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Long-Term Trends in Humanities Knowledge Production: Evidence from Buddhist Studies (1990–2024)

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Abstract

As part of research evaluation and disciplinary studies, understanding the long-term evolution of academic knowledge is essential. This study examines the macro-level development of Buddhist Studies between 1990 and 2024 using bibliometric and time series data from the OpenAlex academic database. By analyzing publication output, institutional distribution, and temporal trends, it reconstructs the historical trajectory of the field and discusses possible directions for future academic and institutional development.

The analysis indicates that Buddhist Studies has experienced steady growth over the past three decades. Following an initial period of rapid expansion, the field has undergone increasing consolidation and structural organization. Rather than offering an interpretive or historical analysis of Buddhist doctrines or narratives, this study contributes empirical evidence and a methodological approach by developing a quantitative, reproducible, and scalable framework for examining the disciplinary development of Buddhist Studies. The findings further suggest a stage-based growth pattern and the emergence of multiple, diversified institutional centers, reflecting the transregional and transcultural character of the field. Predictive results derived from historical data should therefore be interpreted as indicative rather than definitive, as future developments may be shaped by policy, funding, and linguistic factors.

Keywords: Buddhist studies; Bibliometric analysis; Time series analysis; Disciplinary evolution

1 Introduction

Buddhist studies, as a multidisciplinary humanities discipline, have long occupied an important position in philosophy, history, religion, linguistics, and regional studies. Since the 20th century, with the abundance of archaeological discoveries, the development of cross-cultural studies, and the advancement of document compilation, the academic framework of Buddhist studies has gradually matured. The objects of Buddhist research cover texts, thought systems, institutions, and evolutionary processes within different regional cultural contexts(Cohen, 2023;Ma, 2024). From the perspective of global academic development, Buddhist studies are not only an important window for understanding Asian culture, but also a key component of global religious studies and cross-cultural studies (Travagnin, 2024).

However, compared with the profound history and traditional theories of Buddhism, Buddhist studies have long been dominated by qualitative analysis, and their research outcomes are mainly based on traditional humanities methods such as textual interpretation, historical examination, and ideological analysis (Li, 2023). Although these methods have high scholarly value in explaining the core ideas and historical significance of Buddhism, at a macro level, the academic community has a limited understanding of the scale of academic production, long-term development trends, and structural changes in Buddhist studies. Especially in the current context where the scale of global academic publishing is expanding rapidly and interdisciplinary research is continuously deepening, relying solely on a single case or a partial study is no longer sufficient to comprehensively reflect the evolving characteristics of

Buddhist studies as a discipline within the international academic system (Amanullah, 2023).

In recent years, research methods such as bibliometrics and scientometrics have been widely applied in the humanities and social sciences, significantly enhancing the analytical tools available for scientific development(McManus & Neves, 2022). By analyzing academic databases, researchers can systematically present the structural characteristics, growth rates, and evolution patterns of disciplines at the macro level. This method can make up for the shortcomings of traditional qualitative research in terms of scale and systematicness(Donthu et al., 2021). Under the impetus of digital humanities research, quantitative analysis has gradually become one of the important approaches for understanding the long-term evolution of the humanities(Poole, 2017).

In the field of religious studies, bibliometric methods have been applied in a number of studies to analyze traditional religions or related research. Some studies have shown that this approach has the potential to reveal research hotspots and disciplinary differentiation(S¸enel & Demir, 2018).

However, compared with other areas of religious studies or the sociology of religion, systematic quantitative analyses of the overall academic output in Buddhist studies remain limited, and there is a lack of research frameworks that capture its long-term structural changes (Magnone, 2015; Azancot-Chocrón et al., 2022; Mamdapur & Senel, 2020).

Meanwhile, in the field of scientific measurement research, the use of time series methods to model trends and conduct prospective analyses of academic outputs has become an important research direction in recent years(Ferligoj et al., 2015). By modeling historical data, researchers can predict the future trajectory of a discipline based on clear methodological assumptions and boundary conditions, providing scenario references for academic development and planning. However, in the field of Buddhist studies, relevant predictive analyses remain limited, and discussions within the academic community on the future development of this discipline mostly remain at the level of qualitative judgment.

Based on the above background, it can be observed that although Buddhist studies have continuously expanded in terms of research topics and ethical aspects, this discipline still lacks in macro quantitative analysis and long-term trend research. Especially, there is a lack of authoritative databases, as well as methods that combine phased growth analysis and time series modeling to systematically describe the overall academic output of the discipline. This research gap has, to a certain extent, contributed to the academic community's understanding of the structural evolution of Buddhist studies and the assessment of its future development potential.

In summary, this study, based on the OpenAlex academic database, conducted a systematic analysis of academic papers published in the field of Buddhist studies from 1990 to 2024. This study, at the macro level, reveals the growth characteristics of this discipline stage, the distribution of institutions, and the trend of annual publication volumes. Based on this, a time series model is introduced to conduct exploratory predictions on the future development trend of academic papers on Buddhist studies. By combining bibliometric analysis with time series methods, a reproducible and scalable quantitative analysis framework is provided for the historical research analysis of the Buddhist studies discipline, and data references are offered for the possible future

development directions of this discipline. From a scientometric perspective, this study treats Buddhist Studies as a humanities case study to examine long-term patterns of disciplinary research output using bibliometric and time-series methods.

2 Methods

2.1 Research Design and Approach

This study combines bibliometric analysis and time series analysis to conduct a systematic examination of the development patterns, structural characteristics, and future directions of Buddhist academic research at the macro level. The research follows an analytical logic of description–comparison–prediction. First, bibliometric methods are employed to depict the historical evolution of Buddhist academic research. Second, the structural characteristics of different developmental stages and major research institutions are examined. Finally, based on historical data, a time series model is introduced to support a forward-looking discussion of future developments in Buddhist academic research. It should be emphasized that the analytical focus of this study is solely on Buddhist academic research itself and does not involve Buddhist doctrines, ideological content, or sectarian positions. The aim of this study is to present quantitative and structural changes in academic production, without engaging in evaluative judgments regarding the academic value of specific research outputs.

2.2 Data source

All data used in this study were obtained from the OpenAlex open academic database (https://openalex.org/). This database covers major academic journals and publications worldwide and is widely used in bibliometric, scientometric, and digital humanities research. It is characterized by a high level of transparency, reproducibility, and cross-disciplinary applicability. In this study, the research scope was limited to peer-reviewed academic literature related to Buddhist studies (excluding preprints), covering the period from 1990 to 2024. Data access and retrieval were completed in late 2025.

2.3 Data Processing

To ensure the reliability and consistency of the analysis results, the original data downloaded were cleaned and preprocessed before analysis. First, from the original data downloaded from OpenAlex, the records that contain publication year information were selected. The entries in the form of four-digit years were retained and converted into numerical variables to avoid potential impact on subsequent statistics. Second, the publication years and the corresponding publication numbers were extracted and converted into numerical variables to construct the annual publication volume data. To ensure the consistency of the time range in this study, the data were further restricted to the period from 1990 to 2024 and arranged by year to form a continuous time series. After completing the construction of the annual publication volume, an inspection was conducted to check the continuity of the years within the study period and

to ensure that no years were missing, meeting the requirements for continuous obser- vation values in time series analysis. All data cleaning, analysis and visualization in this study were completed in RStudio, and the statistical software used was R ver- sion 4.5.2. The data processing and organization were carried out using R packages such as read r, d plyr and stringr. The visualization of annual publication trends and structural characteristics was conducted using ggplot2 and scales. The time series pre- diction was constructed based on the forecast package, and an ARIMA model with automatic parameter selection was used to predict the long-term change trend in the number of Buddhist research publications.

2.3.1 Annual Publication Trend Analysis

To depict the development trajectory of Buddhist academic research over a long period of time, this article will conduct a descriptive analysis of the publication trends of Buddhist studies from 1990 to 2024 using the cleaned data. Let N_t denote the number of academic publications in year t.The annual publication trend can therefore be represented as a time series:

$$\{N_t\}, \quad t = 1990, 1991, \ldots, 2024$$

By analyzing annual publication counts, temporal changes are visually presented (Figure 1) to illustrate scale variations and long-term growth trends across different periods.This analysis is intended to identify long-term trends and phased change characteristics, without involving the causal explanation of abnormal fluctuations in a single year.

2.3.2 Stage-based growth rate analysis

To further characterize the temporal dynamics of Buddhist Studies research, a stage- based growth rate analysis was conducted. Let denote the number of publications in year t, where t = 1990, 1991, ... , 2024. The study period was divided into several consecutive stages in order to examine differences in growth intensity across distinct developmental phases. For a given stage spanning from year t_0 to year t_1 ,the average annual growth rate g was calculated as:

$$g = \left(\frac{N_{t_1}}{N_{t_0}} \right)^{\frac{1}{t_1 - t_0}} - 1$$

where and represent the publication counts at the beginning and end of the stage, respectively, and denotes the length of the stage in years. This formulation standardizes growth across stages of different durations and reflects the mean proportional change in publication output per year.

The stage-based growth rate analysis was applied to all predefined stages using annual publication data. The corresponding computation was implemented in R as follows: where N_{t0} and N_{t1} represent the publication counts at the beginning and end of the stage, respectively, and t_1 - t_0 denotes the length of the stage in years. This

formulation standardizes growth across stages of different durations and reflects the mean proportional change in publication output per year.

2.3.4 Long-term projection of publication trends

In order to explore potential future trajectories of Buddhist Studies research output, a time-series forecasting analysis was conducted based on historical publication data. The annual publication counts were modeled as a univariate time series $\{N_t\}$, assuming that past trends may provide a reference for future development under stable structural conditions.

An autoregressive integrated moving average (ARIMA) framework was adopted to generate projections. Model selection was performed automatically using information criteria, allowing the optimal combination of autoregressive, differencing, and moving average terms to be identified from the data.

Formally, an ARIMA(p, d, q) model can be expressed as:

$$\phi(B)(1 - B)^d N_t = \theta(B)\varepsilon_t ,$$

where B is the backshift operator, p and q denote the orders of the autoregressive and moving average components, respectively, d is the degree of differencing, and ε_t represents a white-noise error term.

The resulting projections are intended to illustrate possible long-term trends rather than to predict exact future values. Consequently, the forecast results are interpreted as scenario-based references for understanding the prospective evolution of Buddhist Studies research.

2.4 Methodological considerations

It is important to note that the analysis in this study is mainly descriptive and exploratory and therefore does not imply a causal or functional relationship between the stage-based growth rates and the time series predictions. The prediction results do not take into account external variables or unforeseen socioeconomic factors. By integrating comprehensive growth rate analysis, trend visualization, and long-term prediction, this methodological framework provides a structured description of the temporal evolution of Buddhist studies research, as well as its potential future trajectory.

2.5 Artificial Intelligence Declarations

During the writing process of this article, the author solely utilized ChatGPT (OpenAI, version 5.2) to conduct grammar checks and language polishing of the English text, as well as to enhance the clarity and readability of the article. The artificial intelligence tools did not participate in the research topic selection, data collection, data analysis, model construction, research design, result generation, or any other academic work such as result interpretation. The research ideas, methods, data processing and result analysis in this thesis were all independently completed by the author, and the author assumes full responsibility for the academic content.

3 Results

3.1 Annual Publication Trends in Buddhist Studies

Figure 1 illustrates the changes in the number of annual papers published in the field of Buddhist studies from 1990 to 2024. Overall, the academic output in this field has shown a significant upward trend over the past thirty-four years. In the early 1990s, the level of academic output in this field was relatively low, with the average annual number of published papers being fewer than 100, and year-to-year fluctuations remaining limited. Since the late 1990s, a clear upward trend has emerged, and this increase accelerated further in the early 21st century. By around 2010, the annual number of published articles had exceeded 500, indicating that Buddhist studies had entered a phase of more rapid development. Over the past decade, the number of published papers on Buddhism has continued to grow steadily. After 2015, the annual publication volume consistently exceeded 900 and reached its highest level within the study period in 2024. Although slight fluctuations occurred in some years, the overall

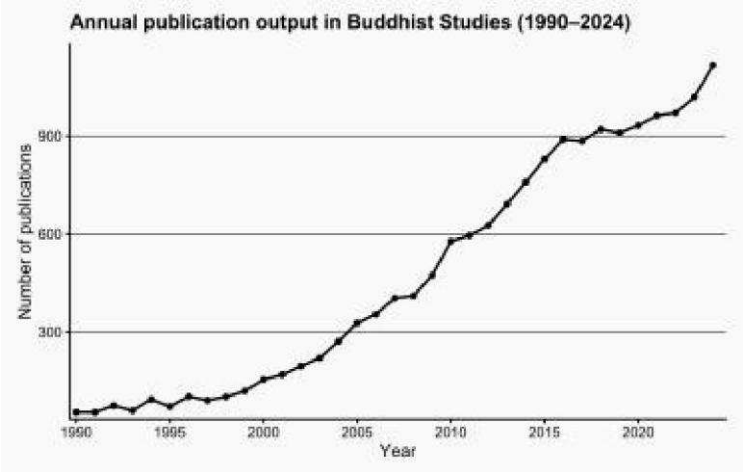


Fig. 1 Annual publication output in Buddhist Studies (1990–2024)

trend remained stable, reflecting the sustained growth of academic output in Buddhist studies.

3.2 Analysis of Staged Growth Rates

In order to further describe the temporal evolution of academic output in Buddhist studies, the research period was divided into three consecutive stages: 1990–2004, 2005–2014, and 2015–2024. The compound annual growth rate (CAGR) for each stage is presented in Figure 2. The first stage (1990–2004) exhibited the highest growth intensity, with an average annual growth rate exceeding 12%. As shown in Figure

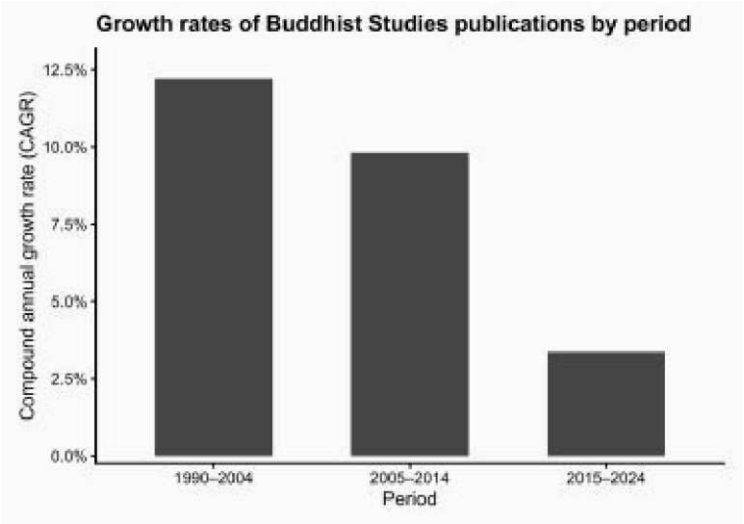


Fig. 2 Stage-based growth rates of Buddhist Studies publications across different periods

1, although the absolute number of publications during this period was relatively low, the growth rate was comparatively high, reflecting a phase of rapid expansion in the early development of academic output in Buddhist studies. During the second stage (2005–2014), the growth rate of academic output slowed to some extent but remained at a relatively high level, with an annual growth rate of approximately 10 %. Throughout this period, the number of research papers on Buddhism continued to increase steadily, suggesting a transition toward a more mature stage of development. In the third stage (20 15–2024), the growth rate declined further, with annual growth rates decreasing to approximately 3%–4%. As indicated in Figure 1, although the pace of growth slowed, the absolute number of published papers remained at a relatively high level. This pattern suggests that Buddhist studies entered a phase of more stable development under conditions of sustained high output.

3.3 Long-term Forecast of Academic Output in Buddhist Studies

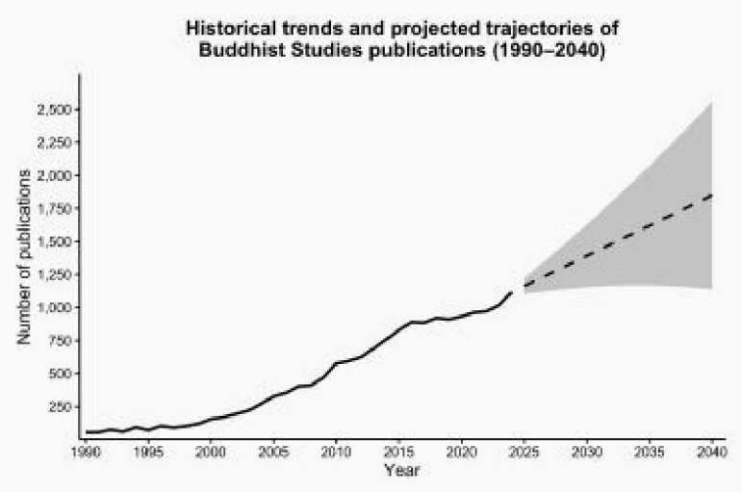


Fig. 3 Historical trends and projected trajectories of Buddhist Studies publication output (1990–2040)

Figure 3 presents the historical trend of Buddhist academic research output from 1990 to 2024, together with projected values up to 2040 obtained using the ARIMA model. Based on the historical data, the number of research papers on Buddhism has exhibited a long-term and continuous upward trend. This pattern provides the basis for constructing time series models and conducting predictive analysis. According to the ARIMA model results, and without considering the influence of external factors, the annual publication volume in the field of Buddhist studies is projected to continue increasing during the period from 2025 to 2040. The confidence intervals of the projections widen gradually over time, reflecting the increasing uncertainty associated with long-term forecasts. Although different prediction methods may yield varying

results, the model used in this study indicates an overall trend of continued growth in academic output, with no evident stagnation within the projected period.

3.4 Distribution Characteristics of Major Buddhist Research Institutions

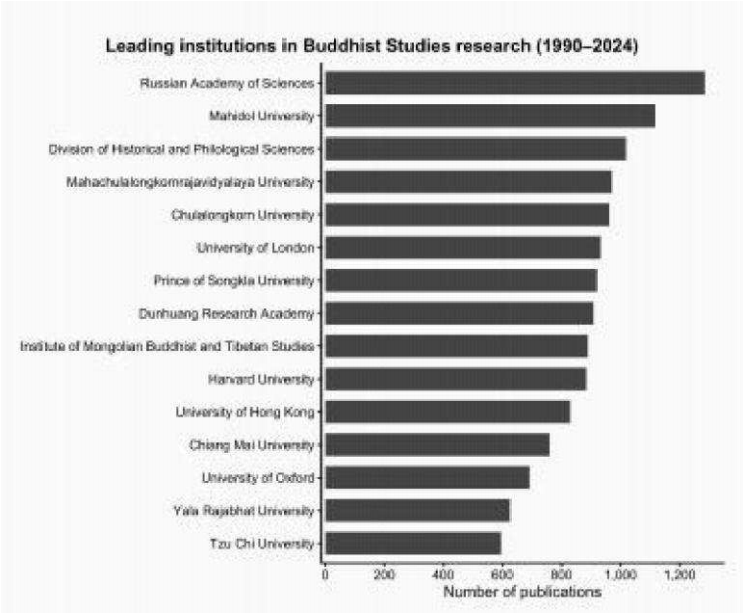


Fig. 4 Leading academic institutions in Buddhist Studies research by publication output

Figure 4 shows the distribution of major research institutions in the field of Buddhist studies from 1990 to 2024 . The results indicate a certain degree of institutional concentration in academic output, while research activity is not dominated by a single institution or country. Several national research institutes and comprehensive universities have maintained relatively high levels of publication output over an extended period. At the same time, universities from a wide range of countries are also among the main contributors, reflecting the international scope of research activity in Buddhist studies. Overall, academic output in Buddhist studies is jointly produced by multiple research institutions and universities worldwide, forming a diverse and relatively dispersed institutional landscape.

4 Discussion

4.1 The Long-Term Growth of Buddhist Academic Output and Its Disciplinary Significance

This study reveals, at the macro level, a continuous growth trend in Buddhist academic research output from 1990 to 2024. In general, this result reflects the academic vitality demonstrated by Buddhist studies within the contemporary humanities discipline system, as well as its broader trajectory of academic development (Marinescu, 2019; Cook Diemberger, 2021). Previous studies have shown that since the late 20th century, Bud- dhist studies have undergone significant transformation, gradually shifting toward a more diversified research landscape encompassing sociology, anthropology, religious studies, law, and digital humanities (Veidlinger,2019; Schonthal2025; Das& Mitra, 2025) From the perspective of disciplinary development, the increase in academic output in Buddhist studies is not merely a rise in the number of published papers; this phenomenon is more likely to indicate that the field has attained a relatively stable position within the international academic research system. With the growing promi- nence of cross-cultural studies, Asian studies, and religious studies in European and American universities, Buddhist studies have gradually been integrated into the main- stream framework of humanities research over the past decade(Cook & Diemberger, 2021). The long-term upward trend observed in this study is largely consistent with the broader structural transformation of the discipline.

4.2 Phased Growth Characteristics and the Transformation of Buddhist Studies Research Paradigm

The analysis of phased growth rates in this study reveals that the development pace of Buddhist studies has varied considerably across different periods over the past three decades. From 1990 to 2004, the discipline experienced a particularly high growth rate. This pattern may be associated with improvements in the global academic exchange environment following the end of the Cold War, as well as the rapid expansion of Asian studies within Western academic communities. The reprinting, publication, translation, and collation of numerous classical texts, together with ongoing archaeological discoveries, provided new source materials for research in Buddhist studies (Dharmarathna, 2022).

In the early 21st century (2005–2014), Buddhist studies gradually shifted from a phase of rapid expansion to one of deeper development. During this period, although the growth rate of academic output slowed, research topics and methodological approaches became increasingly diversified. For example, the integration of Buddhism with modern social issues and the rise of regional approaches to Buddhist studies emerged as important directions within the academic community-Magnone, 2015; Keown, 2022).This shift suggests that Buddhist studies were no longer confined to traditional textual scholarship but were increasingly engaging with broader discussions in the social sciences and humanities.

Since 2015, the growth of Buddhist studies has slowed further, while remaining relatively stable against a high baseline of research output. This pattern is consistent

with the developmental trajectory of a mature academic discipline. Similar trends have been observed in other humanities fields, such as history and religious studies, which likewise entered phases of more stable development following earlier periods of rapid expansion.

4.3 Boundary of Academic Interpretation of Prediction Results

The prediction results based on the ARIMA model in this study indicate that, under the current structural conditions, academic output in the field of Buddhist studies is likely to continue to grow in the coming period. However, it should be noted that the time series analysis employed in this study does not offer a qualitative judgment regarding the future trajectory of the discipline, but rather provides a reference framework grounded in historical trends. In the humanities, academic output is influenced by multiple factors, including institutional structures, language, academic evaluation systems, and research funding (Hicks et al., 2015; Benneworth et al., 2016).Disciplines such as Buddhist studies, which rely heavily on regional expertise and linguistic com- petence, may experience shifts in development trajectories in response to changes in academic priorities and policy environments. Therefore, the prediction results pre- sented in this study should be understood as a form of situational inference rather than as a normative expectation for the future development of the discipline.

4.4 Institutional Distribution and the Internationalization Characteristics of Buddhist Studies Research

The results of this study indicate that contemporary Buddhist studies exhibit a multi-center distribution pattern at the institutional level , with research activity not dominated by a single country or research institution. This pattern reflects the cross-cultural and transregional character of Buddhist studies as an academic discipline. Previous research has shown that the field has long relied on scholarly traditions involving multiple languages, regions, and diverse cultural backgrounds, and that academic authority is not concentrated within a single intellectual center. At the same time, this decentralized institutional structure suggests that Buddhist studies demonstrate a relatively high degree of inclusiveness within the global academic system, enabling more balanced scholarly dialogue across different academic contexts. In this sense, the field appears to be increasingly oriented toward a cross-cultural and global research perspective.

4.5 Methodological Reflection and Research Limitations

This study attempts to use bibliometric and time series analyses to provide a macroscopic perspective on Buddhist studies, but the methodology also has certain limitations. First, based on analysis of the OpenAlex database, this study acknowledges that limitations in database coverage and language bias may lead to the underrepresentation of research outputs published in non-English languages(Hammarfelt, 2014) . Second, the quantitative analysis conducted in this study focuses primarily on the volume of research output rather than on the quality or intellectual depth of individual studies. In a discipline such as Buddhist studies, which places strong emphasis

on historical interpretation and textual analysis, an increase in publication volume does not necessarily indicate theoretical innovation or substantive academic breakthroughs. Therefore, the findings of this study should be understood as an external, institutional-level description of disciplinary development, rather than as an evaluation of the academic value or scholarly contributions of Buddhist studies.

4.6 Academic Contributions and Future Research Directions

Overall, this study has employed time series models and bibliometric analysis to provide a replicable quantitative framework and data foundation for examining the long-term evolution of Buddhist studies as a discipline. This approach is not intended to replace traditional interpretive research in Buddhist studies, but rather to offer complementary perspectives for the study of disciplinary history, academic policy, research planning, and cross-disciplinary comparison. Future research may incorporate additional analytical approaches, such as regional and linguistic stratification analyses or citation network analysis, to further explore the internal knowledge structure of Buddhist studies. A research trajectory that integrates quantitative analysis with interpretive perspectives may therefore represent an important supplementary direction for the development of contemporary Buddhist studies research.

4.7 Academic Significance of Buddhist Studies Research

This study systematically analyzed the academic output of Buddhist studies from a macro-level perspective over the period from 1990 to 2024. Its significance does not lie in providing new interpretations of specific Buddhist doctrines, thought systems, or religious traditions, but rather in offering a structural perspective for understanding the overall academic development of Buddhist studies as a discipline. Previous research has suggested that contemporary Buddhist scholarship has gradually shifted from a primary focus on classical texts and ideas toward more interdisciplinary and diversified approaches. The results of this study indicate that Buddhist studies have experienced continuous growth followed by a gradual trend toward stabilization over the past three decades. This pattern reflects a broader movement of the field toward institutionalization and internationalization. From the perspective of disciplinary development, growth in this field is reflected not only in the increasing number of studies, but also in the diversification of research themes and the expansion of analytical frameworks. Existing studies have shown that as Buddhist studies increasingly intersect with religious studies, regional studies, and the broader humanities, both research objects and research questions within the discipline have continued to evolve. To some extent, these changes suggest that Buddhist studies are moving beyond the limitations of traditional interpretive or text-centered approaches and are increasingly engaging in dialogue with contemporary issues in the humanities and social sciences. Furthermore, the phased growth characteristics identified in this study suggest that the current research ecosystem of Buddhist studies may be substantially influenced by academic institutions and international scholarly exchange mechanisms. Previous scholarship has noted that research output in the humanities is closely linked to academic evaluation systems and research funding, rather than being determined solely by the internal

evolution of scholarly ideas. In this context, the development of cross-regional collaboration networks, the ongoing refinement of academic training systems, and the establishment of dedicated research centers all have the potential to shape research agendas and academic output within Buddhist studies. (Hsiehchen, Espinoza & Hsieh, 2018; Nagasaki,2013; Kai, 2022).

5 Conclusion

This study is based on the OpenAlex academic database and employs bibliometric and time series analyses to systematically describe the long-term evolution of academic output in Buddhist studies from 1990 to 2024 at a macro-level perspective. On this basis, the study further conducts exploratory projections regarding the future development trends of the discipline. The results indicate that Buddhist studies, as a humanities discipline, have experienced an expanding scale of academic production and sustained growth over the past three decades, characterized by a structural transformation from rapid early expansion to gradual maturity and stabilization. From a methodological perspective, the core contribution of this study lies not in the interpretation of Buddhist thought, doctrines, or historical issues, but in providing a replicable and scalable quantitative analytical framework for examining the disciplinary history of Buddhist studies. By combining bibliometric analysis with time series modeling, this study attempts to address a gap in macro-level research on the overall developmental trajectory of the discipline within traditional Buddhist studies . This approach is not intended to replace established interpretive, thought-centered, or historical research traditions, but rather to serve as a complementary tool that offers an additional perspective on the structural evolution of Buddhist studies within the global academic system. At the disciplinary level, the study identifies phased growth characteristics and patterns of institutional distribution, reflecting a broader trend toward multi-centered and institutionalized development in the international academic landscape. Research in this field is not concentrated in a single country or institution, but is jointly advanced by academic organizations across different regions, linguistic contexts, and scholarly traditions. This pattern reflects the transregional and cross-cultural nature of Buddhist studies, and aligns closely with broader developments in religious studies and Asian studies. It should be noted that the predictive results constructed in this study on the basis of historical data are intended as situational references within existing structural conditions, rather than as definitive judgments regarding the future academic trajectory of the discipline. Actual developments may continue to be shaped by multiple factors, including policy environments, research funding structures, and linguistic dynamics. Accordingly, the primary significance of these projections lies in providing a quantitative background for disciplinary reflection and scholarly discussion, rather than in offering normative conclusions about future trends. In summary, this study introduces bibliometric and time series approaches to provide a macro-level perspective on Buddhist studies, thereby contributing to ongoing discussions on the history and methodology of the discipline. Future research may build upon this foundation to further examine internal knowledge structures and the

evolution of research paradigms, supporting the continued development of Buddhist studies within the contexts of digital humanities and interdisciplinary scholarship.

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8 Author contributions

Conceptualization, methodology, data collection, data collation, formal analysis, visualization, software implementation, and original draft writing: D.L.

Time Series Modeling and Bibliometric Analysis: D.L.

Abstract writing and refinement: S.T.

Writing - Reviewed and edited by: S.T., S.P., J.H., Y.C.

Supervision and Academic guidance: S.T., S.P.

All authors have read and approved the final manuscript and agree to take responsibility for all aspects of the work.

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