figure who holds an important role is the monk. In Buddhism, monks are often regarded in society as spiritual leaders, guardians of religious traditions, and community servants. In addition, monks can also serve as psychics to exorcise spirits (Muecke, 1992) or to meet ancestral spirits, which is a scholarly debate on the intersection of religion, media, and cultural identity. The intersection of religion, media, and cultural identity in the context of Buddhism has become a scholarly debate, offering an interesting interdisciplinary perspective that integrates Buddhism, media (Film), and the cultural identity of contemporary society in the international sphere.

In the last five years, research on monks and films has been conducted by several researchers, namely as follows. In a study by Zhou et al. (2025), it was found that the presence of a celibate monk in a Tibetan Amdo family significantly reduced the risk of death by 69% in older non-monk family members, indicating a positive impact of religious presence on the family structure on health. Furthermore, research conducted by Bangert et al. (2015) highlighted how European heritage films utilized religious figures such as monks to represent national identity and collective memory in reconstructed historical narratives. Research by Ng (2025) highlighted how the representation of monks in religious films created a distinctive ethical and ritual space, showing how cinema shaped religious experiences that lay between piety and visual aesthetics. Research by Kidpromma & Taylor (2024) showed that in Chiang Mai, monks were presented as



symbols of alternative spiritual paths for transgender people who wanted to live a religious life outside the rules of the traditional monastery. Finally, research by Zhang et al. (2021) noted that the reduction of mythical and religious elements, such as monk figures in contemporary films, affects audiences' perceptions of spiritual values, indicating a change in visual culture consumption patterns.

These studies were fascinating because they revealed that monks also appeared in global films, either as main characters or as supporting characters. Monks in films were also shown as figures who provided Buddhist enlightenment to society. Unfortunately, no research has been conducted on monks associated with spiritualism in the context of Thai films. In this regard, this study aimed to fill the gap in previous research by portraying monks as spiritual figures in Thai films. Specifically, the researcher portrayed monks as anthropological spiritualists in Thai films.

The study of spirituality was initially included in the fields of philosophy (Steiner & Bamford, 2003); (Wane, 2011); (Rousseau, 2019), religion (Maugans, 1996); (Sutcliffe & Gilhus, 2013), psychology (Jung & Adler, 2023); (McNeill, 1998); (McQueen, 2019); (Yang et al., 2012), anthropology (Cooper, 2015); (Davies, 2020), and literature (Holden-Kirwan, 1999); (Neary, 2011). However, in its development, the study of spirituality has been incorporated into various interdisciplinary scientific studies. Historically, the study of spiritualism was able to be traced back through the writings of James (1902), Culpin (1920), and Lohuizen (2011), who initially discussed the study of spiritualism in relation to philosophy, religion, anthropology, and psychology. In this context, researchers focused on spiritual anthropology. Spiritual anthropology is a subfield of anthropology that examines the spiritual context, including religion and beliefs, within a cultural context in society. Parsania (2006) stated that spiritual anthropology focused explicitly on the supernatural, mystical, and belief dimensions in society. Spiritual anthropology intersects with the philosophy of anthropology.

However, spiritual anthropology is more focused on the spiritual context. In contrast, the philosophy of anthropology is more concerned with the philosophical aspects (Ontological, Axiological, Epistemological), which can sometimes be separate from the spiritual (Hindmarsh, 2021). Dimensions in spiritual anthropology appear in three categories: 1) The spiritual dimension of human anthropology concerning oneself; 2) The spiritual dimension of human anthropology concerning society; and 3) The spiritual dimension of human anthropology concerning God/something transcendental. In this study, spiritual anthropology is explored through the lens of Buddhist monks who undertake spiritual anthropological journeys in Thai films. Specifically, this spiritual anthropology focuses on the ideal spiritual context and also the pedagogical-spiritual dimensions in films.

### **Objectives**

This research aimed to critically examine how Thai films constructed the spiritual and social identities of monks, revealing the underlying tensions between traditional monastic roles and contemporary societal expectations.



## Methodology

This research method employed a qualitative-interpretative approach, where the researcher narrated the data based on interpretation. The data sources used were selected primary Thai films featuring monks (Table 1). The research data took the form of visual, narrative, and script elements (Ellis, 1990); (Murtagh et al., 2009), all of which were relevant to the monk theme. At this stage, the researcher watched the film, read the script in-depth, and interpreted the visual symbols contained in the Thai film.

**Table 1** Main Data of Thai Films Related to Monks

No.	Film	Year	Duration
1.	The Holy Man	2005	92 minutes
2.	Pee Mak	2013	1,52 minutes
3.	Arbat	2015	1,39 minutes
4.	The Forest	2016	1,49 minutes
5.	Pee Nak	2019	1,48 minutes
6.	The Medium	2021	1,30 minutes

This study employed a qualitative-interpretative method. The data collection techniques were documentary. The data analysis techniques were adapted from the views of Huberman & Miles (2002), Creswell & Poth (2016), and Silverman (2016), namely data identification, data verification, data classification, data exposure, and data validation. As for data coding, the researcher referred to Neuman's (2014) view, namely open coding, at this stage the researcher looked for Thai film themes related to Buddhism and groups them; Axial coding, at this stage the researcher identified themes; And selective coding, at this stage the researcher identified the main themes used as the primary data for the research. At the data validation stage, the researcher discussed the research findings with experts in the field of humanities research.

## Results and Discussion

### Monks and Exorcism Rituals

The representation of monks and exorcism rituals in Thai films shows the complexity of the relationship between Buddhist spirituality, popular culture, and the search for meaning in contemporary society. In an analysis of six films, namely The Holy Man (Chernyim, 2005), Pee Mak (Maligool, 2013), Arbat (Kwanyu, 2015), The Forest (Spurrier, 2016), Pee Nak (Chotkisadarsopon, 2019), and The Medium (Pisanthanakun, 2021), a narrative pattern can be traced that includes three important stages in the relationship between humans, monks, and spirits, namely: The initial stage of the emergence of ghosts; The stage of spiritual struggle or conflict; and The stage of recovery or healing. In the early stages, the appearance of ghosts or supernatural disturbances in films is often linked to spiritual issues or violations of religious teachings. In the film Pee Nak (Chotkisadarsopon, 2019), for example, the figure of a ghost appears because someone dies before being ordained as a monk. This causes resentment because the character feels spiritually unrecognized.



On the other hand, Arbat depicts the spiritual crisis of a young man who is ordained as a monk without sincere intentions. He violates the rules of monk life, including having an illicit relationship, thus giving rise to inner tension that is the center of the story. In The Forest, the character of a monk who comes to the village fails in carrying out his duties as a teacher and spiritual leader. He does not believe in the supernatural stories that are developing in the village, and ends up getting involved in a relationship that makes him feel guilty. As a result, tensions arise in the community that are not only social but also spiritual in nature. Research by Campoli (2015) revealed that Thai horror films frequently employed supernatural imagery to convey Buddhist teachings on impermanence and suffering. In this context, monks and religious rituals function as a means to deal with and understand aspects of life that are difficult to explain rationally. This aligns with the notion that horror films can serve as a medium for reflecting spiritual and social values within society.



**Figure 1** Exorcism Ritual in *Pee Mak* (Scene: 01:25:06)

The second stage in the storyline typically shows how the characters in the film attempt to cope with or confront the disturbance. This is where the role of religious rituals and monks becomes more apparent. In the film Pee Mak, the monk performs an exorcism ritual in a temple with his equipment, starting from candles, holy water, holy rice, a (Holy) rope wrapped around the mantra reader, and reciting exorcism mantras. To strengthen the spell, the spell is recited together so that the ghost can be defeated/disappear. In the film The Medium, the exorcism ritual is performed by a monk and a female shaman. The monk leads the chanting, uses holy water, and performs various ceremonies aimed at purifying the possessed main character. However, this ritual is not entirely successful, and it even ends in tragedy. This shows that some Thai people not only rely on the official teachings of Buddhism, but also believe in spiritual powers from outside religion, such as shamanism and other traditional beliefs. As explained by



Tambiah (1970), Buddhism in Thailand does not stand alone, but coexists with spiritism and local beliefs such as the cult of spirits and guardian deities.

Meanwhile, in Pee Nak, the monk is embroiled in an inner conflict with a spirit that seeks to join the monastic community. Efforts to appease the spirit are carried out by symbolically ordaining it, even though it is via video call due to emergency conditions. However, the spirit itself refuses because it is aware that it is not human and is not worthy of being a monk. This shows that in community beliefs, exorcism is not always carried out through violence or coercion, but can also be through a process of recognition and acceptance. The monk's rejection of the spirit also reflects the precise boundaries in formal Theravāda religious practice, as described in a study by McDaniel (2011) on the relationship between images of monks, ghosts, and bodies in Thai temples.

In the film Arbat, although no ghosts appear physically, a spiritual struggle occurs within the main character, who is searching for direction in life. He questions religious teachings, experiences conflict with senior monks, and finally chooses to be alone and reflect on his life. This process is another form of "Exorcism", namely, freeing oneself from mental burdens and past mistakes. This aligns with the concept in Theravāda Buddhism, where repentance and meditation are employed as means to cleanse the mind and attain enlightenment (Dockett & North-Schulte, 2004). Thus, Arbat not only presents a story about violating monastic discipline but also depicts the spiritual journey of an individual in facing and overcoming inner conflicts, which ultimately leads to self-transformation and a deeper understanding of Buddhist teachings.

The endings in these films show various forms of resolution. In The Medium, despite multiple rituals, the evil spirit is not completely exorcised, and the film's ending remains somber. This shows that in real life, not all spiritual problems can be resolved through formal religious means. Based on research (Mitchell, 1971), the current Theravāda Buddhist approach emphasizes that mindfulness and ethical awareness are more important than rituals, especially in addressing inner conflicts and suffering that cannot be resolved externally. In The Forest, the monk who feels like a failure finally chooses to leave the village with two children who have been marginalized by society. He does not return to monastic life, but instead takes a new path to atone for his mistakes, which becomes a form of personal healing. According to Valle-Lira & Noguera-Solano (2024), compassion (Karuṇā) in Buddhist teachings is a force that can purify the mind and free someone from suffering, even outside the context of formal rituals.

**Table 2** The Narrative Pattern of The Monk's Exorcism

No.	Session	Activity
1.	Beginning	Search for the ghost, the cause of the ghost's appearance.
2.	Exorcism	Use of sacred objects: Water, rice, incense, candles, rope, and the recitation of mantras.
3.	Battle	A battle of strength between the monk and the ghost.
4.	Ending	The ghost is expelled/returned to the afterlife, and the ghost cannot be defeated.



Table 2 In Pee Nak, resolution occurs when the spirit finally accepts the fact that he cannot become a monk and chooses to release his anger. This shows that inner peace can be achieved not through force, but through awareness and acceptance. In line with this, research (Dong et al., 2024) indicates that meditation practices based on loving-kindness and compassion in Buddhism can help individuals resolve inner conflicts, foster self-acceptance, and cultivate lasting inner peace. Unlike other films, The Holy Man presents a monk who brings about significant change in society. He conveys the teachings of Buddhism in a simple and touching way, helping to awaken people who have lost hope. He also manages to prevent suicide attempts with just words of wisdom and empathy, without having to perform formal rituals. Here, healing does not come from exorcism, but from love, care, and understanding of others. This is reinforced by the findings in studies (Gilbert & Van Gordon, 2023); (Condon & Makransky, 2020), which emphasize that spiritual healing in Buddhism does not depend on the power of rituals, but rather on genuine, compassionate relationships between humans, which can touch the soul more deeply.

### Monks and Self-Enlightenment

In some Thai films with spiritual and religious themes, the monk character is not always depicted as a perfect and holy figure from the beginning. In fact, in several films, monks appear as humans who have made mistakes, experience inner restlessness, and even violate norms, then undergo a process of repentance and ultimately achieve enlightenment. Through these plots, these films present the human side of monastic life that often does not appear in formal religious narratives. Analysis of the films The Holy Man (Chernyim, 2005), Arbat (Kwanyu, 2015), and The Forest (Spurrier, 2016) shows that the spiritual experiences of the monk characters in these films are not linear or simple, but rather complex and full of inner challenges. The Holy Man (Chernyim, 2005) presents a different narrative, yet still explores themes of repentance and enlightenment. The main character is a former gangster who decides to repent and be ordained as a monk. Unlike the characters in the previous film, this character's repentance occurs at the beginning of the story and serves as the starting point for a major transformation in him. Although not everyone initially believes in his sincerity, he proves through real actions that he wants to change. He helps residents in trouble, defends the weak, and conveys Buddhist teachings in a light and touching way.

In the film The Forest, a monk character arrives in a remote village to impart the teachings of the Dharma. However, his spiritual journey is disrupted when he falls in love with a female teacher in the village. The relationship they have violates the principles of monastic life, which should be carried out with discipline and maintaining purity. Guilt begins to grow when he realizes that his actions have not only damaged his image as a monk, but also damaged the trust of the community that relies on him as a bringer of goodness. This regret does not immediately lead him to enlightenment, but instead traps him in a profound moral dilemma. This is in line with research showing that violating the principles of monasticism, such as having a romantic relationship, can lead to internal conflict and a crisis of spiritual identity. Jory (2021) explains that Buddhist ethics emphasize the importance of moral discipline as a basis for achieving enlightenment, and



violations of this discipline can hinder an individual's spiritual development. In addition, Coombs & Montanez (2025) highlight that sexual behavior that is not in accordance with Buddhist teachings can damage a monk's moral integrity and the community's trust in him. Thus, the internal conflict experienced by the monk in The Forest reflects the reality faced by Buddhist practitioners when emotions and personal relationships test their spiritual principles. These studies confirm that violations of monastic discipline affect not only individuals but also the communities that trust them as moral role models.

In the process of repentance, the monk character in The Forest does not immediately perform a purification ritual or repentance in public. Instead, he chooses another path, namely by reflecting, withdrawing from his social role, and admitting his failures privately. One tangible manifestation of this repentance process is when he resigns from his position as a teacher and chooses to leave the village with two children, one of whom has special needs. The other is a mysterious figure related to the supernatural world surrounding The Forest. This action illustrates a form of repentance that is quieter and less symbolic, but still meaningful. He not only tries to atone for his mistakes but also takes responsibility for protecting the two children who have been neglected by society. This is a simple but powerful form of spiritual enlightenment, not because the monk returns to the temple or wears a robe again, but because he finally chooses sincere goodness without being bound by formal religious roles. This aligns with research indicating that in Buddhism, repentance is not always expressed through public rituals, but can be achieved through personal reflection and genuine actions that demonstrate moral responsibility. For example, in the study (Sun, 2024), it is explained that repentance in Buddhism can take the form of "Formless" which emphasizes introspection and inner transformation without formal ritual involvement. In addition, research by Ghimire (2025) highlights that Buddhist principles, such as compassion (Karunā) and non-violence (Ahimsā), encourage individuals to take on social responsibilities, including protecting children and vulnerable groups, as part of Buddhist ethical practice.

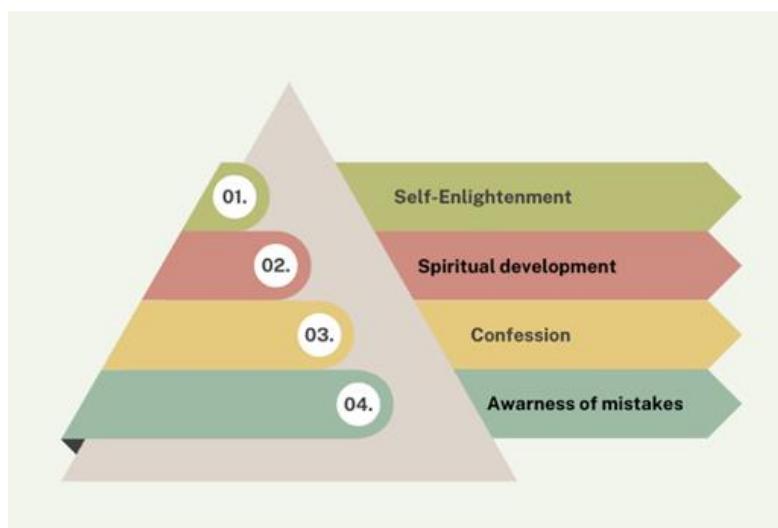
A similar scenario also appears in the film Arbat, where the main character, Sangkha, is a young man who was ordained as a monk due to his father's wishes, rather than his own personal desires. From the beginning, he exhibits a rebellious attitude and questions many aspects of monastic life. He does not fully adhere to the rules, even engaging in a sexual relationship with a woman from his past. This becomes a turning point in his life, leaving him feeling empty and confused, and he did not know what to do. Interestingly, this film does not immediately punish him religiously, but instead shows that humans, even monks, can fall and lose their way. Repentance in Arbat is not achieved through sanctions or specific purification rituals, but rather through deep contemplation. Sangkha chooses solitude, distancing himself from the crowd to confront his inner self. This is where the process of enlightenment begins. He no longer argues with senior monks, nor does he seek justification for his mistakes; Instead, he begins to accept that spiritual life is indeed not an easy path. This film shows that enlightenment can arise from adversity and that guilt is not the end of everything. It is precisely through such failure that one can understand



the true meaning of religious life, which is not merely as a matter of symbols and rules, but as a sincere journey of continual self-discovery and self-improvement.

This aligns with research indicating that in Buddhist teachings, repentance is not always expressed through formal rituals, but can be achieved through personal reflection and genuine actions that demonstrate moral responsibility. For example, a study by Li (2023) explains that repentance in Buddhism can take the form of deep gratitude and appreciation for the practices. Additionally, research by Ghimire (2025) highlights that Buddhist principles, such as compassion (*Karuṇā*) and non-violence (*Ahimsā*), encourage individuals to take social responsibility as part of Buddhist ethical practice.

However, the film also shows that true repentance is not just about changing clothes and social status. The character Sangkha loses society's trust when his past as a gangster is revealed. However, instead of running away or denying it, he chooses to remain within society and continues doing good. The acceptance of society again occurs not because he forces himself to look holy, but because he shows consistency in living a better life. This is a form of enlightenment that arises from genuine action, not from prolonged meditation or elaborate rituals. The film aims to demonstrate that anyone can repent and that a life as a monk can begin with sincerity, rather than holiness, and can lead to meaningful change. This aligns with research that suggests spiritual transformation in Buddhism is not solely determined by one's origin or background, but rather by commitment and genuine action in living a life characterized by love and wisdom. For example, Keown (2016) emphasizes that Buddhist ethics stress the importance of moral discipline (*Sīla*) as the foundation for achieving enlightenment, and violations of this discipline can be overcome through repentance and consistent behavioral change. Additionally, Ghimire's (2025) research highlights that Buddhist principles, such as compassion (*Karuṇā*) and non-violence (*Ahimsā*), encourage individuals to take social responsibility as part of their Buddhist ethical practice.



**Figure 2** Self-Enlightenment Stage



The narrative and visualization of these films are as follows. First, awareness of mistakes generally shows that the monk who makes a mistake is not depicted as a figure who must be punished harshly, but rather as an ordinary human being who is given space to reflect, improve himself, and learn from experience. Second, when they make mistakes, monks honestly admit them and apologize to themselves, others, and society. Third, in the confession stage, the process of repentance in these films is not always depicted formally through religious ceremonies or temple punishments. However, it is more often shown through contemplative processes, symbolic actions, and meaningful social interactions. Fourth, the enlightenment stage, in this context, is also not always identical to returning to being an obedient or perfect monk. In *The Forest*, enlightenment occurs when the character relinquishes his monk status. In *Arbat*, enlightenment comes after a long period of mistakes and inner suffering. Meanwhile, in *The Holy Man*, enlightenment comes through goodness that is consistently demonstrated, regardless of a dark past as illustrated in Figure 2.

### Monks and the Spread of Buddhism

In Thai religious films, monks are depicted not only as individuals living a personal spiritual life, but also as active agents in spreading Buddhism to the broader community. Through stories in films such as *The Holy Man* (Chernyim, 2005) and *The Forest* (Spurrier, 2016), it is clear how the spread of Buddhism has become an integral part of the lives of monks, both through traditional means and more modern and contextual approaches. Each film offers a distinct portrayal of how Buddhism is conveyed, the challenges that arise during the process, and the changes that occur in society afterwards.

The *Holy Man* film centers on the figure of a monk as the main protagonist in the mission to spread the teachings of Buddhism. What is interesting about this film is the approach to preaching used by the main character, namely, a former gangster who repents and chooses the path of monkhood. On his journey to a village, he not only carries a robe as a symbol of monkhood, but also brings a new way of thinking that is more open and readily accepted by the general public. The monk in this film conveys the Dharma in a humorous, light, and empathetic way, different from the rigid or frightening style of preaching. He approaches the community with patience, helps them directly, and understands the daily problems they face. This is a depiction of a humanistic and down-to-earth preaching model.

One of the primary ways the monk in this film spreads Buddhism is by visiting people's homes, introducing newly reactivated temples, and inviting residents to participate in religious activities. He also does not hesitate to help resolve social conflicts in the community, such as when he breaks up a fight between two groups (*Marriage and Death*), or when he prevents a resident from committing suicide because he has lost gambling. It is done not only to show personal virtue, but also to re-instill the values of Buddhism directly through tangible actions. However, the process of spreading religion does not always run smoothly. In *The Holy Man*, challenges arise from people who have lost faith in religion. Many residents believe more in shamans or mystical practices, and there are even fake monks who use the name of religion to deceive. The monk character in this film must face this distrust and work hard to rebuild the community's faith. When his past



as a thug is revealed, he must also face a crisis of trust, both within himself and from those who begin to doubt his sincerity. However, these challenges do not break his spirit. In fact, through consistency and sincerity in his actions, he was able to change society's views gradually.

Meanwhile, in the film *The Forest*, the spread of Buddhism is presented in a more contemplative and introspective manner. The monk character in this film travels to a remote village to serve as a teacher and spiritual guide. He intends to introduce the Dharma to the village community, particularly to the children. However, the challenges he faces are not easy. In addition to dealing with people who believe in supernatural things and adhere to their local belief systems, he also faces temptations and inner conflicts that compromise his image and mission.

The spread of religion in *The Forest* does not occur on a large scale, but rather through small efforts made by the monk in everyday life. He tries to teach discipline, the value of compassion, and the importance of self-control. However, when he gets involved in a relationship that violates the principles of the monk, everything he has built seems to collapse. The guilt that arises finally makes him resign from his role as a teacher, and he chooses to leave the village. Although it may seem like a failure, the decision to go with two children, especially the mysterious boy in *The Forest*, who is believed to be a ghost and is not recognized by society, reveals another form of moral success. He continues to spread Buddhist values through an attitude of compassion and protection for those who are rejected and marginalized.

The two films offer distinct yet complementary portrayals of Buddhism's spread throughout society. *The Holy Man* depicts the success of the monk's preaching, which is carried out actively, openly, and directly touches the lives of the community. He is a model of a modern monk who remains loyal to traditional religious values while adapting to contemporary society. Meanwhile, *The Forest* portrays the challenges faced by a monk when confronted with complex social realities and personal temptations. However, in the end, both monk characters in the film continue to strive to embody the values of goodness that are at the core of Buddhist teachings.

It is concluded that the spread of Buddhism in Thai films is not depicted rigidly or formally. Preaching does not only occur in temples or through lectures, but can also be done on the streets, in homes, and even in stressful situations. The monks in the films are not always perfect, but through their struggles and self-discovery, the spread of religion becomes more humane and relevant to real life. These films demonstrate that Thai society views Buddhism not only as a belief system but also as a guide to life that can be embodied through simple actions, the courage to change, and a spirit of helping others. Thus, monks in films are not just religious symbols, but also a reflection of the continuous effort to spread goodness amidst the challenges of the times. Based on this analysis, it can be concluded that the image of a monk in Thai films is not only depicted as a sacred religious figure but also as an ordinary human being who has weaknesses and faces various challenges. Exorcism rituals are not always the primary method for overcoming spiritual disturbances. In some films, healing occurs through self-awareness, inner reflection, and genuine relationships with others. Through these stories, the films not only present horror

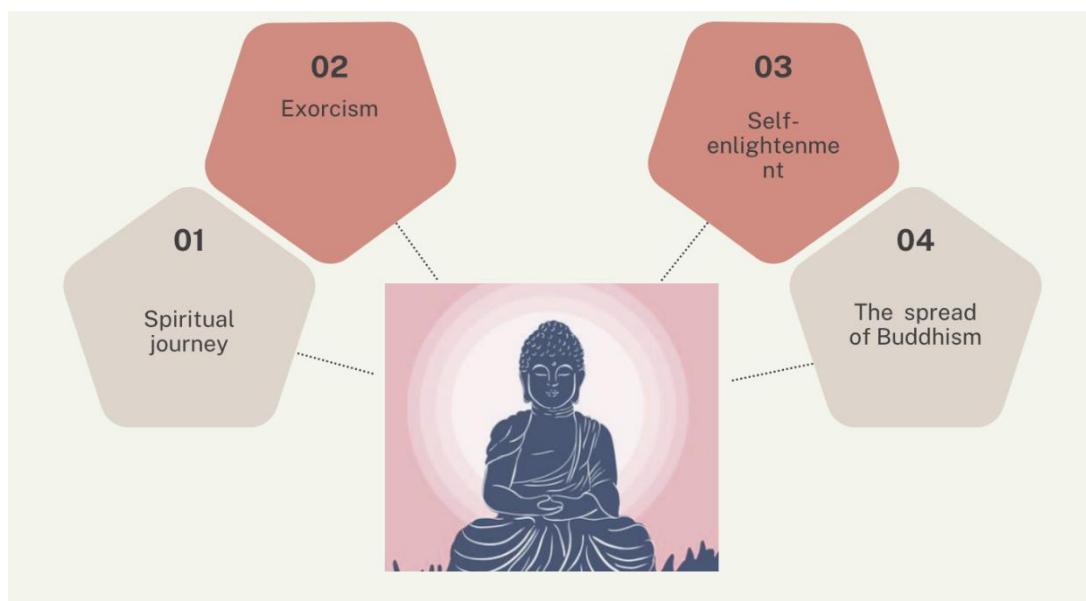


tension but also convey deep spiritual messages about the search for meaning, forgiveness, and sincerity in living life.

This aligns with Wanarathana's (2022) research, which demonstrates that the Buddhist monk community plays a crucial role in social development and community transformation. The study by Wanarathana highlights the importance of Buddhist social work in promoting community development and social justice, emphasizing that Buddhist teachings inspire individuals to work for the welfare of society, including the poor and marginalized communities. In addition, research by Kitanant et al. (2024) shows that monks can play a strategic role in community development through their moral authority and community trust, as well as their adaptation to community needs. Thus, the representation of monks in these films reflects their role as active agents of social change, who spread Buddhist teachings not only through lectures or rituals, but also through concrete actions and direct involvement in community life.

### Originality and Body of Knowledge

This research identifies a new body of knowledge related to the spiritual-anthropological journey of Buddhist monks, as follows. First, monks are figures who help those in need, one of which is assisting with exorcisms so that their spirits return to the afterlife. Second, the spiritual-anthropological journey of monks is related to self-enlightenment. The process towards self-enlightenment is inseparable from a long journey, including challenges and trials. Therefore, monks, as human beings, also commit ethical violations, but they recognize them, apologize, make amends, and achieve self-enlightenment. Third, monks spread Buddhism to various regions. Fourth, in the context of transformational studies, film media representation is one strategy-a strategic medium-that can be used to spread/strengthen Buddhist spiritualism in the atmosphere of international society as in Figure 3.



**Figure 3** The Cycle of Anthropological Spiritual Journey

Temple of Wang Tawan Tok  
1343/5 Radchadannern Rd., Meuang, Nakhon Si Thammarat, 80000 Thailand



## Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the results of the analysis, the representation of monks in Thai films reflects three main dimensions. First, monks and exorcism rituals are presented as part of a complex spiritual role, where monks not only perform exorcisms through religious ceremonies but also face inner conflicts, social tensions, and serve as a bridge between the real and supernatural worlds. Films such as Pee Mak, Pee Nak, and The Medium demonstrate that exorcism rituals do not always work literally, but rather become symbols of human struggles against fear and inner imbalance. Second, monks and self-enlightenment are depicted as a lengthy process involving failure, moral transgressions, and profound reflection. The monks in The Holy Man, The Forest, and Arbat do not achieve holiness immediately, but rather through inner conversion, personal introspection, and taking on social responsibility. Enlightenment in this context is human and contemplative, not always achieved through formal rituals, but rather through awareness and the transformation of the heart. Third, monks and the spread of Buddhism are presented in the form of loving preaching. The figures of monks in The Holy Man and The Forest convey Buddhist teachings not only through lectures but also through real-life actions, such as helping the community, protecting the oppressed, and giving hope to those who are marginalised. These films highlight that the role of monks in Thai society extends beyond being a religious symbol to also serving as an agent of social and spiritual change. Researchers recommend the following. First, the roles of monks as exorcists, spiritual seekers, and preachers narrate and visualize key aspects of Buddhist spiritual practice and help provide a more complete picture of how monks are represented on screen. Besides that, the representation of monks in films can also be used as a medium for spiritual education. As an anthropological-spiritual study of Buddhism using film, this research is limited by the quantification of Thai films, which have not been fully explored in detail. Second, this research also suffers from the Buddhist aspect, which only addresses Thai films. For this reason, the researcher hopes that in the future, other researchers can conduct more comprehensive research by examining international Buddhist films with a broader range of film topics. Third, future research also includes conducting diachronic research on the time period from the early days of Thai films to the present. This way, we can explore the role of Buddhism in a more comprehensive spiritual context. This research challenges international film producers to strengthen spirituality in films, both explicitly and implicitly. Policymakers can also use films as an alternative spiritual education for millennials. In a multicultural society, audiences can critically examine spirituality through films.

## References

Bangert, A., Cooke, P. & Stone, R. (2015). Screening European Heritage: Negotiating Europe's Past via the "Heritage Film". In Carlsten, J. M. & McGarry, F. (Eds.), *Film, History and Memory* (pp. 32-47). London, United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan. [https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137468956\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137468956_3).



Borchert, T. (2022). Monks, the State, and Monastic Governance in Contemporary Thailand. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 90(3), 654-673. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfac067>.

Campoli, A. (2015). A Ghostly Feminine Melancholy: Representing Decay and Experiencing Loss in Thai Horror Films. *Plaridel*, 12(2), 14-35. <https://doi.org/10.52518/2015.12.2-02cmpli>.

Chernyim, N. (Director). (2005). *The Holy Man* [Film]. Bangkok, Thailand: Phranakorn Films.

Chotkiisadarsopon, P. (Director). (2019). *Pee Nak* [Film]. Bangkok, Thailand: Five Star Productions.

Condon, P. & Makransky, J. (2020). Recovering the Relational Starting Point of Compassion Training: A Foundation for Sustainable and Inclusive Care. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 15(6), 1346-1362. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691620922200>.

Coombs, E. & Montanez, S. R. (2025). Religious Doctrines Regarding Sexual Behavior. In Shackelford, T. (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of Religious Psychology and Behavior* (pp. 1-12). Cham, Switzerland: Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-38971-9\\_1117-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-38971-9_1117-1).

Cooper, A. G. (2015). Spiritual Anthropology in Ambiguum 7. In Allen, P. & Neil, B. (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Maximus the Confessor* (pp. 360-377). New York, United States of America: Oxford University Press.

Creswell, J. W. & Poth, C. N. (2016). *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*. California, United States of America: SAGE Publications.

Culpin, M. (1920). *Spiritualism and the New Psychology An Explanation of Spiritualist Phenomena and Beliefs in Terms of Modern Knowledge*. London, United Kingdom: Edward Arnold Publishers Ltd.

Davies, D. (2020). *Anthropology and Theology*. London, United Kingdom: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003084624>.

Dockett, K. H. & North-Schulte, D. (2004). Transcending Self and Other. In Dockett, K. H., Dudley-Grant, G. R. & Bankart, C. P. (Eds.), *Psychology and Buddhism From Individual to Global Community* (pp. 215-238). Boston, United States of America: Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/0-306-47937-0\\_11](https://doi.org/10.1007/0-306-47937-0_11).

Dong, H. B., Nguyen, N., Nguyen, T. T., Nguyen Hoang Le, G. & Trinh, E. (2024). The Buddha: Wisdom from the East. In Geier, B. A. (Eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Educational Thinkers* (pp. 17-34). Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-25134-4\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-25134-4_3).

Ellis, J. (1990). What Does a Script Do? *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 20, 60-64. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3507520>.

Ghimire, S. (2025). Incorporating Buddhist Ethics and the Constitution of Nepal: Ensuring Child Rights Protection. *Lumbini Prabha*, 10, 169-182. <https://doi.org/10.3126/lumbinip.v10i1.78835>.

Gilbert, P. & Van Gordon, W. (2023). Compassion as a Skill: A Comparison of Contemplative and Evolution-Based Approaches. *Mindfulness*, 14, 2395-2416. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-023-02173-w>.



Hindmarsh, B. (2021). The Calculating Spirit: Theological Anthropology and the Measuring of Spirituality. *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care*, 14(2), 162-177. <https://doi.org/10.1177/19397909211044661>.

Holden-Kirwan, J. (1999). Contemplating Faith: Sylvia Plath's Spiritual Journey. *Christianity & Literature*, 48(3), 295-307. <https://doi.org/10.1177/014833319904800306>.

Huberman, M. & Miles, M. B. (2002). *The Qualitative Researcher's Companion*. California, United States of America: SAGE Publications, Inc. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412986274>.

James, W. (1902). *The varieties of religious experience: A study in human nature*. London, United Kingdom: Longmans, Green & Co. <https://doi.org/10.1037/10004-000>.

Jory, P. (2021). *A history of manners and civility in Thailand*. England, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.

Jung, C. G. & Adler, G. (2023). *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung Vol 11. Psychology and Religion: West and East*. (2nd ed.). New Jersey, United States of America: Routledge.

Karimova, N. E. (2022). From The History of Buddhism in Thailand. *Builders of The Future*, 2(2), 250-257. <https://doi.org/10.37547/builders-v2-i2-38>.

Keown, D. (2016). *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics*. New York, United States of America: Palgrave Macmillan.

Kidpromma, A. & Taylor, J. L. (2024). Transgenderism, Othering and Third Way Buddhist Monasticism in Chiang Mai, Thailand. *TRaNS: Trans- Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia*, 12(2), 173-185. <https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2024.2>.

Kitanant, T., Cain, P. M., Kaewhanam, K. & Kaewhanam, P. (2024). The Strategic Role of Monks in Community Development: A Case Study of The Community Enterprises in The Nakhon Chai Burin Province Cluster, Thailand. *Journal of Buddhist Anthropology*, 9(3), 188-200.

Kwanyu, K. (Director). (2015). *Arbat* [Film]. Bangkok, Thailand: Shareongkol Film International.

Li, P. J. (2023). Learning from Buddhist Teachings and Ethical Practices in Qualitative Research. *The Qualitative Report*, 28(1), 285-300. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2023.5772>.

Lohuizen, W. (2011). *A Psycho-Spiritual View on the Message of Jesus in the Gospels: Presence and Transformation in Some Logia as a Sign of Mysticism*. New York, United States of America: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc.

Maligool, J. (Director). (2013). *Pee Mak*. Bangkok, Thailand: GMM Thai Hub.

Maugans, T. A. (1996). The SPIRiTual history. *Archives of Family Medicine*, 5(1), 11-16. <https://doi.org/10.1001/archfami.5.1.11>.

McCargo, D. (2004). Buddhism, democracy and identity in Thailand. *Democratization*, 11(4), 155-170. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1351034042000234576>.

McDaniel, J. T. (2011). The agency between images: The relationships among ghosts, corpses, monks, and deities at a buddhist monastery in thailand. *Material Religion*, 7(2), 242-267. <https://doi.org/10.2752/175183411X13070210372706>.

McNeill, J. J. (1998). Psychotherapy and the Spiritual Journey. *Journal of Religion and Health*, 37, 333-344. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1022983824613>.



McQueen, T. (2019). Spiritual Psychology and the Hospice Death Journey: The Chaplain's Challenge. *Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling*, 73(1), 56-57. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1542305019836200>.

Mitchell, D. W. (1971). Analysis in Theravada Buddhism. *Philosophy East and West*, 21(1), 23-31. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1397761>.

Muecke, M. A. (1992). Monks and Mediums: Religious Syncretism in Northern Thailand. *Journal of The Siam Society*, 80(2), 97-104.

Murtagh, F., Ganz, A. & McKie, S. (2009). The structure of narrative: The case of film scripts. *Pattern Recognition*, 42(2), 302-312. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.patcog.2008.05.026>.

Neary, J. (2011). *Shadows and Illuminations: Literature as Spiritual Journey*. Liverpool, United Kingdom: Liverpool University Press.

Neuman, W. L. (2014). *Social Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*. England, United Kingdom: Pearson Education Limited.

Ng, T.-K. (2025). Spatial Trajectories, Theories, and Topoi in the Study of Religion and Film. In Kong, L., Woods, O. & Tse, J. K. (Eds.), *Handbook of the Geographies of Religion* (pp. 1233-1247). Cham, Switzerland: Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-64811-3\\_69](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-64811-3_69).

Parsania, H. (2006). *Existence and the Fall: Spiritual Anthropology of Islam*. London, United Kingdom: ICAS Press.

Pisanthanakun, B. (Director). (2021). *The Medium* [Film]. Bangkok, Thailand: Showbox.

Rousseau, D. (2019). Spirituality and Philosophy. In Zsolnai, L. & Flanagan, B. (Eds.), *The Routledge International Handbook of Spirituality in Society and the Professions* (pp. 15-24). London, United Kingdom: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315445489>.

Shatnataphat, C. (2024). Buddhism and National Integration in Thailand. *Journal of Buddhist Anthropology*, 9(4), 270-281.

Silverman, D. (2016). *Qualitative research*. London, United Kingdom: SAGE Publications.

Sombatpoonsiri, J. (2022). Buddhist Majoritarian Nationalism in Thailand: Ideological Contestation, Narratives, and Activism. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 53(3), 398-422. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2022.2036360>.

Spurrier, P. (Director). (2016). *The Forest* [Film]. Bangkok, Thailand: Friese-Greene Vachon.

Steiner, R. & Bamford, C. (2003). *How to Know Higher Worlds: The Classic Guide to the Spiritual Journey*. England, United Kingdom: Rudolf Steiner Press.

Sun, H. (2024). On Freedom from Remorse (Avipratisāra/Avippaṭisāra): Its Place on the Well-Trodden Path from Moral Discipline to Samādhi Meditation. *Mindfulness*, 15, 2082-2092. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-024-02354-1>.

Sutcliffe, S. J. & Gilhus, I. S. (2013). *New Age Spirituality Rethinking Religion*. New York, United States of America: Routledge.

Tambiah, S. J. (1970). *Buddhism and the spirit cults in north-east Thailand*. England, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.



Valle-Lira, M. D. C. & Noguera-Solano, R. (2024). Animal Suffering from a Buddhist Perspective: A Reinterpretation of the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path. *Journal of Dharma Studies*, 7, 229-256. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42240-024-00188-7>.

Wanarathana, V. R. (2022). The Significance of Buddhist Social Work: A Study on its Impact on Community Development and Social Justice. *Journal of Language Studies*: 6(2), 95-113. <https://doi.org/10.4038/jls.v6i2.11>.

Wane, N. N. (2011). Spirituality: A Philosophy and A Research Tool. In Wane, N. N., Manyimo, E. L. & Ritskes, E. J. (Eds.), *Spirituality, Education & Society* (pp. 67-82). Rotterdam, Netherlands: Sense Publishers.

Yang, C. T., Narayanasamy, A. & Chang, S. L. (2012). Transcultural spirituality: The spiritual journey of hospitalized patients with schizophrenia in Taiwan. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 68(2), 358-367. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2648.2011.05747.x>.

Zhang, P., Liu, M., Li, D. & Dong, Y. (2021). The Audience's Perspective: Decline of Mythical Elements in Films. *SAGE Open*, 11(3), 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440211040801>.

Zhou, L., Chen, Y., Ge, E., Zhang, A., Zhang, Y., Du, J., Mace, R. & Zhan, Y. (2025). Having a monk in the family and all-cause mortality: A seven-year prospective cohort study. *Evolutionary Human Sciences*, 7(e8), 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.1017/ehs.2025.1>.