

# A FOLK TAXONOMY OF TERMS FOR GHOSTS AND SPIRITS IN THAI<sup>1</sup>

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## บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยส่วนใหญ่ ในอดีตมุ่งศึกษาบทบาทของผีในสังคม และแสดงให้เห็นว่าวิถีชีวิตของคนไทยผูกพันอยู่กับผีตั้งแต่เกิดจนกระทั่งตาย ยังไม่มีผลงานใดที่ศึกษา “ผี” เพื่อตีแผ่มโนทัศน์ของคนไทยอย่างเป็นระบบ ดังนั้น งานวิจัยนี้จึงมีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อวิเคราะห์ระบบคำเรียกผี จัดจำพวกประเภทคำเรียกผี และตีความโลกทัศน์ของคนไทย ที่สะท้อนผ่านความหมายของคำเรียกผี โดยใช้วิธีที่เรียกว่า “การจัดจำพวกแบบชาวบ้าน” ซึ่งเป็นวิธีวิเคราะห์อย่างหนึ่งในบรรดาศาสตร์ชาติพันธุ์

ผู้วิจัยเก็บข้อมูลด้วยการสัมภาษณ์ผู้บอกภาษาจำนวน 15 คน ซึ่งถูกคัดเลือกอย่างเฉพาะเจาะจงจากชาวบ้านในชุมชนวัดสวนแก้ว ตำบลบางเลน อำเภอบางใหญ่ จังหวัดนนทบุรี ซึ่งถือเป็นตัวแทนทางความคิดของผู้พูดภาษาไทยส่วนใหญ่ ผลการศึกษาพบประเภทผีทั้งหมด 49 ประเภท ซึ่งจัดจำพวกแบบชาวบ้านออกเป็น 5 ระดับชั้น คือชั้นจุดเริ่มหนึ่งเดียว ชั้นรูปแบบชีวิต ชั้นบอกหมวด ชั้นเฉพาะเจาะจง และชั้นชนิดย่อย โดยชั้นจุดเริ่มหนึ่งเดียวมีคำเรียกผีเพียงคำเดียวคือ ผี (1) ซึ่งมีความหมายกว้างมากที่สุด ชั้นรูปแบบชีวิตมีคำเรียกผี 2 คำ คือ ผี (2) และ วิญญาณ สำหรับชั้นบอกหมวดมีคำเรียกผี 7 คำ เช่น ผีสาวเทวดา กระสือ ปอบ ส่วนชั้นเฉพาะเจาะจงเป็นระดับชั้นที่อยู่ภายใต้ชั้นบอกหมวดมีคำเรียกผีอยู่มากที่สุดคือ 33 คำ เช่น นางไม้ ผีป่า เปรต ระดับชั้นสุดท้ายคือชั้นชนิดย่อยมีคำเรียกผี 6 คำ เช่น เจ้าแม่ไทร เจ้าแม่ขาม นางตานี

ผลการวิเคราะห์ความหมายของคำเรียกผีแสดงให้เห็นว่าผู้พูดภาษาไทยคิดว่าผีมีวิธีการดำรงอยู่เหมือนคน ผีส่วนใหญ่มีรูปร่างเหมือนคน และผีบางประเภทก็ยังมีความเป็นคนอยู่ ผีแต่ละประเภทถูกจำแนกออกจากรันด้วยพฤติกรรมการทำความคิด ความชั่ว เพศ อายุ ที่อยู่อาศัย และอาหารที่ผีกิน นอกจากนี้ ผลการวิจัยยังแสดงให้เห็นว่าคนไทยมีทัศนคติทางลบต่อผี คือเห็นว่าผีเป็นสิ่งที่น่ากลัว น่ารังเกียจ ดิสลินบนได้ อย่างไรก็ตามผีก็มีบทบาทสำคัญในการควบคุมสังคม

<sup>1</sup>“การจัดจำพวกแบบชาวบ้านของคำเรียกผีในภาษาไทย”

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## Abstract

Previous studies show that Thai people's ways of life and traditions from birth to death are related to ghosts. Most of the studies deal with the role of ghosts in Thai society but there has been no study on ghost terms in Thai, which would reflect the ghost system in Thai thoughts. Thus, this study aims to analyze the system and categorization of terms for ghosts and spirits in Thai. Folk taxonomy, which is a method in the ethnosemantic approach, has been adopted for the analysis.

Data elicitation of the meanings of Thai ghost terms was done at Wat Suan Kaew Community, Tambon Bang Len, Amphoe Bang Yai, Nonthaburi Province, as representative of the mainstream Thai community. Fifteen intentionally selected informants were interviewed. The result of the analysis shows that there are forty nine categories of ghosts and spirits in Thai. They are classified into a taxonomy of five hierarchical classes: unique beginner, life-form, generic, specific, and varietal. There is only one unique beginner term: *phǐi*(1) 'ghost+spirit'. There are two life-form terms: *phǐi*(2) 'ghost' and *winyaan* 'spirit'. As for generic ghost terms under life form, there are seven. Thirty three specific ghost terms were found e.g., *naaŋ-māay* 'female spirit of a tree', *phǐi-pàa* 'forest demon', *prèet* 'evil tall spirit', etc. There are six sub-specific or varietal ghost terms, such as *cāaw-mêε-say* 'female banyan tree spirit', *cāaw-mêε-mákhăam* 'female tamarind tree spirit', *naaŋ-taani* 'female banana tree spirit', etc.

It should be noted that Thai people conceive of ghosts as human. Indeed, most types of ghosts have a human shape and

some even are human. Thai ghosts are distinguished by their kindness or malevolence, sex, age, dwelling place and the food they take.

Furthermore, it has been found that Thai people have negative attitudes towards ghosts as can be seen from the meanings of ghost terms. They find ghosts frightening, disgusting, and susceptible to bribes or dogged with misfortune as a result of karma. However, ghosts are seen as a means of controlling society.

## Introduction

Previous studies have shown that the Thai daily way of life is related to their belief in ghosts from the time they are born to the time they die. Phaithayawatthana (1995: 91) states that Thai people believe that ghosts are in everything and that human beings belong to certain ghosts even before they are born. Some believe that powerful ghosts invent a human body through magic and give life to it by catching an aimless soul, putting it into the body and bringing that live body to a mother's womb. There is, therefore, a Thai tradition called *súu lûuk* (meaning 'buying a child'), which has led to a ceremony in which a mother pretends to buy her newborn baby from a ghost, otherwise, the ghost will take the newborn back in three days, and it will die if the parents have not observed the tradition. If the newborn can survive this period, it will thrive. This belief underlies the saying: "A newborn belongs to a ghost for three days and to a human being for four days" (Phaithayawatthana 1995: 95). Another tradition based on the belief in ghosts involves deceiving ghosts that the baby is not human or is too ugly to take. Thai people do this by making a comment on a newborn baby such as "What an ugly

baby!” and naming their baby after an unpleasant thing or with an animal name, e.g. *dam* ‘black’, *mûmt* ‘dark’, *măa* ‘dog’ and *ʔùŋ* ‘bullfrog,’ etc. In addition, there is a tradition of performing a ceremony over a dead body to pacify the spirit and stop it from coming out and shocking humans. This is based on the belief that when a human being dies, it will be transformed into a living ghost.

The oldest written record that serves as evidence showing the Thai belief in ghosts is 716 years old. It is the first stone inscription of the Sukhothai period (1238-1438) that says the following:

“In the North of Sukhothai city, there is a entity where a scholarly monk lives in, a barrage, a forest of coconut and areca palms, mango and tamarind trees, and water resources. There is also *prá-khà-phuŋ-phĩi*<sup>4</sup> in that mountain. It is more powerful than the other ghosts in the city. If a ruler offers worship to it, the city will prosper. If not, the city will not be protected and finally, will face a catastrophe.”

(The Fine Arts Department 1984)

The above quotation signifies that Sukhothai people made offerings to *prá-khà-phuŋ-phĩi*, the leader of ghosts and spirits in the Sukhothai City in order that it would protect them and allow them to live peacefully. It is generally accepted that after Brahmanism and Buddhism came to the city, their doctrines and practices harmonized with the tradition of worshipping ghosts and spirits as can be seen in several religious ceremonies in

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<sup>4</sup> *prá-khà-phuŋ-phĩi* means ‘the most powerful spirit.’

Thai people’s everyday life; for example, Buddhist ceremonies of offering alms to monks, making merit and funeral rites, etc., and Brahman ceremonies of establishing a spirit house, offering rice and summoning one’s spirit (*khwǎn*) to stay in and protect one’s body. This ceremony is called *baay-sĩi-sùu-khwǎn* and rites about ghosts, e.g. house-blessing and ghost-feeding ceremonies.

Obviously, the more roles ghosts have played in everyday life, the more terms for them are to be found in the Thai language. However, although it is observed that there are many ghost terms in Thai, nobody knows how many there are, exactly, how they are categorized in Thai cognition and what each category specifically denotes and connotes.

All of the questions above make it necessary to study terms for ghosts and spirits in Thai thoroughly and systematically. This study, therefore, is an attempt to analyze such terms using an ethnosemantic approach, which according to Prasithratsint (2006: 79), means arriving at a people’s way of thinking and worldview through the study of the meanings of certain words in their language. In this study, the meanings of the terms for ghosts and spirits were analyzed from the native Thai viewpoint and were finally categorized into a taxonomic system. Also, from the denotations and connotations of the terms, the concepts of “ghost” and “spirit” in Thai cognition are clearly depicted and Thai attitudes toward ghosts are inferred.

Folk taxonomy has been used in ethnosemantic studies for classifying the indigenous system of categorization. Frake (1961: 115) analyzed disease terms in Subanun in the Philippines. He found that

the diagnostic category was labelled by the disease name. On the other hand, several diseases names might indicate just a single illness. So, Subanun speakers had to use these medical terms carefully, otherwise the others would not understand what they wanted to describe. Frake (1961) said that the Subanun's disease concepts were different from Western ones. Berlin (1992) and Berlin, Breedlove, and Raven (1973) studied folk biology and proposed that there were five universal ethnobiological hierarchical categories: *unique beginner*, *life form*, *generic*, *specific* and *varietal* (See definitions of these terms below). Indeed, a number of studies applied the folk taxonomy approach to the classification of Thai cultural terms. For example, Pumyoo (2005) compared the systems of rice classification in Southeast Asian languages, including Thai, using folk taxonomy, and Panyaatisin (2009) showed the result of his analysis of the system of cooking terms in Northern Thai dialect through a folk taxonomy.

In the present study, the data used in the analysis consisted of terms for ghosts and spirits and their meanings. The terms were taken from fiction and non-fiction concerned with mystery, magic, and superstition. The meanings of the terms were elicited through interviews with fifteen informants, who were deliberately selected from the Wat Suan Kaew Community, Tambon Bang Len, Amphoe Bang Yai, Nonthaburi Province, which was generally regarded as representative of a regular community of mainstream Thai people. The informants were native speakers of Standard Thai who had lived in that community since birth and were over fifty years old. They had completed compulsory education; i.e., level 4 in elementary school. Among the fifteen

informants, eleven of them were orchardists, and the rest had been hired to do odd jobs in the community. They were all native speakers of Thai who lived in a Thai cultural environment with very little or no influence from other cultures. Thus, the information elicited from them would be expected to lead us to a knowledge and understanding of the Thai way of thinking related to ghosts and spirits.

In the process of data collection, at first we collected all the terms signifying any kind of supernatural being. Later on, however, only traditional ghost terms in Standard Thai were adopted for analysis. Therefore, terms in other dialects and recently created terms that signified ghosts of utensils, such as shampoo ghosts, soap ghosts, refrigerator ghosts, air-conditioner ghosts, etc., were removed from the list. Ultimately, there were altogether fifty six terms used in the analysis. Ideally, one term should represent one conceptual category, but we found that those fifty six terms represented only forty nine ghost categories. The reason for the discrepancy between the number of terms and categories represented by the terms was that, in some cases, more than one term represented a single category. All the terms can be seen in Table 1.

### **A folk taxonomy of Thai ghost terms**

The results of the analysis of the meanings of all the ghost terms mentioned above enabled us to categorize all the terms and arrange them into a hierarchical folk taxonomy. We adopted Berlin's technical terms representing levels in taxonomy (Berlin 1992). He proposed five levels in the ethnobiological classification of plants and animals in traditional societies: *unique*

*beginner, life form, generic, specific and varietal.*

These five significant concepts seem to be most applicable to the classification of ghost terms. *Unique Beginner* is the topmost level of the hierarchy. It is the highest and most inclusive rank consisting of only one term that includes every term under it. The second is *life form* meaning the body form representing a kind of organism. Even though we are not sure whether all would agree that ghosts and spirits are organisms, we think that the term *life form* is applicable to an identifiable category of a group of supernatural things. The main principles of a folk taxonomy are *contrast* and *inclusion*. This means that each term is in contrast with others at the same level and is included in the term at the above level. Thus *life forms* contrast with one another and are included in *unique beginner*. At the same time, under *life form* there are other terms included. This level is called *generic* meaning general class or group. This term also suits the classification of ghosts and spirits in Thai in terms of describing a general class in which there are many sub-categories, labeled by Berlin (1992) as *specific*, meaning a special or particular class. As will be seen later, some ghost terms are particular and can be grouped under *generic*. The last level is *varietal*, here meaning something that deviates from a *specific* kind. Thus, *varietal* is included in *specific*. The *varietal* level is the lowest of the taxonomy. Below is a folk taxonomy of ghost terms in Thai.

Table 1: folk taxonomy of ghost terms in Thai

Unique beginner	Life form	Generic	Specific	Varietal	
<i>phǐi(1)</i> 'ghost+spirit'	<i>winyaan</i> 'spirit'	<i>phǐi-haa-saataan</i> or <i>phūt-phǐi-piisàat</i> 'bad spirit'	<i>naaṅ-máay</i> 'female spirit of a tree'	<i>câaw-mêe-say</i> 'female spirit of a banyan tree'	
				<i>câaw-mêe-mákhăam</i> 'female spirit of a tamarind tree'	
				<i>naaṅ-taanii</i> 'female spirit of a banana tree'	
				<i>naaṅ-takhian</i> 'female spirit of a ta-khian tree'	
				<i>phǐi-ṅûak</i> 'mermaid ghost'	
				<i>phǐi-pàa</i> 'jungle demon'	
				<i>phǐi-thalee</i> 'sea ghost'	
				<i>phǐi-náam</i> or <i>phǐi-praay</i> or <i>praay-náam</i> 'water ghost'	
				<i>phǐi-taay-tháṅ-klom</i> or <i>phǐi-taay-thóṅ-klom</i> 'female ghost dying during pregnancy'	
				<i>prêet</i> 'tall evil ghost'	
				<i>yommabaan</i> 'the chief guardian of hell'	
				<i>yommathūt</i> 'guardian of hell'	
				<i>phǐi-rêerôn</i> 'stray ghost'	
				<i>phǐi-haa</i> 'bad spirit causing epidemic'	
			<i>piisàat</i> 'devil'		
			<i>phǐi-săaṅ-theewadaa</i> 'good spirit'	<i>mêe-yâa-naaṅ</i> 'female guardian spirit of a boat'	
				<i>thee-phaa-ráak</i> or <i>rúk-khâ-theewadaa</i> 'male guardian spirit of a tree'	
				<i>pùu-sôm</i> 'old male guardian spirit of treasure'	
				<i>câaw-khăw</i> 'spirit of a mountain'	
				<i>câaw-pàa</i> 'spirit of a forest'	
				<i>mêe-phoosòp</i> 'goddess of rice'	
				<i>mêe-khoṅkhaa</i> 'goddess of a river'	
				<i>mêe-thooranij</i> 'goddess of land'	
				<i>theewadaa</i> 'angel'	<i>thêep-thídaa</i> or <i>naaṅ-fáa</i> 'female deity'
					<i>thêep</i> 'male deity'
				<i>phrá-sûa-muaṅ</i> 'guardian spirit of a city'	
				<i>câaw-phôṅ</i> 'benevolent male spirit'	
				<i>câaw-mêe</i> 'benevolent female spirit'	
				<i>câaw-thîi</i> or <i>câaw-thîi-câaw-thaaṅ</i> 'guardian spirit of a place'	
				<i>phrá-phuum</i> 'male guardian spirit dwelling in a spirit house'	
				<i>phǐi-bâan-phǐi-ruaṅ</i> 'house spirit'	
				<i>mêe-súuu</i> 'female spirit that protects an infant'	

<i>phǐi(2)</i> 'ghost'			<i>naaŋ-kwàk</i> 'female spirit who attracts customers'	
			<i>kùman -thooŋ</i> 'golden child spirit'	
			<i>rákyom</i> 'twin children ghosts'	
		<i>phǐi-dùut-lûat</i> 'blood sucking ghost'	<i>phǐi-dìp</i> 'uncremated ghost'	
			<i>drék-khiw-lâa</i> 'Dracula'	
		<i>kràsũu</i> 'female demon with internal organs outside the body'		
		<i>kráhǎŋ</i> 'male demon with two winnowing baskets as wings'		
	<i>pòop</i> 'greedy man-ghost'			
	<i>lúuk-kròok</i> 'fetus ghost'			

**Table 2: the unique beginner *phǐi(1)* 'ghost+spirit'**

Unique beginner	English equivalent	Meaning
<i>phǐi(1)</i> ผี (1)	'ghost+spirit'	A supernatural being manifested in any form, which may be visible or invisible.

**The first level: unique beginner**

The *unique beginner* has the broadest meaning (See Table 2). It is represented by only one term: *phǐi(1)* 'ghost+spirit'. Based on the analysis of traditional meanings and the informants' judgment, all the other ghost terms presented in this article are included in this level of *unique beginner*. Indeed, this unique beginner of ghost terms in Thai distinguishes between what is a ghost and what is not. Such terms as *lǎaŋ-pùu* 'an old monk', *sàdèt-phôo-roo-hâa* 'King Rama the Fifth' are not ghost terms—none of the informants said they were, when they were asked "Is this (the term) *phǐi*?"

It is important to note that the word pronounced [phǐi] in Thai has two meanings, as shown in Tables 2 and 3. The difference in meaning is significant with regard to the breadth of each denotation, which suggests a hierarchical

difference. Thus, we conclude that there are two words in the same phonetic form: *phǐi(1)*, with the broader or more general meaning and *phǐi(2)*, being the narrower in meaning.

The most general ghost term in Thai, the *unique beginner phǐi(1)*, can be seen when it occurs in such sentences as (1) and (2).

- (1) *khǎw chûa rûaŋ phǐi(1)* .  
he believe story ghost  
'He believes in ghosts.'
- (2) *phǐi(1) pèn sîŋ nâa-klua* .  
ghost be thing terrifying  
'Ghosts are terrifying things.'

**The second level: *life form***

Next in the taxonomy from the *unique beginner* is the *life form* level containing two terms: *phǐi(2)* ‘ghost’ and *winyaan* ‘spirit’. They are in contrast with each other and are both immediate subcategories of the *unique beginner*. Analysis of the meanings of the terms (See Table 4) and the informants’ judgment confirm this. All of the interviewees said both *phǐi(2)* ‘ghost’ and *winyaan* ‘spirit’ are included in *phǐi(1)* ‘ghost+ spirit.’

**Table 3: *life forms* *phǐi(2)* ‘ghost’ and *winyaan* ‘spirit’**

<i>Unique beginner: phǐi(1)</i> ‘ghost+spirit’		
<i>Life form</i>	English equivalent	Meaning
<i>phǐi(2)</i> ผี(2)	‘ghost’	A supernatural being transformed from a deceased person or animal. It is visible and touchable and can appear in any shape. (opposite to <i>winyaan</i> ‘spirit’)
<i>winyaan</i> วิญญาณ	‘spirit’	A spirit, which is intangible, invisible and has no identifiable form. (opposite to <i>phǐi(2)</i> ‘ghost’)

These two terms in the second level occur in such sentences as (3) and (4).

- (3) *phǐi-kràsũu pen phii(2)*  
Krasue be ghost  
*thĩi raw mɔɔŋ hən dǎay.*  
that we look see can  
‘Krasue is a ghost that we can see.’

- (4) *phũuchaay khon nán ?àat*  
man person that may  
*pen phǐi(2) phró chɔɔp*  
be ghost because(he) likely  
*hǎay pay tɔɔn khlaŋ kuum.*  
Disappear away at middle night  
‘That man may be a ghost because he is likely to disappear at night.’
- (5) *chǎn mɔɔŋ máy hən tɛɛ*  
I look not see but  
*rúu-sũk wáa winyaan*  
feel that spirit  
*khun-taa yùu thĩi-nĩi.*  
grandfather be here  
‘I cannot see it but feel that my grandfather’s spirit is here.’

**The third level: *generic***

The third level in the folk taxonomy of ghost terms in Thai is the *generic* level, which is under *life form*. There are eight terms representing seven categories at this level. Three of them; namely, *phǐi-sǎaŋ-theewadaa* ‘good spirit’, *phǐi-hàa-saataan* and *phũut-phǐi-piisàat*, both meaning ‘bad spirit’ are under *winyaan* ‘spirit’ in the second level. The rest are five terms representing ghost categories under *phǐi(2)* ‘ghost,’ which contrasts with *winyaan* ‘spirit.’ The five categories share one important characteristic; i.e., they are ghosts that are visible and touchable. Actually, we can say that they are humans who have become ghosts. For example, *kràsũu* is a human being who has become a ghost. At night, she usually goes out of her house and roams in the surroundings to find rotten things to feed on. Most of the time she appears and behaves as a normal human being. The meanings of the *generic* categories can be seen in Table 4 and Table 5 below.

**Table 4: generic ghost categories under the life form *winyaan* ‘spirit’**

<i>life form: winyaan</i> ‘spirit’		
<i>Generic</i>	<b>English equivalent</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
<i>phǐi-sǎaŋ-theewadaa</i> ผีसांगเทวดา	‘good spirit’	A good spirit who brings fortune and prosperity to man. It does not do harm or cause trouble to man.
<i>phǐi-hàa-saataan</i> ผีห้าชาติตาน or <i>phûut-phǐi-piisàat</i> ภูติผีปีศาจ	‘bad spirit’	A dreadful wicked spirit who causes sufferings and all sorts of trouble.

Table 4 shows two *generic* terms under *winyaan* ‘spirit’ in the life form level. They are long compound words with collective meanings. The first one is composed of three words: *phǐi* meaning ‘ghost,’ *sǎaŋ* also meaning ‘ghost,’ (archaic), and *theewadaa* meaning ‘angel.’ Altogether, the compound means collectively ‘good spirit.’ The term *phǐi-hàa-saataan* is composed of *phǐi* meaning ‘ghost,’ *hàa* meaning ‘bad spirit causing an epidemic’ and *saataan* ‘devil’ The whole compound means ‘bad spirit.’ The last one *phûut-phǐi-piisàat* is composed of *phûut* ‘demon,’ *phǐi* ‘ghost,’ and *piisàat* meaning ‘devil.’ The compound means exactly the same as *phǐi-hàa-saataan*. They both denote the same category of ‘bad spirit.’

The following are examples of sentences in which the above *generic* terms occur (Examples 6, 7, 8).

- (6) *khǒohây phǐi-sǎaŋ theewadaa*  
ask good spirit  
*khúm-khrooŋ phûak-raw.*  
protect we  
‘May good spirits protect us!’

- (7) *khon thay baay khon chûa*  
person Thai some person believe  
*wâa rûaŋ leew-ráay*  
that happening bad  
*tháŋ-lǎay kǔrt cǎak kaan*  
all born from NOMINAL  
*kràtham khǒoŋ*  
action of  
*phûut-phǐi-piisàat rǔuu*  
Bad spirit or  
*sìŋ nǔa thammachâat.*  
thing above nature  
‘Some Thai people believe that all bad things are caused by bad spirits or supernatural things.’

- (8) *phǐi-hàa saataan ton day*  
Bad spirit person which  
*don-bandaan hây khun tham chûa*  
inspire give you do evil  
‘Which bad spirit inspired you to do evil things?’

**Table 5: generic ghost categories under the life form *phĩi(2)* ‘ghost’**

<i>life form: phĩi(2)</i> ‘ghost’		
<b>Generic</b>	<b>English equivalent</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
<i>kràsũũũ</i> กระสือ	‘female demon with internal organs outside the body’	A woman who has become a demon whose body consists merely of a head and internal organs, such as the heart, the lungs, the intestines. She can emit a gloomy green light during the night while feeding herself. Her food is raw meat, excrement, fresh placenta and dirty things.
<i>kràhǎñ</i> กระหัง	‘male demon with two winnowing baskets as wings’	A man who has become a demon who feeds on excrement, dirt and the fresh entrails of a dead body. He has two wings made of winnowing baskets ( <i>kràdôñ</i> ).
<i>pòop</i> ปอบ	‘greedy man-ghost’	A male or female who is believed to become a ghost that is very greedy and feeds on fresh entrails, dead bodies and live animals.
<i>phĩi-dùut-lũat</i> ผีดูดเลือด	‘blood sucking ghost’	A human who has become a ghost which is believed to feed on fresh blood.
<i>lũuk-kròok</i> ลูกกรอก	‘fetus ghost’	A premature baby who dies when it is born and becomes a tiny ghost. It is believed that if people worship it, it will bring them luck, and, in contrast, it can bring them misfortune if it is not satisfied.

The five terms under *phĩi(2)* ‘ghost’ represent five categories of ghosts that share one important characteristic; i.e., they are humans who have become ghosts. *kràsũũũ* (female) and *kràhǎñ* (male) are human beings who have become ghosts. At night, they usually go out to find food. Examples of using the words *kràsũũũ* (female) and *kràhǎñ* (male) are as follows.

9) *chǎn khít wáa sěεñ*  
I thought that light  
*sĩi khĩaw thĩi hěñ pen*  
color green that see be  
*kràsũũũ pró mii tềε*  
female demon because have but

*hũa lé krũañnaay tháwnán*  
head and entrails only  
‘I am absolutely sure that the green  
light is *kràsũũũ* because there is only  
a head and entrails.’

(10) *kràhǎñ tii piik*  
male demon hit wings  
*kràdôñ looy*  
winnowing basket fly  
*nĩi chawbáan.*  
escape villagers  
‘*kràhǎñ* flies away with his  
winnowing basket wings.’

Similarly, *pòp* is a human who has become a ghost that eats greedily. It can be anyone in the family who turns into *pòp*, as in (11).

- (11) *yaay hǐw tǎlòot weelaa*  
 Grandma hungry all time  
*thángthīi kin cù*  
 although eat very much  
*chǎn wáa kεε khoŋ*  
 I think she likely  
*pen pòp.*  
 be ghoul  
 ‘Grandma/old woman is hungry all the time though she eats a lot. I think she is probably a *pòp*.’

As for *phǐi-dùut-lûat*, it is a human that has become a blood-sucking ghost, as shown in (12).

- (12) *thxx khoŋ thùuk*  
 you might passive  
*phǐi-dùut lûat*  
 ghost that drinks people’s blood  
*kát nêe pró tua sīit*  
 bite sure because body pale  
*lé mii rooy khǐaw sǒoŋ*  
 and have scar teeth two  
*sīi bon khoŋ.*  
 piece on neck  
 ‘You might have been bitten by *phǐi-dùut-lûat* because your body is pale and there is a two-teeth bite scar on your neck.’

- (13) *chǎn líaŋ lûukkròok*  
 I have raised foetus ghost  
*mǔan lûuk chǎn phûut*  
 like child I speak  
*khàp khǎw bǎy-bǎy*  
 with him often

‘I have raised the foetus ghost like my child. I speak to him often.’

### The fourth level: *specific*

In this section, we will show specific terms under the *generic* level. Altogether thirty three **specific** ghost categories were found. Nineteen specific categories are under *phǐi-sǎaŋ-theewadaa* ‘good spirit’, twelve under *phǐi-hàa-saataan* or *phûut-phǐi-piisàat* ‘bad spirit,’ and two under *phǐi-dùut-lûat* ‘blood sucking ghost.’ Table 6 shows the specific categories under the generic *phǐi-sǎaŋ-theewadaa* ‘good spirit’, Table 7 shows those under *phǐi-hàa-saataan* or *phûut-phǐi-piisàat* ‘bad spirit,’ and Table 8 shows the two categories under *phǐi-dùut-lûat* ‘blood sucking ghost.’

**Table 6: Specific ghost categories under the generic *phǐi-sǎaŋ-theewadaa* ‘good spirit’**

<i>Generic: phǐi-sǎaŋ-theewadaa</i> ‘good spirit’		
<i>Specific</i>	<b>English equivalent</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
<i>mĕ̄ɛ-yâa-naaŋ</i> แม่ย่านาง	‘female guardian spirit of a boat’	The goddess guardian of boats, carts, cars and other vehicles. Those who believe in this ghost need to offer bribes and colorful garments to her so that she will protect them.
<i>theephaa-ráak</i> เทพารักษ์ or <i>rúkkhà-theewadaa</i> รุกขเทวดา	‘male guardian spirit of a tree’	A spirit dwelling in a particular tree in the forest who is in charge of protecting trees from being cut by humans.
<i>pùu-sǒom</i> ปู่โสม	‘old male guardian spirit of treasure’	The spirit of a very old man who is believed to be unable to leave his possessions. Therefore, it has to guard his property forever.
<i>câaw-khǎw</i> เจ้าเขา	‘spirit of a mountain’	A spirit who is more powerful than other spirits in a particular mountain. Most people who pass by have to bribe or pay respect to it so as to be protected from mysterious harm. This term usually occurs with <i>câaw-pàa</i> ‘spirit of a forest’ to form a semantic doublet: <i>câaw-pàa-câaw-khǎw</i> ‘spirits of forests and mountains’
<i>câaw-pàa</i> เจ้าป่า	‘spirit of a forest’	A spirit which has more special powers than other neighboring spirits in a particular forest. People who pass by have to offer to pay respect to it so as to be protected from mysterious harm. This term usually occurs with <i>câaw-khǎw</i> ‘spirit of a mountain’ to form a semantic doublet: <i>câaw-pàa-câaw-khǎw</i> ‘spirits of forests and mountains’
<i>mĕ̄ɛ-phoosòp</i> แม่โพสพ	‘goddess of rice’	The female spirit which protects all paddy rice fields.
<i>mĕ̄ɛ-khoŋkhaa</i> แม่คงคา	‘goddess of a river’	The female spirit which protects rivers
<i>mĕ̄ɛ-thooranii</i> แม่ธรณี	‘goddess of land’	The female spirit which protects land.
<i>theewadaa</i> เทวดา	‘angel’	A male or female deity who has a beautiful seductive body and dwells with joy in heaven. He or she has more ability and power than humans.

<i>phrá-sūa-muaŋ</i> พระเสื้อเมือง	'guardian spirit of a city'	A spirit who dwells at the main shrine of a city. His duty is to guard the city.
<i>cāaw-phôo</i> เจ้าพ่อ	'benevolent male spirit'	A male spirit praised and bribed by believers who think that he can bring them fortune, prosperity or solve some difficulties they have undergone. A Thai style shrine is often established for his dwelling and as a symbol of people's respect for him.
<i>cāaw-mêe</i> เจ้าแม่	'benevolent female spirit'	Similar to <i>cāaw-phôo</i> 'benevolent male spirit,' this term denotes a female spirit who is praised and bribed by surrounding people because they believe that she can bring them fortune, prosperity or solve some difficulties they have undergone. A Thai style shrine is often built for her dwelling and as a symbol of people's respect for her.
<i>cāaw-thīi</i> เจ้าที่ or <i>cāaw-thīi-cāaw-thaaŋ</i> เจ้าที่เจ้าทาง	'guardian spirit of a place'	A spirit that haunts a particular place previously owned by him/her when he or she was alive. It is believed that this demon helps protect the place from bad spirits or disasters.
<i>phrá-phuum</i> พระภูมิ	'male guardian spirit dwelling in a spirit house'	A respectable male spirit invited by the owner of a place to dwell in a shrine (called a "spirit house") in a yard. People believe that this spirit will make them prosperous, healthy and protect the house from misfortune.
<i>phǐi-bāan-phǐi-ruan</i> ผีบ้านผีเรือน	'house spirit'	A spirit that protects a house, it is believed that this spirit is the ancestor of the house's owner. It protects all the members of the house.
<i>mêe-súuu</i> แม่ซู่	'female spirit that protects an infant'	The spirit whose duty is to protect an infant from any harm. It takes care of the baby until it becomes two/three years old.
<i>naaŋ-kwàk</i> นางกวัก	'female spirit who attracts customers'	A female spirit represented by a miniature figure poses by sitting and raising one of her hands to beckon people. It is believed that she can persuade customers to purchase goods in the store or bring prosperity to the owner who bribes her.
<i>kūman -thooŋ</i> กุมารทอง	'golden child spirit'	A child spirit dwelling inside a miniature childhood stucco or wooden figure. It is believed that its owner needs to bribe it with food or other things it likes.

<p><i>rákyom</i> ရက်ဃ</p>	<p>‘twin children ghosts’</p>	<p>The ghosts of twin children (one male, one female) in the shapes of wooden carved miniature twin figures. It is believed that these doll ghosts feed on sandalwood oil and work as guardians of people and their houses.</p>
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As shown in Table 6, all the terms represent nineteen categories of ‘good spirit,’ but they differ in terms of gender. For example, The word *câaw-phôo* ‘benevolent male spirit’, *pùu-sôom* ‘old male guardian spirit of treasure’ are male but *câaw-mêe* ‘benevolent female spirit’, *mêe-phoosòp* ‘goddess of rice’, *mêe-súuu* ‘female spirit that protects an infant’ are female.

The dwelling place also distinguishes one specific ghost term from another. For example, *theewadaa* ‘angel’ resides in heaven, *phrá-phuum* ‘a male guardian spirit of land’ dwells in a spirit house, *phǐi-bâan-phǐi-rwan* ‘house spirit’ resides in the house.

Age is another factor that differentiates specific ghost terms. While, people see the image of *pùu-sôom* ‘old male guardian spirit of treasure’ as an old spirit, they see *rákyom* ‘twin children ghosts’, and *kùman-thooŋ* the ‘golden child spirit,’ as children.

Normally, people pray to *phǐi-săaŋ-theewadaa* ‘good spirit’ asking it to help, to prevent and to do anything that makes them feel happier. Most of the prayers concern the situations people cannot control. People also give bribes, such as a reward or a gift. The amount of the bribe depends on the degree of work.

The more difficult for the wish to come true, the bigger bribe. The following are examples of some of those ghost terms in sentences.

(14) *coon mây klâa khùt ceedii*  
thief not dare dig pagoda  
*boraan pró klua*  
old because afraid of  
*thùuk pùu-sôom loŋthôot*  
Passive old male spirit punish  
‘Thieves don’t dare to dig up the old pagoda because they are afraid of *pùu-soom*.’

(15) *chǎn thawaay námdeey*  
I give red soda  
*kùman-thooŋ lé rákyom*  
golden child spirit and twin children ghost  
*thùuk wan pûathîi thǎn*  
every day for they  
*ca chûay hây chǎn*  
will help give I  
*thùuk hǎy.*  
won lottery

‘I offered red-soda to *kùman-thooŋ* and *rákyom* everyday, so that they would help me win a lottery prize.’

With reference to *phǐi-hàa-saataan* or *phúut-phǐi-piisàat* ‘bad spirit’ twelve categories are found, as can be seen in Table 7.

**Table 7: Specific ghost categories under *phǐi-hàa-saataan* or *phuut-phǐi-piisàat* ‘bad spirit’**

<i>Generic: phǐi-hàa-saataan</i> or <i>phuut-phǐi-piisàat</i> ‘bad spirit’		
<i>Specific</i>	<b>English equivalent</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
<i>phǐi-hàa</i> ผีท่า	‘bad spirit causing an epidemic’	A dreadfully bad spirit dwelling in water and causing an epidemic. In the past people who died from cholera due to drinking infected water were believed to die because of this bad spirit.
<i>naaη-máay</i> นางไม้	‘female spirit of a tree’	A female spirit dwelling in any kind of tree, dressed in a white traditional Thai costume. It is believed that she can harm or kill people in cases where her occupied trees are cut without asking for permission or without bribing her.
<i>phǐi-ηúak</i> ผีเงือก	‘mermaid ghost’	A spirit that dwells in fresh water, such as a pond or a river. She can harm people. Her appearance is similar to that of a woman with long hair. She likes combing her hair at twilight.
<i>prèet</i> เปรต	‘tall evil ghost’	A tortured ghost which is extremely tall, very bony and has hideously frizzy hair. It has a tiny mouth of a needle’s eye size. Therefore, it suffers greatly from hunger because it cannot eat much. Thai people believe that its existence is a result of the wicked deeds it did in the past and it dwells in hell.
<i>yommabaan</i> ยมบาล	‘the chief guardian of hell’	The chief ghost who is in charge of judging all the dead and torturing all sinners. He has a dark complexion and two long horns on his head.
<i>yommathúut</i> ยมทูต	‘guardian of hell’	The ghost who works in hell. He takes a human’s soul to hell.
<i>phǐi-rêerôn</i> ผีเร่ร่อน	‘stray ghost’	A ghost which has no particular place to dwell. It is said that this ghost used to be a wicked man.
<i>piisàat</i> ปีศาจ	‘devil’	A hideous and terrifying demon or devil who harms and haunts people.
<i>phǐi-pàa</i> ผีป่า	‘jungle demon’	A jungle demon believed to belong to a person who died in a forest. This demon cannot go anywhere because he has no one to make a merit for him.
<i>phǐi-thalee</i> ผีทะเล	‘sea ghost’	The ghost of a person who drowned in the sea.

<p><i>phǐi-náam</i> ผีน้ำ or <i>phǐi-praay</i> ผีพราย or <i>praay-náam</i> พราย น้ำ</p>	<p>‘water ghost’</p>	<p>The water ghost of a person drowned in a pond or a river.</p>
<p><i>phǐi-taay-thán-klom</i> ผีตายทั้งกลม or <i>phǐi-taay-thóoy-klom</i> ผีตายท้องกลม</p>	<p>‘female ghost dying during pregnancy’</p>	<p>A female ghost who died during pregnancy or while delivering her baby.</p>

All the ghost terms representing the twelve ghost categories share the same feature of being ‘bad spirit.’ Specifically, they are differentiated by other features, such as dwelling place, duty, gender, etc. For example, *phǐi-hàa* ‘bad spirit causing an epidemic’ and *phǐi-ŋúak* ‘mermaid ghost,’ dwell in water, while *prèet* ‘tall evil ghost,’ *yommabaan* ‘the chief guardian of hell,’ and *yommathûut* ‘guardian of hell,’ dwell in hell. The following are examples of the specific ghost terms under the ‘bad spirit’ generic term.

(16) *nâa náam mák dâyyin*  
time water often hear  
*sǎŋróoy plèek plèek*  
sound queer strange  
*khǒoy phǐi-hàa*  
of bad spirit causing epidemic  
*thîi kamlay plòoy pít*  
that being release poison  
*loŋ náam*.  
fall water  
‘In the rainy season, we often heard the strange sound of *phǐi-hàa* releasing poison into the water.’

(17) *naaŋ-máay cà tham*  
female spirit of a tree will make  
*ráy khon thîi may khoo*  
hurt person who not ask  
*ʔànúyâat kòon tàt máay*.  
permit before cut down tree  
‘*naaŋ-máay* will hurt anyone who cuts down the tree without permission.’

(18) *kray thúp tii póc*  
anyone hit beat (his) father  
*mêe mûa taay cà*  
mother when(he) die will  
*klaaypen prèet*.  
become evil tall ghost  
‘Anyone who hurts his parents will turn into *prèet* when he passes away.’

(19) *ʔyàa lén nám naay*  
do not play water in  
*weelaa khlaaŋ khuum*  
time middle night  
*phǐi-praay cà duŋ*  
water ghost will pull  
*khǎa tham-háy raw com*  
legs make us drown  
*nám taay*.  
water die  
‘Don’t play in the water at night. The ‘water ghost’ will drown us.’

- (20) *tháa máy ʔyàak thùuk*  
 If not want passive  
*phǐi-pàa kháa taay*  
 jungle demon kill die  
*tóon sùat-mon kòon*  
 must pray before  
*kháw pàa thúk khráj.*  
 enter jungle every time  
 ‘If you don’t want to be killed by  
 the ‘jungle demon,’ you have to  
 pray every time before you enter the  
 jungle.’

**Table 8: Specific ghost categories under the generic *phǐi-dùut-lûat* ‘blood sucking ghost’**

<i>Specific: phǐi-dùut-lûat</i> ‘blood sucking ghost’		
<i>Varietal</i>	<b>English equivalent</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
<i>phǐi-díp</i> ผีดิบ	‘uncremated ghost’	A Chinese court ghost recognized by its heavy bouncing instead of walking. The word <i>díp</i> means ‘raw.’ This kind of ghost has not been cremated.
<i>drêk-khiw-lâa</i> <sup>5</sup> แดร์กคว ลา	‘dracula’	A blood drinking demon whose sucks blood from a victim, who will soon become another demon like him. He hates garlic and sunlight.

As shown in Table 8, neither *drêk-khiw-lâa* ‘dracula’ nor *phǐi-díp* ‘uncremated ghost’ appear in daylight. They are both considered sub-categories of *phǐi-dùut-lûat* ‘blood sucking ghost’ as can be seen in the following examples.

- (21) *chǎn hēn*  
 I see  
*phǐi-dùut-lûat*  
 ghost that drinks people’s blood  
*plɛɛŋrâaŋ pɛn*  
 transfigure be  
*kháaŋkhaaw bin nǐi*  
 bat fly escape  
*pay man cà tóon pɛn*  
 away it will must be  
*drêk-khiw-lâa nêɛ nêɛ.*  
 Dracula sure sure  
 ‘I saw *phǐi-dùut-lûat* change  
 into a bat and fly away. It must be  
 dracula.’
- (22) *phǐi díp chôop*  
 uncremated ghost like  
*dùut lûut càak lamkhoo*  
 drink blood from neck  
*khóŋ dèk.*  
 of children  
 ‘The uncremated ghost likes drinking  
 blood from children’s necks.’

<sup>5</sup> This term *drêk-khiw-lâa* ‘dracula’ is the borrowed from the Western term.

**The fifth level: *varietal***

The last level of the folk taxonomy of ghost terms in Thai is the *varietal* level. There are only six categories in this last level. Four of them are sub-categories of *naaŋ-máay* ‘female spirit of a tree,’ and two are under *theewadaa* ‘angel.’

Table 9 shows varietal categories under *naaŋ-máay* ‘female spirit of a tree’ and Table 10 shows varietal categories under *theewadaa* ‘angel.’

**Table 9: *Varietal* ghost categories under the *specific* *naaŋ-máay* ‘female spirit of a tree’**

<i>Specific: naaŋ-máay</i> ‘female spirit of a tree’		
<i>Varietal</i>	English equivalent	Meaning
<i>naaŋ-tàkhian</i> นางตะเคียน	‘female spirit of a <i>ta-khian</i> tree’	A female spirit who dwells in <i>Malabar ironwood</i> . She is dressed in a white traditional Thai costume. It is believed that she can haunt and hurt people. She can even kill or possess a person so as to make him insane.
<i>naaŋ-taani</i> นางตานี	‘female spirit of a banana tree’	A female spirit dwelling in a banana tree. She is dressed in a greenish traditional Thai costume. It is said that a man who courts her affectionately for three days will get her as a wife. However, if he treats her badly, she will break his neck and kill him.
<i>câaw-mêe-say</i> เจ้าแม่ไทร	‘female spirit of a banyan tree’	A female spirit who dwells in a banyan tree. She is respected and offered bribes by those who have faith in her. A Thai style shrine is erected for her dwelling and as a symbol of respect for her.
<i>câaw-mêe-mákhăam</i> เจ้าแม่มะขาม	‘female spirit of a tamarind tree’	A female spirit who dwells in a tamarind tree. She is bribed by people, who also establish a spirit house for her.

As shown in Table 9 the four varietal terms representing the four sub-categories of *naaŋ-máay* ‘female spirit of a tree’ share the same important features— [+spirit of a tree], and [+female] but they still differ from each other by the characteristic of their dwelling in different kinds of tree. For instance, *naaŋ-tàkhian* signifies a female spirit dwelling in the *ta-khian* tree, *naaŋ-taani* dwelling in a

banana tree, *câaw-mêe-say* in a banyan tree and *câaw-mêe-mákhăam* in a tamarind tree.

Because they are under the generic level of *phǐi-hàa-saataan* or *phuut-phǐi-piisàat* ‘bad spirit,’ Thai people see them as malevolent spirits who dwell in trees, as shown in the following examples.

(23) *naay weelaa klaaη khuum*  
 at period middle night  
*thâa hěn phûu-yǐη yuum*  
 if see woman stand  
*khon diaw tây tôn*  
 man one under tree  
*tâkian hây rĭip nĭi*  
 ta-kian must quickly to run  
*pró nân khuum*  
 because she is  
*phĭi naaη-tâkian.*  
 spirit female *ta-kian* tree spirit  
 ‘At night, if you see a woman  
 standing alone under the *ta-kian* tree,  
 you must run away because she is a  
 spirit of the *ta-kian* tree.’

(24) *ʔyâa plùuk tôn klûay*  
 do not plant tree banana  
*taanii nay khèet bán*  
 taa-nii in area home  
*ป้ວηkan naaη-taanii*  
 protect female banana tree spirit  
*cà ma tham ráay raw.*  
 will come make hurt us  
 ‘Don’t plant *ta-nii* banana tree in the  
 home area because the spirit of the  
 banana tree will come and hurt us.’

Under the specific term *theewadaa* ‘angel’ there are two varietal categories: *thêep -thídaa* or *naaη-fáa* ‘female deity’ and *thêep* ‘male deity’; *thêep -thídaa* or *naaη-fáa* ‘female deity’ is female, while *thêep* ‘male deity’ is male, as shown in Table 10.

**Table 10: Varietal ghost categories under the specific *theewadaa* ‘angel’**

<i>Specific: theewadaa</i> ‘angel’		
Varietal	English equivalent	Meaning
<i>thêep -thídaa</i> เทพธิดา or <i>naaη-fáa</i> นางฟ้า	‘female deity’	A female deity who has a beautiful and seductive physical appearance and dwells blissfully in heaven.
<i>thêep</i> เทพ	‘male deity’	A male deity who has a handsome and seductive physical appearance. He dwells with extreme joy in heaven.

The term *thêep-thídaa* or *naaη-fáa* ‘female deity’ shares the same characteristics with *thêep* ‘male deity’ that is [+good spirit in heaven] and Thai people respect them. It is believed that if we regularly make merit and behave well, we will be born again as a *thêep* ‘male deity,’ or *thêep -thídaa* ‘female deity.’ This shows that Thai people have faith in life after death, as seen in the following sentence.

(25) *hàak tham khwaamdii lē*  
 If do goodness and  
*mii bun mâak phoo*  
 have goodness many enough  
*cà dây pay kḥḥt nay*  
 will get go born in  
*sàwǎn phûuchaay cà*  
 heaven man will  
*klaaypen thêp tēē*

become male deity but  
*phûuyǐŋ cà klaaypen*  
 woman will become  
*thêep-thídaa rǔũũ*  
 female deity or  
*naaŋ-fáa* .  
 female deity  
 'If you are good and make enough  
 merit, you will be born again in  
 heaven. The man will become  
 a *thêep* and the woman will become  
 a *thêep-thídaa* or *naaŋ-fáa*.'

## 5. Conclusion

In the preceding pages, we have shown a system of ghosts and spirits in Thai culture. It resulted from an ethnosemantic analysis of ghost terms in Thai. The findings shown here are an arrangement of all the ghost terms into a folk taxonomy of five levels based on Berlin (1992): *unique beginner, life form, generic, specific and varietal*. Our decision as to which terms refer to which levels of the taxonomy depends on the semantic features of the ghost terms elicited from informants who are native speakers of Central Thai. Also, the placement of each term in the hierarchy is also based on the suggestion whether the term contrasts with another term or is included in it. In brief, our conclusion is not based on our own logical thinking or scientific knowledge but on the folk world view.

The findings imply that Thai people are close to nature. Indeed, most ghost terms show that ghosts have fixed dwellings, for example, trees, rivers, mountains, forests, rice fields, etc.

It has been found that only female ghost terms have titles as part of their structure, such as *naaŋ* 'female title' and *mêe* 'mother' which marks the female gender

e.g. *naaŋ-máay* 'female tree spirit', *naaŋ-taani* 'female banana tree spirit', *naaŋ-takian* 'female spirit of a kind of tree named *ta-kian*, *mêe-yâa-naaŋ* 'guardian goddess of boats', *mêe-phoosòp* 'goddess of rice' and *mêe-thooranii* 'goddess of the land' etc. The findings show that terms with *naaŋ-* signify bad spirits and those with *mêe-* good spirits. Also, it may be interesting to note that all male ghost terms are unmarked; they do not begin with a title.

In conclusion, the analysis of ghost terms presented in this study reveals the Thai cognition of ghost system. It also implies that in that Thai cognition, ghosts do exist because there are ghost terms to represent them. Although they cannot be seen, people perceive that they are all around.

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