

Auspicious Cats of Thailand and Their Cultural Significance

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Abstract

This study explores the cultural significance and historical importance of Thai cat breeds, focusing on their symbolic value in Thai society. Thai cats, particularly those with distinctive physical traits, have long been cherished and regarded as symbols of prosperity, protection, and good fortune. The research delves into the role of cats in Thai folklore, religious beliefs, and traditional customs, illustrating how they are often associated with auspicious meanings. The study examines the influence of cats on various aspects of Thai culture, including their presence in rituals, their representation in art, and their status as cultural icons. Additionally, the research highlights the impact of Thai cats on the global pet industry, where their unique characteristics have gained international recognition. Through an analysis of historical texts, cultural practices, and social beliefs, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of the enduring cultural significance of Thai cats, emphasizing their importance not only as beloved companions but also as symbols of cultural heritage. The research also considers the preservation of Thai cat breeds and their continued relevance in modern Thai society, where they remain a beloved part of everyday life. Ultimately, this study demonstrates the profound connection between Thai cats and the cultural identity of Thailand, showcasing their enduring legacy in both local and global contexts.

Keyword: Cultural Heritage, Animal Symbolism, Folklore and Mythology

Introduction

Thailand was once home to more than twenty native cat breeds, which were first introduced to the Western world in the 19th century through diplomatic exchanges by the Thai monarchy. Thai cats became so highly sought after that in 1901, the Thai government had to issue an official statement clarifying that there was no "Royal Cat of Siam" or any breed specially preserved within the palace. However, cats have been revered by the Thai people for centuries. Following the tradition of documenting animals with significant roles in the royal court and monasteries, Thai monks began recording the Tamra Maew (Cat Treatises) around the 18th century. These samut khoi (folding books) contained illustrations and descriptions of the physical characteristics of various cat breeds, along with the superstitions associated with each breed. Today, only four of these breeds remain: Supalak, Konja, Sisawat (Korat), and the most popular, Siamese (Wichienmaat). These auspicious felines continue to play a vital role in Thai ceremonies and are globally admired for their beauty and unique lineage.

The most famous of these cat breeds to originate in Thailand is the Traditional Siamese cat, Wichien Maat, or "Moon Diamond", receiving the moniker because of its white fur, triangular face, and striking blue eyes. Today, they may be most well known for their

large blue almond shaped eyes and pointed fur coloration, having a light colored body that becomes darker around the extremities, and their friendly demeanor. Originally, they were reserved exclusively for the Thai royal family, guarding households, temples, and the royal palace (The Real Housecats of Siam: Wichien Maat, 2022). Even still today, the Wichien Maat are desired for their ability to bring good fortune, ward off evil spirits, and always find their way back home (Felicitous Felines: Beliefs about Thai Cats and Breed Characteristics, 2023).

In 2019, after the new king His Majesty King Maha Vajiralongkorn's coronation, there was a traditional celebration on his first night at the royal palace where he was presented with several auspicious items. During this Royal Housewarming Ceremony the new king is given a golden key, a mortar, seeds, coconut flowers, betel nut flowers, a fly-whisk made of the tail hair from an albino elephant, along with a white chicken, and a carefully selected ceremonial Wichien Maat, known as a wilarn (The Real Housecats of Siam: Wichien Maat, 2022).

Auspicious Cats in Thailand

In Thailand, cats are often associated with beliefs related to good luck and the warding off of evil spirits. For instance, the white cat is commonly believed to bring happiness and prosperity to households and families. There are also beliefs that cats can remove misfortune from homes or businesses. Additionally, certain breeds, such as the Siamese cat, are highly regarded for their beauty and are also believed to be linked to good fortune in various aspects of life

Thailand has traditionally been an agricultural society, with great importance given to farming and the rain required to support an abundant harvest. In times of drought however, it is believed that by performing the Hae Nang Maew ceremony farmers can ensure consistent and predictable precipitation by parading a gray/silver colored Sisawat or Korat cat (or nowadays a stuffed animal) around while pouring water on it, with the felines fur representing rain clouds and their green eyes symbolizing growth and fertility (Black Cats Are Lucky – Thai Cats and the Thai People, n.d.). Named by King Rama V after where they originated, they are traditionally given to newlywed couples to ensure good luck, and until just recently could not even legally be sold, but only given as a gift (Mohnot, 2023). Legend says that the more crooked or bent the cat's tail, the more wealth and prosperity will be bestowed upon the owner.

The Supalak, known as Thong Daeng, or “red gold”, came to prominence during the Burmese-Siamese war in the 18th century. After the sacking of Ayutthaya, many royal treasures were transferred to Burma (present-day Myanmar), including the Tamra Maew. Upon discovering the awe-inspiring nature and energies of Supalak cats as detailed in the Cat Treatise, the king of Burma commanded his subjects to capture all Supalaks and bring them back to Burma. But Thailand's love for the Supalak isn't just because it's rare. This rare breed is small and short-haired, with golden yellow eyes, and an evenly colored reddish-brown coat, attributes often compared to the value of gold, implying that they will bring prosperity to the pet owner (Mohnot, 2023).

Contrary to how black cats are usually thought of as harbingers of bad luck, the all black Konja is often compared to the Thai lion, Singha, because of its majestic gait and noble aura. Their eyes, teeth, tongue, and claws were described as pitch black, with a distinguishing white stripe running from under their chin all the way down their belly. These days though, the Konja breed is typically completely black. In the past, Thai people believed that feeding the all black cat would bestow upon them a great deal of good fortune (Mohnot, 2023).

In Thailand all different types of cats are deemed auspicious, even black cats. The following are ten examples of different types of black cats and other colors that bring good luck, wealth, and prosperity, as laid out in the Tamra Maew (Black Cats Are Lucky – Thai Cats and the Thai People):

1. Nilarat is a truly all-black cat inside and out. Its nails, tongue, teeth, eyes, and bones are all black.
2. Koneja or Pure-Black is a black cat with yellow eyes, a long and slim tail, and the elegant posture of a lion.
3. Nilachak has a black coat with a white ring around its neck like a collar.
4. Mulila has a black body with white ears and yellow eyes.
5. Wilat is covered in a black coat from the neck to the belly and from the ears to the tail. It has white legs and green eyes.
6. Pat-sawet has a black body with a white tip on its tail, and sparkling yellow eyes like gemstones.
7. Krajok has a black coat on its round and chubby body, with a white ring around its mouth and yellow eyes.
8. Singhasep is a black cat with white rings around the mouth, neck and nose, and yellow eyes.
9. Karawek is a black cat with yellow eyes and a white nose.
10. Jatubot is a black cat with white socks and yellow eyes.
11. Siamese Cat or Wichien Maat was chosen as a mascot of the SEA Games 1985 in Bangkok and the SEA Games 1995 in Chiang Mai.
12. Supalak is a copper-colored cat with bright eyes. A Supalak is always active, inquisitive, adventurous, curious, and above all free-spirited. Although it is such an adorable cat to its owner, to strangers, it may not be easy to handle.
13. Silver Blue has a gray coat like a cloud rain and green eyes. Chosen as the mascot of the SEA Games 2007 in Nakhon Ratchasima and is a symbol of Nakhon Ratchasima Football Club. In 2009, it became the national animal of Thailand.
14. Ratanakampon is a white cat with a little black stripe at the chest.
15. Kao tam is a white cat with nine black patches on the neck, head, four thighs, and around the hips.
16. Samsawet has short and fine black and white hair growing next to one another, making it appear gray.
17. Horse saddle cat has a fur pattern of a horse saddle on its back and is very expensive.

When it comes to “unlucky” cats, it usually has more to do with how they act as opposed to just how they look. The following examples are included in the Tamra Maew:

1. Devil Cat is skinny with loose saggy skin and rough fur that eat all of its babies.
2. Hinatote is a cat with a stillborn baby.
3. Kop-ploeng is a scaredy cat. It always hides or runs away from people.
4. Nep-saniat acts like a monkey and has a deformed body. It always keeps its tail at the bottom.
5. Tupolapet is a white cat with blood-red eyes and likes to steal fish.
6. Tiger cat has a fur color resembling that of a tiger, red eyes, and a spine-chilling cry.

From the Khao Manee granting safe travels to merchants, the Supalak elevating its owners to greater status, or the Si Sawat blessing newlyweds, Thailand has long seen

mystical properties in its domestic cat breeds. For centuries, Thailand has been recognized as the birthplace of some of the world's most extraordinary cat breeds, capturing hearts with their distinct beauty. Even today, Thai cats are a crucial part of certain traditions and ceremonies in Thailand.

The following are examples of entries from a mid nineteenth century Tamra Maew, complete with illustrations and breed descriptions of the different types of cats native to Thailand (Clutterbuck, 2004)



Image 1: Cat Breeds

Ninlarat (Dark Sapphire) As the name, the breed. Dark Sapphire, Perfect shiny black form, Teeth, eyes, claws, tongue, black as the body, And a tapering tail to the end, running back to touch the head.

Wilat (Beauty) Round from throat and underbelly, two ears White to the tail—a cotton flower. All four paws white, two green eyes, The name Beauty for its body's black field.

Supalak (Excellence) or Thong Daeng (Copper) Of appearance superb, a graceful feline. Color of copper glinting, Eyes lit like shining rays Against all evil, malevolence turns to content.

Kao Taem (Nine Points) Alternating circles on neck, head, and hind thighs, Plus on both shoulders and front paws, Black covering the ends of both paws. Nine horse-like black spots on an all-white background

Maaleht (Flower) or Dork Lao (Lao Flower) Grace of the flower, its body evenly colored, Fur like the lao flower, smooth. Fur roots a cloudy gray, off-white Eyes, like dewdrops on a lotus

Saem Sawet (Alternating White) Black fur alternates with white in all parts. Fur light and scant on the body, The shape orderly, slender, and beautiful. Eyes lit like fireflies, applied liquid gold.

Ratanakamphol (Jewelled Cloth) So called for the body colored as a conch shell, Thus the name Jeweled Cloth was bestowed. A dividing band from chest to back, Golden eyes brim with water like soft light.

Wichien Maat (Moon Diamond) Upper mouth, tail, four paws, and two ears, Eight points of pure black, as stated. Eye color shines bronze-gray, The name Moon Diamond for the white fur.

Ninlajak (Sapphire Circle) The name Sapphire Circle bespeaks grace. Body to crows' wings truly compares, White around the neck, and can live in any country; this cat one should look after.

Mulila Mulila is one with its name, Two ears white, as if embroidered. Eyes like blooming flowers, like the yellow chrysanthemum. To the tail-tip all black—feet, body, and head.

Korp Waen (Spectacle Frame) or Aan Maa (Horse Saddle) Spectacle Frame is the name. White as cliffs, Black fur around the eyes, as if dyed. On the back, like a horse's saddle, A beautiful inky circle. Found in any country.

Pat-sawet (White Line) or Pattalort (Line Throughout) The white line goes from the nose, white, all along to the tail, a rarity. Mixed, alternating to the eye. A short body, Eyes like golden sands of yellow topaz.

Beliefs and Cultural Significance

Culture is a key determinant of both the prosperity and decline of society, deeply influencing the way people live. It serves as a tool to guide the development of society and the way individuals lead their lives. Culture not only reflects the way people live in a society but also embodies the values and beliefs that are important to that society. The study of culture is crucial in helping us understand the way of life, values, and attitudes of different societies. It allows us to better comprehend people's perspectives, opinions, and beliefs, leading to a deeper understanding and respect when interacting with others.

Additionally, learning about culture fosters a sense of unity, enabling people to collaborate effectively within society. A shared understanding of culture can create strong relationships and enhance teamwork, leading to successful outcomes. A well-established culture within a society helps maintain peace and order, as culture provides the framework or guidelines for how people should live together, reducing conflict and promoting harmonious coexistence. Moreover, culture shapes behaviors that are consistent across society, making it easier for individuals to live together smoothly.

Finally, a strong culture enables people to better connect with others in the same society and adapt to various situations appropriately. It also differentiates humans from animals, who lack the ability to adapt and live in complex societies. Therefore, culture plays an essential role in fostering peace, prosperity, and progress in society. It is a crucial factor that allows humans to live a fulfilling and meaningful life within their communities.

In Thai culture, cats are often used as symbols of good luck and auspiciousness, particularly in the context of homes and businesses. People often keep cats or use cat symbols in decorating their shops to attract customers and promote prosperity. Additionally, cats are mentioned in Thai folklore, such as in the story of "The Cat and the Mouse," which imparts lessons about adaptation and cooperation within society.

Cultural beliefs serve as a way of life guided by faith in and acceptance of supernatural powers by individuals or groups within a community. These beliefs act as a collective force, encouraging participation in activities or behaviors aligned with the community's beliefs. During ritual events in communities that serve as centers of faith, members with shared beliefs engage in activities, and individuals, groups, and organizations within the community play significant roles in managing the area and following the appropriate procedures. The intensity of faith will influence the management style and preparation of related resources. Therefore, the management of community faith is crucial, as it has long-lasting effects on the community. (Lunjakon Nillakarn, 2018: 11-20)

The auspicious cats in Thailand have deep cultural significance because they are not only pets that bring happiness and entertainment to families but also play an important role in reflecting the values and beliefs deeply ingrained in Thai society, especially regarding luck, prosperity, and the protection against evil. Additionally, there is a belief that having a cat or a cat symbol in the home can help ward off misfortune and enhance wealth for both households and businesses. Cats are often used as symbols in various rituals related to making wishes or promoting good fortune. For example, during festivals or significant ceremonies associated with the belief of driving away bad elements from life and attracting prosperity. Moreover, in some places, shops or businesses place cat figurines or even real cats to enhance good fortune and attract customers.

In Thai society, cats are also symbols of a healthy and peaceful lifestyle because they are calm animals with a way of life that is undisturbed. Additionally, cats are considered to be

charming and beautiful in the eyes of Thais, especially certain breeds like the Siamese cat, which is regarded as a symbol of beauty and luck in various aspects. Studying auspicious cats in Thailand is not only about pets but also concerns the beliefs and cultural values that influence the way of life and relationships within the community. Understanding the role of auspicious cats helps us better comprehend the Thai way of life and their way of thinking, particularly regarding beliefs related to luck, prosperity, and practices that reflect respect for natural forces and seeking good fortune in daily life.

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