ARTICLE

Context shift, word drift: the meaning transference of the word prèet in Thai Society

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This research investigates the semantic change and conceptual metaphor of the Thai word prèet (/เปรต/), which originates from the Pali-Sanskrit term meaning "departed." The primary objective is to explore how the term's meaning has shifted in contemporary Thai society, where it is now used pejoratively to criticize behaviors such as excessive greed, gluttony, immorality, and social deviance. Data for this study are drawn from both historical texts, particularly the *Traibhumi Phra Ruang* (a prominent Thai Buddhist text from the 14th-century Sukhothai period), and modern Thai linguistic usage. The analysis employs conceptual metaphor theory, focusing on metaphors like SOCIAL DEVIANCE IS MONSTROSITY, MORAL FAILURE IS DEGRADATION, GREED IS HUNGER, and SPIRITUAL LIMINALITY IS MONSTROSITY. to understand how these shifts reflect changing cultural and societal values. Additionally, Impoliteness Theory is applied to examine how prèet functions as a linguistic tool for social critique. Findings show that the semantic evolution of prèet reveals an intricate relationship between language, culture, and metaphor, as it transitions from a religious concept to a vehicle for social commentary. The implications of this study highlight the dynamic nature of language in reflecting societal shifts.

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Introduction

It is intriguing how language evolves over time. Words that once had neutral or even respectful meanings can change in usage and connotation due to various cultural, social, and historical factors, a phenomenon known as semantic change. Semantic change refers to the evolution of word meanings over time, influenced by both internal and external factors Overtime, the meanings of words in each language are shaped by social practices, events, and political circumstances (Keidar et al., 2022; Castano et al., 2022; Azarbonyad et al., 2017). These factors not only impact the traditional vocabulary within society but also influence the evolving meanings of borrowed words, particularly in Thai, which has been almost influenced by Pali and Sanskrit.

Pali and Sanskrit loanwords are extensively used in Thailand, particularly in various aspects such as language, literature, and music (Barua, 2017; Dolphen, 2018; Pimpuang and Yuttapongtada, 2022; Wanglem and Tongtep, 2017). These loanwords have been integrated into the Thai language since ancient times, dating back to the Sukhothai period (around the 13–14th century). The influence of Pali and Sanskrit is particularly notable in religious texts and everyday language usage, especially in Tri Bhum Phra Rung, one of the Thai's masterpiece literary works written in 1345, during the Sukhothai period.

The factors of semantic changes in loanwords generally stem from a diverse range of linguistic and extralinguistic factors. Al-Athwary (2022) asserts that these changes occur due to factors such as lexical necessity, historical influences over time, and misunderstandings during integration. The evolution of borrowed words' meanings illustrates a dynamic interplay between linguistic and extralinguistic influences, shaping the development of vocabulary across languages and cultures. Language and culture share a profound relationship, with language often mirroring cultural values (Stanlaw et al., 2018; Völkel and Nassenstein, 2022). Thus, culture also plays a pivotal role in influencing the evolution of meanings in borrowed words.

In all languages, lexical items, whether native or borrowed, are susceptible to changes in their meaning (Al-Athwary, 2022, p. 1014). Some cultural factors can cause borrowed words to change their meaning, such as the creation of new lexical-semantic categories, the use of expressive metaphors, and the expression of ethnocultural identity in the receiving language (Benő, 2017). "Prèet" in Thai exemplifies this phenomenon, having transitioned from a term associated with ancestral reverence to one used negatively or insultingly. Historically, prèet was not considered vulgar. However, it now carries negative connotations and serves as an insult or a tool to criticize others negatively.

Specifically, in the South of Thailand, the word prèet appears in phrases such as /tâŋ prèet/ (ตั้งเปรต) and /chiŋ prèet/ (ชิงเปรต), which are integral to important ceremonies like the Festival of the Tenth Lunar Month "Sarth Duen Sip," where people show respect to their deceased ancestors (Thailandnow, 2024). In this context, prèet is not vulgar; it refers to ancestors who have passed away. However, the term prèet isn't indigenous to Thai; it stems from the Pali-Sanskrit language. Originally, it denoted a deceased person, ghost, spirit, or ancestor who had passed away. The Concise Pali-English Dictionary by Mahāthera (1958) defines "peta", which is the root word of prèet, as "[adj.] dead; departed" (p. 205), aligning with its usage in the Sart Duen Sip ritual among the Thai people in the south.

Moreover, in the 2011 edition of the official Thai dictionary published by the Royal Society of Thailand, there are also words related to prèet with interesting meanings. For example, the word เปต (peeta), which is a Pali form used in Thai, means: (1) a group of beings born in the lower realms, that is, the realm of suffering; (2) a person who has died (Royal Society of Thailand, 2011). Another term found is peetaphalii (เปตพลี), which means

offerings made to those who have passed away (Royal Society of Thailand, 2011). As for prèet, which is a Sanskrit form used in Thai, it means a type of creature born in the lower realms, that is, the realm of suffering, a type of evil ghost. There are many types, one of which is described as being as tall as a palm tree, with long, wavy hair, a long neck, a skinny body, and a mouth as small as a needle's eye; (2) n. A term used to insult or despise people who are hungry and skinny, disturbing others by asking for food, or when someone receives a fortune, they ask for a share, similar to asking for a share of merit. Such a person is referred to as a ghost (Royal Society of Thailand, 2011). This discovery illustrates an interesting point: the word pet (peeta) found in Thai dictionaries, meaning "the deceased" or "a lower-level being," often appears in the Pali form used in Thai. However, upon researching the Sanskrit form of the Thai word, pret (prèet), it becomes evident that it is a vulgar term.

Contemporarily, the word prèet 'เปรต' is frequently used in Thai speech, especially in southern Thailand, in various contexts. For instance, when describing a person with a very tall figure, they are often compared to a ghost, "being tall like a prèet" (สูงเหมือนเปรต). Similarly, if someone is extremely thin, with only skin covering their bones, they might be described as "being thin like a prèet" (ผอมเหมือนเปรต) or "being starved like a prèet" (อดอยากเหมือนเปรต). If someone is greedy and eats too much, it is said that they "eat like a prèet" (กินเหมือนเปรต). Furthermore, if someone screams and shouts, producing a high-pitched sound that pierces the eardrums, they are said to "scream like a prèet" (ร้องเหมือนเปรต). In these contexts, the word prèet deviates entirely from its original meaning, which used to refer to a spirit or a person who has passed away.

Prèet in the Thai language lacks a well-documented origin as a vulgar word, making diachronic linguistic analysis challenging. However, its usage can be traced through culturally embedded expressions such as /chiŋ prèet/ (ชิงเปรต), glossed as chiŋ (ชิง – to snatch or compete) + prèet (เปรต – hungry ghost), meaning "to scramble for offerings intended for hungry ghosts," and /tâŋ prèet/ (ตั้งเปรต), glossed as tâŋ (ตั้ง – to set up) + prèet (เปรต – hungry ghost), referring to "setting up offerings for the spirits." These expressions are typically used during the Sart Duen Sip (สารทเดือนสิบ) festival in Southern Thailand, which involves making merit for the deceased by preparing and offering food. In this context, prèet refers not to a cursed spirit but to highly respected ancestral spirits who are honored through ritual. The semantic shift of prèet—from a spiritual figure within ritual practice to a pejorative term in contemporary discourse—forms the central focus of this study. Using frameworks of semantic change and conceptual metaphor, this paper investigates the linguistic and cultural mechanisms that have contributed to the evolving meaning of prèet in Thai society. This transformation is hypothesized to reflect broader shifts in social values, moral perceptions, and modes of cultural expression.

This article assumes that this usage likely stems from depictions of prèet in the Tribhum Phra Ruang, influencing the evolution of the word prèet in Thai society. The notion of prèet does not appear solely within local animistic beliefs but also manifests as the concept of the 'non-human' prevalent in Thai Buddhist concepts. This is evidenced by texts like the Traiphumi Phra Ruang (The Concept of Three Worlds by King Ruang), the oldest Thai Buddhist literature, dating back to the Sukhothai period, written around 1345. In the Tribhumi Phra Ruang, prèet is classified as an animal in Pretabhumi, which is the world where prèet reside. It is one of the 11 Kama Bhumi, denoting the realm of those still entangled in sensual pleasures, happiness, and suffering. Pretaphumi is the land of suffering. It is also known as "Duktibhumi". Prèet inhabiting these realms endure the

consequences of their past bad karma and possess strange, frightening bodies, often exhibiting screaming and howling behavior. Employing the method of semantic change and conceptual metaphor, this paper investigates the evolution of prèet from its original meaning to its altered connotation. Through this analysis, the study delves into the intriguing transformation of prèet from a normal term to one of vulgarity in Thai society.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate the semantic and metaphorical evolution of the term prèet in Thai society, focusing on how its meaning has shifted from religious doctrine to contemporary discourse as a form of social critique. By examining both historical texts and modern language usage, the research seeks to uncover the linguistic, cultural, and metaphorical mechanisms underlying this transformation. To achieve this objective, the study is guided by the following research questions: How has the semantic meaning of prèet evolved from its original religious context to its current usage in modern Thai society? What conceptual metaphors are employed in the reinterpretation of prèet, and how do they reflect changing cultural and moral values? In what ways is prèet used across different genres, dialects, and social contexts to express criticism, satire, or identity? These questions aim to frame the investigation into how religious terminology, through metaphorical transformation, becomes embedded in the cultural mechanisms of moral judgment and social expression. The following section will provide a theoretical foundation for understanding these shifts through the lenses of semantic change and conceptual metaphor theory.

Theoretical background and literature review

This section provides a theoretical and contextual foundation for understanding the semantic and metaphorical transformation of prèet in Thai society. It is divided into three parts. The first explores the Traibhumi Phra Ruang, a 14th-century Thai Buddhist cosmological text that laid the ideological groundwork for how prèet has been conceptualized within religious and moral frameworks. The second part introduces Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), which serves as the primary analytical tool for tracing metaphorical structures embedded in language use. This is followed by a review of key linguistic theories of semantic shift, with special attention to mechanisms such as pejoration and recontextualization. Together, these three strands of literature provide a comprehensive lens through which the study analyzes how a sacred term rooted in cosmology has come to function as a linguistic tool of social critique in contemporary Thai discourse.

Traibhumi Phra Ruang. The *Traibhumi Phra Ruang*, a significant Buddhist text composed during the Sukhothai period (circa 1345 A.D.), is deeply embedded in the religious, political, and cultural landscape of the time. To understand its historical context, Wyatt's "*Thailand: A Short History*" (2003) offers a detailed exploration of the Sukhothai period, particularly focusing on the reign of King Lithai. Wyatt emphasizes how King Lithai strategically employed Theravāda Buddhism to consolidate his rule, intertwining religious cosmology with governance. This relationship between religion and politics positioned Buddhism not only as a spiritual practice but as a tool for reinforcing moral authority and legitimizing kingship. Further deepening our understanding of this connection, Coedès's "*The Indianized States of Southeast Asia*" (1975) examines the broader influence of Hindu-Buddhist cosmology in Southeast Asia, including the Sukhothai kingdom. Coedès highlights how the integration of these religious systems provided a framework for political power. The *Traibhumi Phra Ruang* is thus a reflection of this dynamic, where Sukhothai rulers, including King Lithai, drew on both Hindu and Buddhist cosmological ideas to reinforce their authority and shape governance structures.

On a more philosophical level, the *Traibhumi Phra Ruang* also serves as a key text for understanding Buddhist cosmological thought in Thailand. Swearer's "*The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia*" (2010) offers insight into how the cosmology of the three worlds and the concept of rebirth are fundamental to the moral and ethical discourse present in the *Traibhumi*. Swearer's analysis emphasizes how these Buddhist concepts were not just abstract ideas but played an essential role in shaping moral behavior and societal norms, particularly in guiding the conduct of rulers and their subjects. In addition to its local impact, the *Traibhumi Phra Ruang* is also part of a broader Buddhist literary tradition. Skilling's "*Geographies of Intertextuality: Buddhist Literature in Pre-modern Siam*" (2007) positions the text as a significant cultural artifact that reflects the intellectual and religious milieu of pre-modern Siam. Skilling highlights the *Traibhumi*'s engagement with transregional Buddhist thought and its role in transmitting Buddhist cosmology. The text's intertextual nature illustrates how Siamese Buddhist literature was both locally grounded and part of a wider network of Buddhist intellectual traditions.

In addition to examining *Traiphum Phra Ruang* within its social and historical context, several studies have approached the text using a literary methodology. Reynolds and Reynolds (1982), in "*Three Worlds According to King Ruang*," show that the text was composed to make the teachings of Buddhist scriptures more accessible to common Thai people. They assert that the text continues to serve as a primary vehicle for popular moral instruction, serving as a bridge between complex Buddhist doctrines and everyday life. This accessibility contributes to its lasting influence in Thai religious and cultural practice. A critical literary approach is presented by Padamalangula (2003) in "*The Play of Undecidability: A Deconstructive Analysis of "Traiphum Phra Ruang*." Applying Derrida's deconstructive criticism, Padamalangula explores how the text destabilizes traditional concepts such as center, hierarchy, and presence. By highlighting elements that are often overlooked, this analysis aligns with the Buddhist concept of "Anatta" (non-self), questioning fixed interpretations and inviting a more fluid understanding of the text.

Hilderbrand and Sritrakool (2021) conducted a comparative study of *Traiphum Phra Ruang* as a representation of Thai cosmology. They contrast it with the biblical divine council cosmology in an effort to produce a uniquely Thai theological concept. This approach emphasizes the text's broader significance in shaping Thai religious views and highlights its value in comparative theological studies. Even though there have been many literary analyses, there is still a big hole in specific studies about the idea of prèet in *Traiphum Phra Ruang*, especially about how it has shaped the vulgar meanings of the word in modern Thai society. Literary methods like deconstruction and comparative literature have been used to look at the text, but the full academic study of how *Traiphum* affected the development of the word "prèet" and its cultural meanings is still missing.

Mapping meaning: conceptual metaphors and the evolution of word semantics. Building on Bloomfield's (1933) foundational classification of semantic change—including processes such as broadening, narrowing, amelioration, and pejoration—this study situates the semantic evolution of prèet (เปรต) within a dynamic framework that reflects both pejoration and metaphorical transformation. Originally a morally charged but neutral term in Buddhist cosmology denoting tormented spirits suffering karmic punishment, prèet has shifted into an insult

embedded in contemporary critiques of greed, corruption, and social deviance.

Traugott and Dasher (2001) conceptualize semantic change as moving along clines—from concrete to abstract, from objective to subjective, and from descriptive to evaluative. In line with this trajectory, prèet has evolved from describing an eschatological entity to functioning as an expressive tool in everyday discourse. This trajectory exemplifies a broader linguistic and cultural process whereby metaphors grounded in religious cosmology are repurposed to critique moral behavior and social hierarchies.

Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980) provides a cognitive lens to examine how such transformations occur. Metaphors such as MORALITY IS CLEANLINESS, GOODNESS IS ELEVATION, and IMMORALITY IS FALLING shape how individuals interpret behavior in both spiritual and secular contexts. Kövecses (2010) emphasizes that metaphors are not mere linguistic ornaments but cognitive structures deeply embedded in cultural experience. In Thai, the Buddhist notion of rebirth into lower realms, exemplified by prèet, serves as a rich source domain for metaphorical mappings that depict moral failure as degradation.

More recently, Ahrens (2010) has developed the Conceptual Mapping Model, which identifies frequent pairings between source and target domains in conceptual metaphors using corpus-based data, emphasizes that culturally specific metaphor systems—such as those related to religious discourse—are structured through recurrent mappings grounded in local conceptual and linguistic practices. In the case of prèet, the metaphor MORAL FAILURE IS BEING A HUNGRY GHOST exemplifies how karmic imagery becomes lexicalized in modern Thai as a way to stigmatize greed, selfishness, or political corruption.

Reijnierse and Burgers (2023), through the MSDIP framework, show how metaphorical expressions in evaluative contexts become conventionalized through repeated use in media and public discourse. In Thai, the frequent appearance of prèet in political critique, social commentary, and youth slang illustrates how metaphorical pejoration can solidify into everyday communicative practice—reinforcing specific evaluative frames around morality and social deviance.

Goddard and Wierzbicka (2014) argue that terms rooted in religious or moral lexicons often reflect "cultural scripts"—socially shared understandings of proper behavior, hierarchy, and values. Prèet, in this sense, operates not only as a metaphorical extension but also as a vehicle for encoding normative judgments about morality, civility, and karmic consequence in Thai society. Its pejorative transformation reflects deeper shifts in the cultural discourse surrounding deviance and social regulation.

This analysis is further supported by cognitive theories such as prototype theory (Rosch, 1975), which explains how central examples influence category extension. In Buddhist cosmology, prèet prototypically embodies greed and suffering, which facilitates its semantic migration toward critiques of modern excess and corruption. Blending theory (Fauconnier and Turner, 2002) complements this view by illustrating how religious and social mental spaces are merged, allowing prèet to carry layered moral resonances.

Pejoration, as described by Bloomfield (1933), involves the development of increasingly negative connotations. In the case of prèet, this intensification is metaphorically driven. The modern usage reflects a shift from spiritual othering to social othering—marking individuals or behaviors as morally inferior or disruptive. This aligns with Culpeper's (1996) theory of impoliteness, in which language is used to violate social norms and assert moral superiority through symbolic degradation.

The metaphorical pejoration of prèet thus represents a convergence of religious imagery, cultural narrative, and linguistic transformation. As the term travels from sacred texts into digital communication, mass media, and casual speech, it reveals how metaphor functions not only as a cognitive device but also as a mechanism of social regulation. Like culturally specific terms such as witch, heretic, or asura, prèet becomes a discursive tool through which moral anxieties are expressed, contested, and negotiated. In sum, the evolution of prèet underscores the interdependence of metaphor, meaning, and morality. Through the lenses of conceptual metaphor theory, semantic change, and religious discourse, this study shows how language reflects and reproduces the shifting moral landscapes of Thai society.

The influence of Buddhist texts on Thai language and society. The study of Thai Buddhist texts and literature in premodern Siam reveals a rich tapestry of cultural and religious influences that shaped the region's intellectual and social history. Buddhism, particularly Theravada Buddhism, played a central role in the literary and cultural development of Siam, with Pali serving as a significant religious and semi-secular language. This linguistic choice underscores the deep cultural partnership between India and Thailand, as evidenced by the integration of Pali-Sanskrit and Cambodian linguistic elements into Thai language and literature (Barua, 2017). The Jataka tales, which recount the past lives of the Buddha, were a popular theme in Siamese literature and art, as seen in the samut khoi manuscripts, which combined narrative and visual storytelling to communicate Buddhist teachings (Appleton, 2013). The idea of barami, or moral perfection, comes from Theravada Buddhist thought. It shows how religious and cultural stories were mixed in early Thai literature (Jory, 2002; Sheravanichkul, 2009). The influence of Buddhism extended beyond religious texts, as the Pali Tipitaka became a cornerstone of Thai wisdom, challenging Western scientific paradigms and contributing to a unique epistemological framework that emphasized moral and spiritual truths (Promta, 2002).

Moreover, Buddhist texts, particularly those written in Pali, have profoundly shaped Thai language, culture, and societal structures, serving as cornerstones for religious, cultural, and intellectual growth. As the scriptural language of Theravada Buddhism, Pali has facilitated religious and semi-secular communication in Thailand. Foundational texts like the Jataka Tales and the Tipitaka are deeply embedded in Thai Buddhist literature, guiding moral education, cultural expression, and ethical norms (Barua, 2017). This religious and linguistic base has helped bring different cultures together. For example, Pali words have mixed with Sanskrit and Khmer, showing a long history of cultural exchange with India and other nearby areas (Barua, 2017). The Pali Canon, pivotal to Thai Buddhism, holds normative authority and has sparked hermeneutic debates, shaping Thai Theravada Buddhism's conservative identity (Seeger, 2010).

Historically, the dissemination of Buddhist texts in Thailand blended oral and written traditions. Manuscript culture grew in places like Lan Na, where written records backed up the oral transmission of Buddhist teachings. This was a characteristic of the Theravada approach, which, unlike Mahāyāna traditions, was cautious about written scripture (Veidlinger, 2006). Moreover, the Pali Tipitaka has functioned as more than a religious text. It has influenced Thai society's philosophical and scientific discourses, standing as a counterbalance to Western paradigms on development (Promta, 2002). The doctrine of the dhammarāja (righteous king) exemplifies the integration of Buddhist principles into Thai constitutional thought, cementing Buddhism's role in Thailand's political and legal frameworks (Mérieau, 2018). This doctrine

aligns the king's role with moral duty and reinforces Buddhism's prominence in national identity.

In the reviewed literature, it is evident that there has been little to no prior research focusing specifically on the conceptual evolution of prèet and its shift from a term associated with Buddhist cosmology to one of vulgarity in contemporary Thai society. While existing studies have explored the general significance of Thai Buddhist texts, especially Traibhumi Phra Ruang, and their place in Thai moral teachings, few have examined the transformation of prèet through a conceptual metaphor analysis, particularly in the context of its evolving cultural connotations. This gap in research highlights the need for a focused investigation into how prèet has moved from its original, religiously significant meaning to a term used to convey disdain or moral judgment in modern Thai vernacular. This absence of comprehensive studies on the topic has inspired me to undertake this research, aiming to provide new insights into the semantic and cultural shifts surrounding prèet in Thai society.

Material and methods
This study adopts a multidisciplinary approach to analyze the semantic change and conceptual metaphor of the word prèet in Thai society. It combines textual analysis of historical sources with corpus-based data to trace the evolution and metaphorical use of prèet in modern discourse.

Textual analysis. The first phase involves a close reading of Traibhumi Phra Ruang, a foundational Buddhist cosmological text by King Mahadhammaraja Lithai, which contains the earliest depictions of prèet. This analysis, guided by Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) metaphor theory, explores how metaphors shape cultural thought. Additional Buddhist texts were consulted to deepen understanding of prèet's associations with moral transgressions and karmic retribution.

Corpus-based analysis. The second phase utilizes the Thai National Corpus (TNC), Third Edition, compiled by the Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University, to examine contemporary uses of prèet across diverse genres.

Data collection and coding.

1. Search Strategy: the keyword prèet was queried across all corpus categories.
2. Selection Criteria: 215 relevant instances were extracted, focusing on metaphorical, social, or cultural contexts.
3. Categorization: each instance was coded by genre, context, and co-occurring language patterns to identify semantic shifts.

The results show a predominant use in non-academic and fictional texts, suggesting a shift toward metaphorical and cultural applications of prèet. Only 18.14% appeared in academic contexts, with no usage in legal documents. Of the 215 instances, 174 demonstrated metaphorical or culturally extended meanings and were selected for conceptual metaphor analysis. Table 1 presents the detailed distribution.

Identifying conceptual metaphors. To ensure analytical clarity, the following criteria were used:

1. Inclusion: figurative uses framing prèet as moral corruption, social deviance, inequality, or critique.
2. Exclusion: literal uses grounded in Buddhist doctrine, folklore, or historical references without metaphorical extension.

Table 1 summarizes the frequency distribution of prèet across genres.

Category	Occurrences	Percentage
Fiction	44	20.47%
Newspaper	20	9.30%
Non-Academic	101	46.98%
Academic	39	18.14%
Law	0	0%
Miscellaneous	11	5.12%
Total	215	100%

Conceptual metaphor analysis. To identify metaphorical uses of prèet, this study employed the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIPVU) (Steen et al., 2010). Each lexical unit was analyzed by (1) determining its contextual meaning, (2) identifying its more basic, literal meaning, and (3) comparing the two for contrast and possible metaphorical mapping. Expressions meeting these criteria were grouped into conceptual domains and analyzed for source–target structure, resulting in four dominant metaphors discussed in section "Conceptual Metaphors and the Evolution of prèet".

Rationale. The integration of historical and corpus-based methods aligns with established practices in linguistic and cultural studies (Biber et al., 1999; Gries, 2013). Textual analysis uncovers traditional meanings, while corpus data offers empirical insights into contemporary usage.

Results and discussion
The influence of *Thri Bhumi Phra Ruang* in Thai society. *Tribhumi Phra Ruang*, also known as *Traiphumikatha* or "*The Concept of Three Worlds by King Ruang*," is a significant literary work in Thai culture written by King Lithai of Sukhothai, also known as King Ruang, in the 14th century around 1345 by King Lithai (King Mahadhammaraja 1st). This text influences Thai worldview and thought (Sritrakool and Hilderbrand, 2021, pp. 10-11). This book offers a reinterpretation of the worldview and cosmology of Theravada Buddhism, as presented in the Buddhist Scriptures (Tripitaka or Pali Canon), but in a more organized and structured format. The story describes the 31 levels of the three worlds and outlines a Buddhist cosmology consisting of three primary realms or worlds: Kama Bhumi (the Sensual World), Rupa Bhumi (the Form World), and Arupa Bhumi (the Formless World). Kama Bhumi is the realm of desire and sensual pleasure, encompassing humans, animals, certain deities, and hell beings, all driven by physical and emotional needs and caught in the cycle of samsara (birth, death, and rebirth). Above this is the Rupa Bhumi, a more refined and peace realm that heaven where beings who having overcome coarse sensual desires, possess subtle, as called Rupa Brama, ethereal forms as a result of their advanced mental and spiritual discipline. Above is Arupa Bhumi is the highest realm. It is where formless beings live in pure mental and spiritual consciousness. They have gone beyond physical existence through advanced meditation and spiritual realization (King Mahadhammaraja Lithai, 2012; Phonpho, 2014, p. 1354).

The text Traibhumi Phra Ruang serves as a detailed account of Buddhist cosmology, composed to make the teachings of the Buddhist Scriptures more accessible to common Thai people (Reynolds and Reynolds, 1982, p. 25). This text emphasizes the concepts of karma and rebirth, illustrating how beings are reborn into different realms based on their actions and karma (Sritrakool

and Hilderbrand, 2021, p.10). It functions as a moral guide, encouraging virtuous living, meditation, and the pursuit of enlightenment, showing that good deeds lead to higher rebirths, while immoral actions result in suffering in lower realms. As one of the earliest known Thai literary works, Tri Bhumi Phra Ruang is considered a classic of Thai literature, reflecting the synthesis of local beliefs with Theravada Buddhist teachings. It demonstrates the influence of both Indian and Southeast Asian religious traditions on Thai culture, making it an essential text for understanding the religious and philosophical worldview of the Sukhothai Kingdom and the broader Buddhist cosmological framework (Swearer, 1991, p. 654; Sangkhamanee, 2007, pp. 17–18). The Traibhumi Phra Ruang, as a value Buddhist text, has had a profound influence on Thai culture in various aspects, including, politics, moral values, beliefs, visual arts, and literature.

First, Traibhumi Phra Ruang framework played a crucial role in shaping Thai political and moral structures, particularly through the concept of the Dhammaraja (righteous ruler) and the ideal of the Phra Maha Chakraphaddiraja, or the Great Universal Emperor. The Traibhumi emphasizes the king's role as both a moral and spiritual leader, whose governance is directly linked to his merit and ethical conduct. In the Sukhothai period, this concept became central to kingship, positioning the king as not only a temporal ruler but also a guardian of Buddhist principles and moral order. The king's righteousness and merit were believed to directly influence the prosperity of the kingdom, reinforcing the notion that a ruler's actions in the material world have spiritual consequences, both for themselves and their subjects (Boonprasat-Lewis, 1982; Lowe, 2023).

Second, the Traibhumi concept is serving as a moral guide that shapes individual and collective behavior. The detailed portrayal of the realms within the Traibhumi—especially the hell realms—helps to reinforce ethical conduct by illustrating the consequences of actions. By dividing the world into realms of suffering, pleasure, and spiritual purity, the Traibhumi framework encourages Thai people to strive for virtuous behavior and avoid indulgence in base desires. This division supports the development of key ethical values such as kindness, honesty, and compassion, urging individuals to cultivate good deeds and avoid negative ones.

The vivid descriptions of hell in the Traibhumi serve as a powerful deterrent against immoral behavior. These depictions of the suffering souls experience in hell make it clear that unethical actions, such as lying, stealing, or causing harm to others, lead to serious karmic consequences. The fear of falling into hell, enduring endless suffering, and being punished for one's sins compels individuals to reflect on their actions and align themselves with moral principles. By emphasizing the possibility of karmic retribution, the Traibhumi reinforces the notion that virtuous behavior not only brings personal benefit but also helps maintain social harmony. As such, the Traibhumi plays a central role in supporting ethical standards within Thai society, encouraging individuals to live righteous lives out of both a sense of moral duty and fear of the spiritual consequences of their actions.

Beyond illustrating the consequences of good and bad deeds, "Tri Bhumi Phra Ruang" has significantly impacted Thai literature, art, and architecture (Duchanee, 2018; Phonpho, 2014, p.1354). Its depiction of the various realms within the Buddhist's cosmology of existence has inspired temple murals, sculptures, and other artistic representations that depict scenes from the text, making it a vital part of Thailand's artistic heritage. Phonpho (2014, pp.1345-1346) asserted that formerly, architects based their layouts of temples and palaces on descriptions of heaven in the Traibhumi. Moreover, the temples often use these images to educate laypeople about Buddhist cosmology, creating a

visual narrative that supports the teachings found in the Traibhumi text (Yian, 2015).

Additionally, the Traibhumi Phra Ruang has profoundly influenced Thai literary traditions. As one of the earliest Thai literary texts, it stands as a cornerstone in Thai literary history, shaping the works of subsequent generations of writers and poets (Khwanthong, 2022; Sujjapun, 2014). The Traibhumi Phra Ruang has left a lasting impact on Thai literature, providing a foundation for later Buddhist and moral works. A notable example is Phra Malai, written during the late Ayutthaya period (1737 A.D.), a key text in Thai Buddhist literature that details a monk's journey through the heavens and hells, directly inspired by the cosmological and ethical themes in the Traibhumi Phra Ruang. Furthermore, literature from both the late Ayutthaya and early Rattanakosin periods reflects the influence of the Traibhumi Phra Ruang, particularly in its portrayal of mystical landscapes like the Himmapan forest. The text's depiction of cosmic elements, such as Phra Sumaen Mountain, was often used symbolically to represent intimate scenes between characters. In addition, protagonists in later Thai literature were frequently portrayed with regal qualities. For instance, the male protagonist in Litlitt Phra Lor is compared to a majestic lion (Kraisorn), symbolizing majestic and power similar to the lion described in the Himmapan forest of the Traibhumi.

In Thai culture, the metaphorical use of the Traibhumi Phra Ruang framework extends into proverbs or phrases, where the various realms are used symbolically to describe human traits and behavior. For instance, individuals who are graceful, virtuous, and embody positive qualities are often compared to Devas, the celestial beings residing in the higher realms (Sukhatibhumi). This comparison highlights their esteemed character, appearance, and spiritual elevation. Conversely, those who exhibit undesirable traits or engage in malevolent actions are likened to beings in the lower realms (Dukkhatibhumi), such as hungry ghosts or animals, symbolizing their moral and spiritual shortcomings. In Tribhumi Phra Ruang, the Dukkatibhumi realms, or "Realms of Suffering," specifically refer to states of existence marked by dissatisfaction and hardship, which result from negative karma. These realms illustrate the Buddhist concept of Dukkha, which encompasses the pervasive nature of suffering and the unsatisfactory nature of existence. The text categorizes the Dukkha realms into several key categories, including the Hell Realm (Naraka or Narók), the Hungry Ghosts Realm (Preta or Prèet), the Animal Realm (Tiracchāna), and the Beast Realm (Asura). This association is reflected in Thai idioms that liken immoral individuals to animals in the realms of suffering, for example, those who curse their father or strike their mother are believed to be reborn as prèet (beings in the Hungry Ghosts Realm). At times, the names of beings in the Dukkhatibhumi, such as ghosts (phee) and prèet, are used as vulgar terms to insult or criticize individuals who are perceived as bad or disliked.

In summary, Traibhumi Phra Ruang, also known as The Concept of Three Worlds by King Ruang, is a foundational 14th-century Thai text written by King Lithai that profoundly influenced Thai culture, literature, politics, and art. This text organizes Theravada Buddhist cosmology into 31 realms across the three worlds—Kama Bhumi (Sensual World), Rupa Bhumi (Form World), and Arupa Bhumi (Formless World)—with a moral structure where beings' rebirths depend on their karma. Serving as a moral guide, Traibhumi promoted virtuous conduct, meditation, and the concept of kingship as dhammaraja (righteous ruler), linking governance with Buddhist ethics and shaping Thai kingship and moral expectations. Its framework inspired temple architecture, murals, and literary works like Phra Malai and late-era literature depicting symbolic mystical realms like the Himmapan forest. Additionally, it shaped Thai proverbs, likening

virtuous individuals to devas in higher realms and immoral individuals to animals or hungry ghosts in the lower realms, reflecting Buddhist values and moral teachings through its cosmological and ethical imagery.

The concept of prèet in Thai society. In this section, the research will show the origins of the term prèet and its development within Thai society. The study will explore how the term, initially neutral and associated with the departed or ancestors, has evolved over time into a term that carries various connotations, highlighting how the term has come to be used in different social contexts in contemporary Thailand.

Historical roots of the word 'Prèet' in Thai society. The concept of prèet in Thai society has linguistic roots. It is derived from the Pali peta and the Sanskrit preta, which originally meant "departed one" or "spirit of the deceased." The Buddhist Dictionary by Nyanatiloka Mahathera (2006) defines peta as a departed spirit or ghost. According to Sirivun (1993), the meaning of prèet by conducting a morphological analysis of the term peta in the view of Pali language scholars. He concluded that it encompasses three core interpretations.

(1) Peta refers to "one who has gone to the next world," (2) Pret refers to "one who has reached a state far removed from happiness," and (3) Prèet refers to "one who has departed from well-being or bliss."

Historically, in the Thai language, this term held a respectful connotation, associated with ancestral rites and rituals that honor the dead. This is evident in expressions like petapali (เปตพลี), which translates to "offering made for the departed" (Office of the Royal Society, 2011), and pubbapetapali, which refers to acts of merit dedicated to ancestors or deceased relatives (Office of the Royal Society, 2011). These terms reflect a tradition of moral responsibility and familial reverence, emphasizing the importance of generating and transferring merit to those who have passed away—an act believed to positively influence the spiritual progress of the deceased.

Especially in Southern Thailand, particularly during the annual merit-making event known as the "Bun Duean Sip" (Merit-Making Festival of the Tenth Lunar Month), additional terms and practices surrounding "prèet" reflect the regional adaptations of Buddhist rituals for honoring ancestors. Two prominent terms, "Tang Prèet" (ตั้งเปรต) (Setting offerings to the Prèet) and "Ching Prèet" (ชิงเปรต) (Snatching the Prèet Offerings for auspicious fortune, bringing prosperity to one's self and family). These highlight how the memory and honor of the deceased are celebrated and symbolized during this festival. Foods arranged during "Tang Prèet" typically include five types of traditional sweets, fruits, and other dishes favored by the departed relatives. This selection aims to invoke the spirit of the ancestors, providing them with sustenance and symbolizing the care and respect held by their descendants. Through these unique Southern Thai traditions, "prèet" reflects both ancestral reverence and the playful, communal aspect of merit-making practices. The ritual merges spiritual devotion with community bonding, highlighting the role of ancestral veneration in Buddhist practices across southern Thailand.

The evolution of the term 'Prèet' in Thai society. Although the term prèet originally was not a vulgar or derogatory word but rather a neutral term referring to the departed, often associated with ancestors. However, the portrayal of prèet began to shift, particularly as described in texts like *Traibhumi Phra Ruang*, prèet are spirits who suffer in the lower realms as a consequence of negative karma, often depicted with distorted physical forms—

elongated necks, massive stomachs, and tiny mouths (King Mahadhammaraja Lithai, 2012). This gross imagery is a strong representation of unfulfilled desires and spiritual torment. It shows the results of too much attachment, greed, or bad behavior in a past life (King Mahadhammaraja Lithai, 2012). As prèet, these beings experience relentless suffering, unable to satisfy their hunger or thirst, embodying the moral and karmic repercussions of indulgent or unethical behavior (King Mahadhammaraja Lithai, 2012). In this way, the depiction of prèet aligns with Buddhist teachings about the dangers of desire and the necessity of self-restraint, encouraging individuals to avoid greed and other vices that could lead to rebirth in such a pitiable state.

In contemporary Thai society, the term prèet has significantly diverged from its original Buddhist context, evolving into a vulgar term used to criticize or mock individuals for various perceived negative traits. Today, calling someone a prèet is generally intended as an insult, often directed at those seen as excessively greedy, inappropriately behaving, or possessing an unattractive physique. For instance, a very tall person may be described as "tall like a prèet" (สูงเหมือนเปรต), while someone extremely thin, with visible bones, might be said to be "thin like a prèet" (ผอมเหมือนเปรต) or "starved like a prèet" (อดอยากเหมือนเปรต). If a person displays extreme greed or gluttony, it's commonly said they "eat like a prèet" (กินเหมือนเปรต). While any man who indulges in pornography will be scolded as a pervert as prèet (ลามกจกเปรต), which means pornographic or indecent. Moreover, the term is also used to describe shameless pursuit of wealth or disruptive behavior, comparing such individuals to a prèet. Furthermore, the term sometimes appears alongside phee (ผี), meaning ghost, as in phee-prèet, to depict someone as bothersome or intrusive, such as when someone seeking constant attention is likened to "a phee-prèet coming to ask for merit" (ผีเปรตมาขอส่วนบุญ).

This shift in usage highlights how prèet has transformed from a term which means "depart" or "a person who has passed away" to a vulgar metaphor. By invoking prèet in this way, Thai society conveys cultural disapproval of certain behaviors or physical appearances, using the image of the suffering spirit as a metaphor for inappropriate behaviors like greed, gluttony, or selfishness. In summary, the evolution of the concept of "prèet" in Thai society showcases a rich tapestry of cultural, linguistic, and religious transformations that reflect broader shifts in societal values and beliefs.

The semantic change and conceptual metaphor of the word prèet in Thai society. Originally rooted in Buddhist cosmology, the term prèet (เปรต) referred to a tormented spirit—typically a towering, emaciated ghost condemned to suffer insatiable hunger as karmic retribution for moral transgressions in a past life. Within this religious framework, prèet functioned as a moral exemplar, reinforcing Buddhist concepts of sin and karmic justice. However, contemporary usage data reveals a marked semantic shift, whereby prèet has undergone both semantic broadening and pejoration, extending its referential range far beyond spiritual contexts while intensifying its negative valence.

Semantic broadening and pejoration. This transformation is evident across a variety of sociolinguistic domains, particularly in online discourse, media, and everyday conversation. No longer confined to describing supernatural entities, prèet now operates as a versatile insult, deployed to characterize individuals, behaviors, and even abstract concepts perceived as deviant, grotesque, or morally reprehensible. Consider the following corpus-derived examples:

Example (1) Moral Condemnation in Criminal Contexts

"Ecstasy, love drugs, ketamine filled the room… and the parents of these prèet kids"…
("ยาอี ยาเลิฟ ยาเค เต็มห้อง… แล้วพ่อแม่ไอ้เปรตกลุ่มนี้…").

In this instance, prèt is applied to delinquent youths involved in drug-related activity. Detached from its religious connotation, the term marks these individuals as not merely lawbreaking but morally repugnant—an echo of the karmic condemnation originally associated with the spirit world.

Example (2) Sarcastic Usage in Domestic Interactions

"The girl ignored the comment… 'Confused? Confused about what? Prèt child!'"
("เด็กหญิงไม่สนใจ… งงบ้างงบออะไร เด็กเปรต!").

Here, prèt functions as a domestic insult, amplifying irritation toward a child's perceived disobedience. While the tone is exasperated rather than fearful, the supernatural imagery underscores the extremity of the scolding, demonstrating how religious lexicon is repurposed in everyday affective discourse.

Example (3) Playful Insults Among Peers

"These prèt kids are really causing him trouble."
("ไอ้เด็กเปรตพวกนี้หาเรื่องให้เขาลำบากจริงๆ เชียว").

The term is invoked here less harshly, in a teasing but still derogatory tone. Although not meant literally, prèt retains negative connotations of trouble and disorder, showing how the term permeates casual language while maintaining its stigmatizing force.

Example (4) Dramatic Exaggeration in Media and Entertainment

"What kind of prèt ghost game is this!"
("เกมผีเปรตอะไรกันวะเนี่ย!").

In this hyperbolic expression of frustration, prèt is used figuratively to dramatize confusion or horror. The grotesque imagery of prèt heightens emotional response, marking the term's evolution into a stylized narrative device within entertainment discourse.

These diverse applications illustrate that prèt has undergone semantic broadening: from a supernatural figure to a catch-all slur for people, machines, or institutions deemed undesirable. Simultaneously, it exemplifies pejoration in the sense of Bloomfield (1933), where the term accrues harsher and more derogatory connotations over time. The term no longer evokes spiritual pity but instead functions as a secular insult— weaponized to assert social disdain.

Moreover, this development aligns with Traugott and Dasher's (2001) concept of subjectification, whereby meanings evolve to reflect the speaker's stance or attitude. The modern use of prèt expresses contempt, mockery, or frustration, often in emotionally charged and performative contexts. This is further reinforced through invited inferencing, as repeated metaphorical usage in expressive contexts becomes conventionalized, cementing the term's derogatory status in everyday speech.

Comparatively, similar trajectories can be observed in other religiously rooted terms such as witch, heretic, or ghost in Western contexts, or asura (อสูร) and Chinese gui (鬼) in Asian cultures—where religious imagery bleeds into colloquial pejoration. Such parallels highlight a broader linguistic phenomenon wherein spiritual lexicon becomes secularized and instrumentalized for social critique.

In sum, the trajectory of prèt—from eschatological entity to expressive insult—offers a vivid illustration of how semantic change interweaves with discourse, ideology, and power. The word evolution not only exemplifies linguistic processes of broadening and pejoration but also reveals the cultural mechanisms through which language encodes marginality and moral judgment in contemporary Thai society.

Conceptual metaphors and the evolution of prèt. The evolution of prèt reflects not only semantic shifts but also the cultural power of conceptual metaphors in shaping moral discourse. Based on 174 metaphorical instances identified in the Thai National Corpus (TNC), four dominant conceptual metaphors emerged, ranked by frequency: SOCIAL DEVIANCE IS MONSTROSITY, MORAL FAILURE IS DEGRADATION, GREED IS HUNGER, and SPIRITUAL LIMINALITY IS MONSTROSITY. These metaphors, grounded in Buddhist cosmology and reinforced by cultural narratives, encapsulate the shift of prèt from a religious figure to a secular moral symbol.

Social deviance is monstrosity: This is the most frequently occurring metaphor in the dataset, accounting for 53 (30.46%) of metaphorical uses of prèt. It reflects the perception of prèt as a symbol of social non-conformity. In Buddhist mythology, prèt are visually depicted as monstrous beings—unnaturally tall, emaciated, with tiny mouths and distended bellies—symbolizing their karmic punishment for previous moral failings. Their grotesque form does not merely signal physical abnormality, but a profound departure from the human condition and the moral community. In modern discourse, prèt is invoked to describe individuals who disrupt social harmony, suggesting that deviating from social norms is not just inappropriate but grotesque.

Example (5)

"…These prèt kids really cause trouble for others."
("…แล้วคิดในใจว่าไอ้เด็กเปรตพวกนี้หาเรื่องให้เขาลำบาก จริงๆ").

This excerpt is taken from a contemporary Thai novel and occurs within a dialogue in which a character expresses frustration toward a group of children who are causing disruptions. The context of the scene involves the character being negatively affected by the children's unruly behavior—such as making noise in public or creating disturbances that trouble others. Here, the term prèt is not used in its traditional Buddhist sense but rather as a metaphorical insult aimed at condemning the children's antisocial behavior.

The phrase "เด็ก เปรต" (dek prèt, literally "prèt kids") demonstrates a shift from the original religious domain, where prèt refers to suffering spirits in Buddhist cosmology, to a contemporary usage that signifies moral deviation or social deviance. The speaker uses the grotesque imagery associated with prèt associated with prèt to emphasize that these children are not merely disobedient but profoundly outside the bounds of acceptable social behavior. This is illustrated in Table 2.

By invoking prèt, the speaker dehumanizes the children, equating their behavior with something monstrous or morally fallen. This use of religious imagery as metaphor intensifies the social judgment embedded in the insult. The metaphor does not merely condemn misbehavior but symbolically casts the subject beyond the boundaries of moral citizenship—reflecting a culturally sanctioned mechanism of exclusion from the social and ethical order.

Moral failure is degradation: Representing 47 instances (27.01%) of the metaphorical uses of prèt, this conceptual metaphor reflects the mapping of moral corruption onto a framework of degradation and spiritual decline. In Buddhist cosmology, prèt are beings condemned to exist in a state of extreme suffering due to past immoral deeds. In the cosmological hierarchy, prèt occupy a liminal spiritual plane—below the human realm but above hell-beings (naraka)—signifying a marked descent from moral agency to karmic subjugation. Their appearance—emaciated bodies, grotesque forms, and inability to satiate hunger or

Table 2 The metaphor aligns with the conceptual mapping: SOCIAL DEVIANCE IS MONSTROSITY.	
Source domain	**Target domain**
The prèet figure in Buddhist cosmology, characterized by unnatural appearance—extremely tall, emaciated, with a tiny mouth—and condemned to a realm of suffering as karmic punishment. This grotesque imagery signals a being that exists outside the moral and natural order.	Socially deviant behavior, particularly actions that disrupt communal norms or cause harm to others.

Table 3 The metaphor aligns with the conceptual mapping: MORAL FAILURE IS DEGRADATION.	
Source Domain	**Target Domain**
The degraded, tormented existence of prèet in Buddhist cosmology—beings suffering the karmic consequences of their unethical actions, marked by their grotesque physical appearance, insatiable desires, and status in the lowest spiritual realms.	Real individuals who engage in morally condemned behavior (e.g., drug use, crime, dishonor), viewed as having "fallen" from moral grace or social respectability.

thirst—serves as a symbolic representation of karmic punishment and spiritual debasement.

In contemporary Thai discourse, prèet has undergone a semantic shift that exemplifies pejoration (Bloomfield, 1933), whereby its meaning becomes increasingly negative. From its original religious reference to beings in a suffering realm, prèet is now metaphorically deployed to mark individuals as morally fallen, socially condemned, or spiritually degraded.

Example (6)

"What will the girl's parents say? And the parents of these prèets—I've dug up all their names!"
("ยาอี ยาเลิฟ ยาเค เต็มห้อง พ่อแม่ผู้หญิงจะว่าไงนี่ แล้วพ่อแม่ไอ้เปรตกลุ่มนี้ นี่ผมเค้นจนได้ชื่อมาหมดแล้วนะครับ").

This excerpt appears in a novel entitle: แม้นรกมากั้น (Even if hell blocks) (Sirisingha, 2008) during a scene where a character discovers a stash of illicit drugs—ecstasy (ยาอี), love drug (ยาเลิฟ), and ketamine (ยาเค)—in a room associated with a group of morally compromised youths. The speaker, visibly outraged, condemns these individuals by referring to them as prèet, a term that—while once a religious category—now connotes shame, spiritual pollution, and familial disgrace.

Here, the metaphor draws a direct link between moral misconduct (in this case, drug abuse) and spiritual degradation. The speaker does not merely critique the individuals' behavior; they symbolically demote them to a subhuman or degraded spiritual status, invoking the imagery of the prèet to heighten the severity of moral judgment. This is illustrated in Table 3.

This metaphor thus performs powerful social and cultural work: it constructs a boundary between acceptable and unacceptable behavior, reasserts traditional moral hierarchies, and leverages religious imagery to reinforce societal norms. By conceptualizing immoral individuals as prèet, language serves to morally dehumanize them, portraying them not just as errant citizens but as spiritually lost beings deserving of scorn.

The cognitive and cultural significance of this mapping is consistent with Traugott and Dasher's (2001) framework of semantic change, particularly the tendency toward evaluative and subjective meanings. The use of prèet in this context reflects the shift from a descriptive religious term to a highly evaluative social insult—one grounded in both moral and emotional judgment.

Furthermore, the metaphor aligns with Goddard and Wierzbicka's (2014) notion of cultural scripts, where moral worth is often collectively assessed and strongly linked to family reputation. The speaker's concern about the parents of the prèet youth underscores how individual moral failure is culturally framed as a source of shame extending to the familial and communal level.

Thus, the metaphor MORAL FAILURE IS DEGRADATION captures a deep interplay between linguistic expression, cultural morality, and the enduring symbolic power of religious imagery. In contemporary Thai, prèet serves not only as a metaphor but as a moral verdict—a linguistic mechanism through which social values are communicated, reinforced, and policed. It functions not merely as an insult but as a culturally sanctioned mechanism of spiritual exclusion and social banishment—casting the labeled individual as unworthy of moral belonging and pushing them beyond the limits of communal redemption.

Greed is hunger: This metaphor, which accounts for 38 instances (21.84%) of metaphorical uses of prèet, embodies a core Buddhist principle: that greed—lobha (โลภะ)—is a root cause of karmic suffering. In religious discourse, prèet are often portrayed as beings cursed with an insatiable hunger as punishment for their greed and stinginess in previous lives. Their grotesque forms—with needle-thin necks and distended bellies—symbolize the futility of endless craving and attachment to material wealth.

Example (7)

"The monk said that when one dies one must be reborn as a hungry ghost due to one's own greed… This is something to think about because no matter how much a hungry ghost consumes, it is never enough."
("พระท่านว่าตายแล้วต้องไปเกิดเป็นเปรตด้วยจิตโลภของตัวเอง…เรื่องนี้น่าคิดเพราะเปรตเสพเท่าไรก็ไม่พอ").

This example is drawn from a semi-autobiographical historical documentary titled Chiwit Nai Wang ("Life in the Palace") by M.L. Nueang Nilrat (Nilrat, 2009). In this passage, the narrator recounts a real-life experience involving an encounter with a prèet. She explains how she interpreted the ghost's appearance as a plea for help and decided to offer assistance. She reflects on the Buddhist teaching that those who are overly attached to material possessions and fail to engage in acts of generosity are condemned to rebirth as prèet. The monk's words emphasize that such a fate is not arbitrary but karmically earned—driven by inner greed. The prèet, despite their suffering, are unable to consume or find satisfaction, symbolizing the unquenchable nature of desire.

Here, the metaphor is not only grounded in doctrinal Buddhist thought but is also personalized through narrative and emotional engagement. The speaker's moral reflection invites the audience to critically examine their own relationship with wealth, generosity, and spiritual practice. This is illustrated in Table 4.

This metaphor highlights the futility and self-destructive nature of unchecked desire. Just as the prèet is doomed to endless consumption without satisfaction, so too is the greedy

Table 4 The metaphor aligns with the conceptual mapping: GREED IS HUNGER.	
Source Domain	**Target Domain**
The physical experience of cursed, insatiable hunger, as suffered by the prèet—figures whose grotesque, emaciated forms reflect punishment for greed and lack of generosity.	The psychological and moral state of human greed—especially the desire for material accumulation without satisfaction, and the social-ethical condemnation of hoarding and selfishness.

Table 5 The metaphor aligns with the conceptual mapping: SPIRITUAL LIMINALITY IS MONSTROSITY.	
Source Domain	**Target Domain**
Prèet as a restless spirit—physically grotesque, spiritually bound, emotionally unresolved, symbolizing death without release.	Human behavior that resists closure—social, emotional, or spiritual imbalance (e.g., obsessive attachment, disruptive mourning, excessive emotional display).

Table 6 Frequency of Conceptual Metaphors of prèet.			
No.	**Conceptual Metaphor**	**Occurrences**	**Percentage (%)**
1	SOCIAL DEVIANCE IS MONSTROSITY	53	30.46%
2	MORAL FAILURE IS DEGRADATION	47	27.01%
3	GREED IS HUNGER	38	21.84%
4	IMBALANCE IS MONSTROSITY	36	20.69%
	Total	174	100.00%

person caught in a cycle of craving that ultimately leads to spiritual ruin. The speaker's reference to a monk's teaching further legitimizes the metaphor as a culturally and religiously grounded warning.

Aligned with Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) foundational claim that abstract concepts (e.g., morality, desire) are understood via concrete experience (e.g., physical hunger), this metaphor exemplifies how religious and cognitive frameworks intersect. It also reinforces Traugott and Dasher's (2001) model of meaning change through subjective evaluation: prèet no longer merely denotes a mythological being, but becomes a linguistic tool to express moral judgment against greed and selfishness.

The narrative structure of this example—combining religious authority, lived experience, and reflection—demonstrates the enduring power of metaphor to shape moral discourse in Thai culture. It suggests that metaphorical language not only describes but prescribes ethical behavior by mapping individual conduct onto cosmological consequences. Ultimately, the metaphor GREED IS HUNGER not only encapsulates karmic logic but also exemplifies how metaphor bridges doctrinal belief and vernacular moral critique in Thai society.

Spiritual liminality is monstrosity: This metaphor, accounting for 36 (20.69%) of metaphorical instances, conceptualizes prèet as a figure trapped in a state of spiritual liminality—neither fully alive nor fully dead, neither here nor beyond. In Buddhist cosmology, prèet represents beings who, due to unresolved karma or attachment, fail to be reborn and linger grotesquely in a distorted state of being. Their tall, thin, and eerie form becomes not merely a physical monstrosity, but a symbol of emotional, moral, or spiritual imbalance.

In everyday discourse, calling someone prèet implies that they are not just socially inappropriate but existentially disordered—behaving in ways that are excessive, erratic, or disturbingly out of sync with social and moral norms. The metaphor highlights a condition of being "out of place," akin to the prèet's liminal and restless existence.

Example (8)

"His speech and behavior were just like that of a prèet in the middle of the day."
("วาจาและท่าทางไม่ผิดอะไรกับอีเปรตเมื่อกลางวันนั่นเลย").

This example comes from a documentary study on the legend of Mae Nak Phra Khanong (Nawigamune, 2009), which analyzes three lesser-known versions of the Mae Nak story. The quoted line refers to a ghost—Mae Nak—who died during childbirth but refused to move on, instead haunting her village. The comparison to prèet here invokes not only grotesqueness, but also the unnatural state of lingering between life and death, a soul caught in limbo due to unresolved attachments. This comparison emphasizes the grotesqueness and inappropriateness of the character's behavior—"like a prèet in daylight"—which metaphorically conveys a state of dissonance with the natural social order. This mapping aligns with the metaphor: SPIRITUAL LIMINALITY IS MONSTROSITY, as shown below in Table 5.

This layered metaphor reflects a broader cultural anxiety about boundaries—between life and death, propriety and excess, order and chaos. In invoking prèet, the discourse not only mocks performative extremity but warns of the karmic consequences of not "letting go."

The selection of these four metaphors was informed by both the conceptual salience of the prèet figure in Thai religious cosmology and its discursive recontextualization in everyday language. As Ahrens (2010) and Reijnierse and Burgers (2023) argue, metaphors become entrenched when they align with culturally familiar source domains—such as hunger, deformity, or descent—and when they are reinforced through frequent public use.

These findings demonstrate that the evolution of prèet is not only a case of semantic broadening and pejoration, but also of metaphorical reconfiguration rooted in cultural scripts and reinforced through repeated communicative acts. The metaphorical deployment of prèet reflects broader processes of moral regulation, social evaluation, and linguistic adaptation, illustrating the dynamic interplay between language, religion, and society in modern Thai culture. This is illustrated in Table 6.

Overall, the semantic change of ordinary words into vulgar expressions under the influence of religious texts is a multifaceted phenomenon rooted in the interplay of cultural, social, and linguistic evolution. Dunai's (2008) research highlights how Judeo-Christian religious terminology in English has undergone semantic shifts, acquiring both religious and secular meanings, with some terms becoming taboo over time. These shifts are shaped by evolving cultural values and societal norms, aligning with the bidirectional interpretation of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which posits a reciprocal relationship between language and

culture (Dunai, 2008). Similarly, Lodej (2008) study demonstrates how terms associated with Christian clergy have transitioned to secular meanings, particularly after the Protestant Reformation, reflecting societal changes and the processes of secularization (Lodej, 2008). This example underscores how religious language can adapt to new contexts and reflect broader cultural shifts.

Moreover, the semantic evolution of pagan terminology within Christian theology, shows how religious concepts are recontextualized across different cultural frameworks. This recontextualization often incorporates political and social dimensions, further contributing to shifts in meaning. Khachaturyan (2017) expands on this by emphasizing that language change in religious contexts extends beyond vocabulary to affect all linguistic levels, including standard language varieties. Her work highlights the profound influence of religious discourse on the broader processes of language evolution.

Collectively, these studies illustrate the complex interplay between religious texts and language, where semantic shifts often reflect societal changes. As religious terminology adapts to evolving cultural landscapes, words may acquire vulgar or taboo connotations, demonstrating the dynamic nature of language and its responsiveness to cultural and social transformations.

The contemporary recontextualization of *Prèet*: folklore, idioms, media, and political discourse. Beyond canonical Buddhist texts, Traibhmi, the contemporary usage of prèet in Thai society has expanded into diverse domains of everyday language, folklore, mass media, and political commentary, all of which contribute to its pejorative transformation. In everyday proverb, prèet has become deeply ingrained as a figure of ridicule and moral condemnation. Common expressions such as "dek prèet" (เด็กเปรต) refer to disobedient or ill-mannered children, often marked by aggressiveness, rudeness, or defiance. Similarly, phrases like "sǔuŋ mǔuan prèet" (สูงเหมือนเปรต – "tall like a prèet") or "phɔ̌ɔm mǔuan prèet" (ผอมเหมือนเปรต – "thin like a prèet") draw on grotesque visual metaphors to disparage someone's physicality or behavior, reinforcing negative imagery inherited from Buddhist depictions.

Moreover, in Southern Thai dialect, the term prèet has undergone pragmatic recontextualization to the point that it is no longer perceived strictly as a vulgar or offensive term. Rather than invoking its religious or ghostly origin, prèet is now commonly used as a discourse particle or expressive interjection with little to no literal meaning. It often serves to enhance conversational flavor, express emotion, or create social engagement. Examples include phrases like "mǔuan prèet" (เหมือน เปรต – "like a prèet") or standalone exclamations such as "ii prèet hɔ̌ɔ" (อีเปรต เหอ), which are uttered in moments of surprise, awkwardness, or playful frustration. These expressions are frequently used in humorous or casual exchanges, functioning similarly to how English speakers might use words like "damn", "girl", or even "bitch" in a non-hostile, ironic, or friendly way. In many cases, prèet acts more as a social-linguistic accessory than a literal insult, demonstrating how the term has adapted into the performative and affective dimensions of regional speech.

The influence of prèet has extended into popular media. The 2003 television drama Prèet Wat Suthat and its 2012 remake depicted the karmic consequences of abusing one's parents, showing the protagonist's transformation into a suffering prèet after death. The narrative reinforced Buddhist moral themes of sin and retribution while simultaneously cementing prèet as a dramatic trope in mainstream entertainment. Moreover, prèet has been appropriated in modern political discourse. In the 2020 s, a youth activist group in Southern Thailand named themselves dek prèet (เด็ก เปรต), openly embracing the stigmatized term as a

badge of defiance against social norms and political hierarchy. Media coverage of their protests described tensions with conservative counter-protesters and the symbolic use of "prèet" as both self-identification and provocation. In this case, the term functions as an act of linguistic reclamation, reappropriating its derogatory connotation to critique social oppression.

The metaphor of prèet has also been explored in literature and digital storytelling. In the urban horror novel Prèet: The Ghost of the Metropolis by Prapt (Chairat Pipitpattanaprap), one of Thai famous ghost novel writer, the figure of prèet is reimagined as a shadowy giant haunting modern Bangkok, a symbol of collective trauma, hidden guilt, and societal decay. The story's visual and linguistic elements evoke the same themes found in Buddhist cosmology, but reframe them in psychological and socio-political terms (Pipitpattanaprap, 2018). Additionally, prèet has appeared in podcasts, viral memes, and online commentary as a metaphor for selfishness, corruption, or moral hypocrisy. These diverse uses across oral tradition, regional speech, mass media, and political mobilization illustrate the dynamic evolution of prèet from a spiritual figure into a rich metaphorical resource for contemporary Thai society. The term now transcends its religious roots to function as a tool for critique, satire, expression, and identity—often simultaneously.

These contemporary usages of prèet—ranging from regional idioms and expressive interjections to popular media and political discourse—demonstrate the term's semantic and pragmatic expansion far beyond its canonical religious origins. While prèet was once a solemn figure rooted in Buddhist cosmology and moral doctrine, it now operates as a versatile cultural symbol, embedded in everyday language and collective imagination. This shift illustrates how metaphorical and emotional resonance can facilitate the recontextualization of religious language into secular, satirical, or even playful domains. Ultimately, the evolving usage of prèet reflects broader patterns of cultural negotiation in Thai society, where inherited spiritual concepts are reimagined, repurposed, and re-voiced in response to changing social landscapes.

Conclusion

This study traces the semantic evolution of prèet in Thai society, revealing its transformation from a Buddhist concept rooted in karmic suffering to a modern metaphor for social critique. Once associated with ancestral rites and religious doctrine, prèet traditionally embodied the moral consequences of sin and spiritual torment. Over time, however, its usage has expanded beyond religious contexts, evolving into a pejorative term used to criticize greed, immorality, and deviant behavior in contemporary discourse. This shift illustrates how religious imagery can be repurposed in everyday language to reflect changing societal values and norms.

The findings underscore the role of conceptual metaphor in shaping the pejorative meanings of prèet, demonstrating how abstract notions of spiritual punishment have been mapped onto concrete moral judgments. The study also highlights the dynamic interplay between language, religion, and culture, showing how sacred symbols adapt over time in response to evolving socio-political realities. Future research could take several promising directions. First, dialectal variation within Thai warrants closer examination, particularly the pragmatic and effective uses of prèet in regional contexts such as Southern Thai. Ethnographic fieldwork combined with corpus-based analysis could reveal how local communities reinterpret the term in nuanced ways. Second, cross-linguistic and cross-cultural comparisons—especially with neighboring languages like Lao, Khmer, or Burmese—could illuminate shared or divergent metaphorical frameworks related

to death, morality, or spiritual transgression. Methodologically, applying systematic procedures such as the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIPVU) and corpus-driven semantic mapping would facilitate rigorous and replicable analysis. These approaches would enhance our understanding of how culturally embedded metaphors both reflect and shape societal beliefs about virtue, vice, and the afterlife.

Data Availability

No datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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Author contributions

KK analyzed literary content, the influence of Trai Bhumi Phra Ruang and the concept of prèt in Thai society, constructed analytical framework and RT analyzed linguistic content, Conceptual metaphor and Semantics change. All authors designed research, data collection, literature review, main argument, wrote and revised the manuscript text.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethical approval

Ethical approval was not required for this study, as it does not involve human medical subjects or experiments requiring ethical review.

Informed consent

There are no interview or questionnaire data, only textual analysis.

Additional information

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