

สหายสัตว์เลี้ยงและมิติทางวัฒนธรรม: การศึกษาเชิงเปรียบเทียบระหว่างอิตาลีและไทย

COMPANION ANIMALS AND CULTURAL PERCEPTIONS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF ITALY AND THAILAND

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บทคัดย่อ

ในช่วงไม่กี่ปีที่ผ่านมา การมีสัตว์เลี้ยงหรือเลี้ยงสัตว์เพื่อเป็นเพื่อนในครอบครัวได้กลายเป็นเรื่องที่พบเห็นได้บ่อยขึ้นอย่างต่อเนื่อง หลายคนมองว่าสัตว์เหล่านี้เป็นทั้งเพื่อนสนิท เป็นเสมือนพี่น้อง หรือแม่กระทั้งเสมือนบุตร ความผูกพันทางอารมณ์ระหว่างมนุษย์กับสัตว์เลี้ยงสามารถเห็นได้อย่างชัดเจนไม่ว่าจะเป็นภาพของแมวลายที่เล่นกับเด็ก ๆ ในสวน หรือสุนัขที่ช่วยเหลือผู้พิการทางการมองเห็น แม้ความสัมพันธ์เหล่านี้จะมีบทบาทสำคัญเพิ่มขึ้นในสังคม แต่กลับมีช่องว่างในงานวิจัยระดับนานาชาติโดยเฉพาะในประเด็นที่ว่าวัฒนธรรมและศาสนา มีอิทธิพลต่อปฏิสัมพันธ์ระหว่างมนุษย์กับสัตว์เลี้ยงอย่างไร โดยการศึกษาเปรียบเทียบระหว่างประเทศไทยและอิตาลี โดยในอิตาลี สังคมให้ความสำคัญกับการรู้และสัตว์เลี้ยงด้วยความเมตตาและให้คุณค่าในฐานะสมาชิกในครอบครัว ขณะที่ใน

ประเทศไทย แนวโน้มการเลี้ยงสัตว์ในฐานะ “ลูก” หรือ “สมาชิกในครอบครัว” ได้รับความนิยมเพิ่มขึ้น โดยเฉพาะในกลุ่มคนรุ่นใหม่ที่เลือกเลี้ยงสัตว์แทนการมีบุตร นอกจากนี้ การประกอบพิธีศพทางพุทธศาสนาให้กับสัตว์เลี้ยง ซึ่งมีความพิถีพิถันและมีแบบแผนคล้ายกับพิธีศพของมนุษย์ สะท้อนให้เห็นถึงความเชื่อว่าสัตว์ครัวได้รับการดูแลด้วยเมตตาและมีโอกาสไปสู่พุทธภูมิที่ดีกว่าในชาติหน้า ปรากฏการณ์นี้ไม่เพียงชี้ให้เห็นถึงการเปลี่ยนแปลงในคุณค่าทางสังคมและวัฒนธรรม แต่ยังตอกย้ำอิทธิพลของหลักธรรมคำสอนในพุทธศาสนาที่ฝัง根柢ในวัฒนธรรมไทย แม้ว่าอิตาลีและไทยจะมีความแตกต่างกันอย่างชัดเจนในด้านวัฒนธรรมและภูมิหลังทางศาสนา แต่ทั้งสองประเทศต่างก็แสดงให้เห็นถึงความห่วงใยและบูรณาการสัตว์เลี้ยงเข้าไปเป็นส่วนหนึ่งของพื้นที่ ช่วงเวลา และวิถีชีวิตในแต่ละวัน

คำสำคัญ: สัตว์เลี้ยง อิตาลี ไทย วัฒนธรรม สังคม

Abstract

In recent years, pets or companion animals in households have become increasingly common. Many people view animals as best friends, pseudo-siblings, or even pseudo-children. The emotional bond between humans and their pets is evident from tabby cats playing with children in gardens to dogs assisting individuals with vision impairments. Despite the growing significance of these relationships, there is a notable gap in the international literature regarding how cultural and religious frameworks shape human-pet interactions, mainly through cross-national comparisons. This paper examines the distinct ways Italy and Thailand engage with companion animals. In Italy, there is a strong societal commitment to humanely treating pets, viewing them as cherished family members. On the other hand, in Thailand, the trend of pet parenting, where pets are regarded as family members, has been gaining increasing popularity, particularly among younger generations who choose to raise pets instead of having children. Additionally, the practice of holding Buddhist funeral ceremonies for pets, conducted with great attention to detail and rituals resembling those of human funerals, reflects the belief that pets should be treated with compassion and allowed a better rebirth in the next life. This phenomenon not only signifies shifts in societal values and cultural transformations but also underscores the influence of Buddhist teachings within Thai culture. Although Italy and Thailand are vastly different, they both demonstrate care, incorporating companion animals into everyday places, spaces, and times.

Keywords: pets, Italy, Thailand, culture, society

Introduction

In most Western and Asian societies, pets are regarded as more than just animals. Bardina (2017) and Fox (2006) argue that in many families they are considered quasi-family members: owners give them names, address them in speech, care for their illnesses, and even mourn their loss (Serpell, 1996). Serpell (2003) underlines that such a practice, which he calls anthropomorphism, attributes human mental states and capacities to non-human beings. Haraway (2003) argues that relations between humans and pets cross species boundaries and unsettle the divide between one and the other. We can argue that differences between species determine how bonds with humans unfold. Dogs manifest overt sociability and return affection without delay. Cats are more emotionally reserved. They do not often show what they feel. Nonetheless, studies attest that they also forge bonds with owners, although these bonds assume forms unlike the demonstrative behaviour typical of dogs. Despite the significance of these interactions, international scholarship has given them little sustained attention, with comparative studies across cultures remaining rare.

The present paper responds to this absence by considering Italy and Thailand as comparative cases and asking what their similarities and differences reveal about the social ground from which they grow. Italy and Thailand were chosen because of their contrasting cultural and religious foundations, which shape distinctive patterns of treatment and care toward companion animals. Italy, with its Catholic heritage, treats pets as extensions of the household, a perception reinforced by legal codes on welfare, veterinary service, and burial practice. Thailand is influenced by Buddhist cosmology, karmic logic, and the pursuit of merit, which encourage more fluid attitudes toward non-

human beings, with stray populations accepted as part of community life and often sheltered in temple compounds. Practices such as Buddhist pet funerals illustrate how spiritual traditions intersect with changing household dynamics, particularly among younger generations who increasingly view pets as family members. By juxtaposing these distinct cultural and religious frameworks, while also considering socio-economic drivers such as population ageing in Italy and the expansion of the pet economy in Thailand, the comparison highlights how different societal forces shape similar trends in the humanization of pets. These contrasts are not only religious or cultural, Italy faces pronounced population ageing and a high share of single-person households, both conditions that magnify reliance on pets for companionship. Thailand, in contrast, is undergoing rapid urban growth, the rise of a middle class, and an expanding pet economy that increasingly commercializes ownership and care. The comparison is further sharpened by distinct legal and policy settings in each country. Taken together, these conditions explain why Italy and Thailand provide a suitable pair of cases for analysing pet parenting across cultural contexts.

Objectives

The article sheds light on the emotional connection between people and their pets. It tests how seeing pets as integral parts of their lives and valuing them intrinsically pushes individuals to enjoy their pets' presence when they are alive. Lastly, the manuscript examines whether there are differences and similarities between Italy and Thailand.

Theoretical Framework

This article is inspired by Human-Animal Studies (HAS) or Anthrozoology and Attachment Theory (AT), which offer complementary perspectives encompassing both sociocultural and emotional dimensions of human-animal engagement. HAS highlights that our interactions with animals are deeply embedded in cultural norms and values (DeMello, 2012). One of the primary concepts in HAS is anthropomorphism, which involves attributing human characteristics and emotions to non-humans. This process is fundamental to understanding how our communities perceive and treat pets. Anthropomorphism facilitates emotional inter-species nexuses because it permits people to relate to animals on a personal level (Serpell, 2003).

This phenomenon explains why pets often occupy roles within human groups that mirror those of family members (Alger & Alger, 2003). Moreover, contemporary society increasingly sees them buried, mourned, and commemorated. DeMello (2016) observes various options for handling the death of a companion animal, from burial to incorporating the animal's remains into jewelry or artwork. Some animals are immortalized in literature or art, such as statues and books. Occasionally, pets are mentioned in human obituaries as surviving kin, thus ensuring their owners are remembered alongside their cherished animals (Wilson, 1998). Per attachment theory, humans are inherently social and have a fundamental need for belonging (Baumeister & Tice, 1988). People frequently form attachments to objects, concepts, and abstractions, fulfilling their desire for connection and belonging. A prominent and compelling example of this is the attachment humans have with pets. One striking case is that of Tommasino, a cat in Italy who, in 2011, inherited more than €10 million after his owner bequeathed

bank accounts and real estate to the beloved pet in her will (Thai PBS, 2011). Although the impact of pets on human wellbeing has been studied, the underlying reasons for this bond are not fully understood. Human-animal linkages differ from interpersonal ones in several unique ways, such as the ability to unilaterally choose animal companions and the reduced fear of being judged by them. Bowlby (1969) hypothesizes that attachment systems activate in threatening situations. Recent studies indicate that as people age, peers often replace parents as primary attachment figures and separation from close others causes significant distress (Fraley & Shaver, 1998). Similar patterns are observed in human-animal relationships, with pets providing both safe haven and secure base functions. The strength of the human-pet bond is evident in the intense grief experienced when pets are injured or die (Hunt & Padilla, 2006). This bereavement process mirrors the stages of human attachment loss: protest, despair, and detachment (Parkes, 2013).

The authors also approached Posthumanism as it accepts non-human minorities such as cats, dogs, and other pets and their connection to political and ethical dimensions. While acknowledging the human-nonhuman continuum, Posthumanism moves around the concept of relationality and not individual agency, critiquing the autonomous liberal subject that manipulates passive nature. It also critiques hierarchical anthropocentrism and encourages a nuanced examination of human privilege. Acknowledging Kopnina's (2022) call for inclusive pluralism, the authors underline the need for sociology to remain open to conflicting views, especially those concerning non-human life. What HAS and Posthumanism share with one another (and how they concomitantly impact attachment theory), of course, is a commitment to anti-anthropocentric thinking, to the idea that the human is not at the Centre of the universe

and that, in fact, the concept of human should not be granted any operational centrality, philosophically speaking. Therefore, we can also argue that proponents of object-oriented ontology are right when they say that the human is just one of many types of objects.

Pets and Humans

We learn from Ingold (2021) that the bond between human and animals emerged from early interactions, such as when people observed their behavior for survival. Over time, this mutual trust evolved into domestication, with wolves becoming dogs as they stopped viewing us as threats. Domestication was not a one-way process—humans, too, changed emotionally, becoming more nurturing and cooperative. Oxytocin, often referred to as the love hormone, allegedly plays a pivotal role in both human-human and human-animal bonds. Originally identified as a hormone that induces labor and lactation, research has shown that it also promotes emotional attachment, reduces fear, and fosters trust. Experiments with pet owners and therapy animals demonstrate that interactions cause oxytocin levels to rise in both species, suggesting a mutual biological feedback loop. A 2003 study by Johannes Odendaal and Roy Meintjes confirmed that friendly encounters between dogs and people elevate oxytocin levels. For Olmert, selective breeding over thousands of years created animals that were not just functional assets but companions. The unique oxytocin-fueled process contributed to human civilization's development.

Pets and Environment

Though much of the literature accentuates the cultural and emotional importance of companion animals, critics contend that affection is not the only story,

for pet ownership entails hidden costs, above all its environmental toll. In this context, Frischmann (2010) advocates choices that lessen ecological harm rather than exacerbate it. He posits that diet is a central issue. The reason is that meat-based feeding places a burden on farming systems. It also depletes scarce resources such as land, water, and fossil fuels, which are already under strain from human demand. Frischmann notes that familiar ingredients—beef, chicken, and fish—amplify this burden when their production proceeds along unsustainable paths, since livestock production generates methane emissions, drives deforestation, and accelerates water pollution. The food itself is only part of the picture, as packaging contributes additional waste, producing streams of plastic that recycling systems wrestle to absorb. Beyond feeding and packaging, another danger arises, for the illegal wildlife trade erodes biodiversity and pulls wild animals into human markets. When exotic species are released into non-native habitats, they do not simply adapt; they unbalance ecosystems by preying on or competing with local species.

From Anthropomorphism to Memorialization of Pets

In Italy, pet owners who bury their animals are not a unique or extreme group within society, either in the country or elsewhere in the West (DeMello, 2016). Instead, they often have pronounced versions of widely held beliefs that reduce the distinction between humans and non-humans. Naming conventions for pets in Italy usually distinguish animals by sex, and most pets receive affectionate nicknames like Ciccio (chubby) or Tesoro della Mamma (mom's treasure) on remembrance cards. Pets are referred to with personal pronouns (he or she) rather than "it," further blurring the boundaries between humans and animals. In some regions, it has become possible for people to have their companion animals buried with them or in a separate urn after

cremation. However, there are still restrictions, such as prohibitions on including the pet's name, photo, and birth and death dates on the memorial (see Redazione Firenze, 2025; ANSA, 2025). In Italy, systematic evidence on whether bereaved pet owners seek professional psychological support remains scarce. What can be observed, however, is the gradual spread of pet loss support groups across the country, where participants often describe relief in sharing their experiences with others facing similar grief. For example, Tralli (2010) unveils that the University of Bologna established an online support system to help individuals.

Most Christian Catholic Italians feel that their companion animals possess immortal souls akin to theirs (Law, 1983). Whereas Canon Law limits ecclesiastical services for animals (e.g. prohibitions on bringing animals inside churches under normal circumstances, cf. Canon 88) (Catholic Church, 1983), Christian tradition nonetheless includes practices such as the blessing of animals (e.g. in the Roman Book of Blessings), indicating partial liturgical recognition. This does not imply that the Church is inimical to animals. Religious teachings favorably address the union between humans and non-humans, acknowledging the latter as God's creations and deserving of care and kindness.

Italian approach Animal Welfare

Italy takes animal welfare seriously, both for owned and stray animals. Growing public sensitivity is reflected in judicial and legislative measures aimed at improving conditions, although exceptions remain in contexts such as farms, circuses, zoos, and research facilities. A decisive step forward was the recognition of animals as sentient beings (*esseri senzienti*) rather than mere objects (*beni mobili*). Law No.189 of 20 July

2004 (Legge 20 luglio 2004, n. 189) introduced Articles 544-bis to 544-sexies into the Italian Penal Code (Codice penale). It criminalizes cruelty (maltrattamento), the organization of fights (combattimenti tra animali), and the use of animals in clandestine competitions (competizioni clandestine), prescribing imprisonment and fines. Furthermore, Article 727 of the Penal Code (art. 727 c.p.) addresses abandonment (abbandono) and the keeping of animals in conditions incompatible with their nature (condizioni incompatibili con la loro natura) that cause serious suffering (gravi sofferenze). Chiefly, the same normative prohibits the illegal trade of pets (commercio illecito di animali da compagnia) and the sale of products derived from their exploitation. On top of that, Italian law affirms the social value of animals in therapy (pet therapy), rehabilitation (riabilitazione), and public events (manifestazioni pubbliche), embedding their welfare within broader health and ethical frameworks. This signals a cultural and legal 'revolution' that increasingly treats animals as beings worthy of respect (rispetto) rather than as property (proprietà).

The protection of stray animals rests on Law No. 281 of 14 August 1991 (Legge quadro 14 agosto 1991, n. 281), the national framework on companion animals and stray population control (prevenzione del randagismo). It forbids the euthanasia of captured dogs and cats except when gravely ill (gravemente malati e incurabili) or demonstrably dangerous (di comprovata pericolosità). Free-living cats (gatti in libertà) are granted explicit protection: they may not be mistreated, must be sterilized by the competent health authority (autorità sanitaria competente), and must be readmitted into their colony (colonia felina), which they have a legal right to inhabit. This territorial safeguard made Italy one of the first European states to guarantee colony cats the right to remain

in their chosen habitats. Day-to-day care of colonies is entrusted to volunteer caretakers (tutori di colonie feline), often accredited by municipalities (comuni), who provide food, sterilization follow-up, and veterinary aid in line with hygiene and public health standards. Poignantly, Italian municipalities are obliged to fund sterilization programs and maintain shelters (canili sanitari), while regions (regioni) oversee registries (anagrafe canina). They also must coordinate enforcement strategies. Despite this advanced legal framework, shortcomings still exist. Many owners fail to respect minimum welfare standards (standard minimi di benessere), such as providing adequate shelter (riparo), veterinary care (cure veterinarie), and proper nutrition (alimentazione adeguata). Besides, enforcement is uneven across the country, with southern municipalities facing chronic difficulties in sterilization (sterilizzazione) and shelter management (gestione dei rifugi). These gaps expose the persistent distance between progressive legal norms and their implementation in practice.

Animal Welfare in Thailand

Animal rights and animal welfare, while interconnected, have different objectives. Animal rights emphasize the inherent value and entitlement of all living beings to live without exploitation. In contrast, animal welfare seeks to regulate human-animal relationships by ensuring animals are treated in ways that serve human needs—whether emotional, practical, or economic. This focus often results in unequal care, as animals are prioritized based on their perceived utility or emotional significance to humans. For example, companion animals typically receive better care and protection than livestock or wildlife, exposing societal biases (Lertkiattamrong, 2023). In 2025, the

Bangkok Metropolitan Administration announced a new regulation requiring all dog and cat owners in Bangkok to register and microchip their pets starting in January 2026 (Bangkok Post, 2025). This policy aims to reduce the number of stray animals within the city, mitigate the spread of rabies, and enhance owners' accountability. The new measure currently being implemented in Bangkok in order to establish a systematic pet database and reduce the number of stray animals. If this measure can be elevated to a national-level law, it would strengthen monitoring mechanisms and increase pet owners' accountability across all regions of Thailand.

In comparison with international practices, Italy has adopted a different approach by allowing pet owners to claim a 19% tax deduction on veterinary expenses under the "Pet Bonus for Families," which will come into effect in 2025 (Holidog Times, 2025). This policy reflects the use of economic incentives to encourage pet owners to consistently invest in the health and welfare of their animals. Therefore, integrating the approaches of both countries — namely, legal enforcement combined with tax benefits — could provide a balanced and effective framework for advancing animal welfare in Thailand in the long term. Such an approach would both address societal issues, such as stray animals, and create positive incentives for responsible and standardized pet healthcare.

In Asian cultures, the foundations of animal welfare are influenced by religious philosophies such as ahimsa—a concept of non-violence that promotes empathy and respect for all living beings. Rooted in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, this principle has long encouraged humane treatment. In Thailand, where Buddhism shapes moral life and everyday practice, ahimsa and metta (loving-kindness) provide an important ethical

framework for understanding human–animal relations. As Ven. Aggānandālañkāra (2023) argues, the first Buddhist precept of abstaining from killing underscores an obligation to avoid harming animals, encouraging humane and responsible treatment. This is reflected in Thai cultural practices such as the merit-making act of releasing animals, as well as in the growing trend of holding Buddhist funerals for pets, which symbolically extend religious compassion to companion animals.

However, the case of the Tiger Temple in Kanchanaburi reveals the tension between religious ideals and lived practice. Although the temple claimed to follow Buddhist compassion, critics argued that the exploitation of tigers for tourism contradicted the very principles of ahimsa it purported to uphold (Cohen, 2013). This divergence illustrates how cultural and religious values may be invoked rhetorically but not consistently applied in practice. From a broader perspective, Szucs (2012) shows that Asian religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism generally embed stronger commitments to non-injury and recognition of animals as participants in the cycle of reincarnation, leading to comparatively higher standards of animal care than traditions with more anthropocentric worldviews. Taken together, these studies reveal both the potential and the limitations of religious ethics as a foundation for animal welfare: while Buddhist and other Asian philosophies provide powerful moral arguments for compassion toward animals, the translation of these ideals into consistent practice remains uneven.

However, in Western societies, modern animal rights movements have largely evolved as secular initiatives, distinct from religious doctrines. Early reforms focused on preventing cruelty, with historical efforts aimed at reducing the harsh treatment of

animals used for labor and production (Orzechowski, 2020). In Thailand, spiritual and cultural beliefs guide how animals are perceived and treated. Compassion toward animals is deeply connected to Buddhist teachings, which promote empathy for all sentient beings. This has influenced practices such as the increased care of companion animals and the growing trend of honoring pets through rituals and funerals. Community efforts to improve animal care are supported by advocacy groups that promote awareness and education on animal welfare, encouraging higher standards of treatment and accountability for mistreatment or neglect. Despite such advancements, challenges persist. The level of protection and care animals receive often depends on their role in human society, leading to ethical questions regarding uneven welfare standards. Animals regarded primarily for economic purposes, such as livestock and wildlife, may face fewer protections than pets or animals viewed as emotionally significant. These disparities highlight the ongoing debate about how societies can ensure humane and equitable treatment for all animals across different contexts.

Pet Parents: Emotional Bonds with Pets in Thailand

In Thailand, animals occupy a paramount position, deeply ingrained within cultural, emotional, and spiritual life. They function as companions, guardians, and emblems of prestige (Meaungjai, 2012). Dogs and cats, in particular, are cherished as indispensable household figures, receiving care analogous to that offered to human relatives. This relationship resonates with Buddhist teachings, which emphasize non-harming (ahimsa) and compassion (metta) toward all sentient beings, thereby extending empathy not only to humans but also to animals and other forms of life. Many

individuals invest substantial time and resources in safeguarding their pets, thereby cultivating enduring emotional bonds. Panta Puapipatselakul's thesis examines the confluence of feline companionship and digital trends, revealing pets' capacity to evoke introspection and nurture personal development. Beyond generating joy and serenity, these animals prompt humans to question anthropocentric views (Puapipatselakul, 2021). While her analysis is framed in a broader context, these insights can also be applied to the Thai setting, where digital culture increasingly shapes human–pet relationships and reinforces the growing perception of pets as family members. During the COVID-19 pandemic, human-animal relationships were significantly strengthened, with pets becoming essential sources of emotional support for their owners. This shift has contributed to the growth of Thailand's pet industry, aligning with changing household dynamics. According to a report by MGR Online (2023), Thailand's pet industry experienced a profit growth rate of 91% in 2023, with projections indicating that the sector will reach a market value of 66,748 million baht by 2026, reflecting an annual growth rate of 8.4%. The primary driver of this expansion is the evolving societal perception of pets as emotional companions. Sinichat Lekkrai, Deputy Minister of Commerce, has noted that these social changes have played a crucial role in stimulating the growth of the pet industry in Thailand (MGR Online, 2023). Additionally, a 2023 survey conducted by the College of Management, Mahidol University (CMMU) found that 49% of respondents identified as "pet parents," with an average annual expenditure of 14,200 baht per pet (MGR Online, 2023). This data reflects the increasing significance of pets in Thai society, further supporting the ongoing expansion of the pet industry.

Lifestyle changes, including the rise of smaller households and an aging population, have further elevated pets' importance in addressing emotional needs (Prachachat Business, 2021). The practice of "Pet Parenting" underlines a reconfiguration of human-animal interactions. Animals, once kept for functional purposes, now occupy places of deep emotional significance, akin to family members. This approach, especially popular among younger generations, signals a cultural metamorphosis toward mutual reliance. According to Krungthai COMPASS, Pet Humanization refers to treating pets as full-fledged family members, rather than just animals kept for companionship or utility. Unlike conventional pet ownership, which may regard animals simply as "companions," Pet Humanization elevates their status, with some pet owners even considering them equivalent to "children" (BrandAge, 2023). In this dynamic, pet owners assume the role of guardians, attentively overseeing the well-being and overall welfare of their pets as integral members of their household.

Chaisuwan's (2019) research, *Pets in Human Lives; Humans in Pet Lives*, delves into these evolving dynamics. Her exploration of Chihuahua owners underscores how these animals provide emotional anchorage, contributing to their caretakers' sense of self and creating spaces of psychological refuge. Chaisuwan highlights that pets often mirror their owners' personalities through grooming choices and accessories, reinforcing social identity and aspirations. These interactions illustrate how pets enrich human lives, fostering environments of reciprocal support and comfort. Economic behaviour increasingly conveys these intricate relationships. Surveys indicate that 65% of Thai pet owners regard their animals as integral to their households, driving higher expenditures on superior products and bespoke services. The market is forecasted to reach 75 billion

baht by 2024, propelled by heightened demand for holistic diets, wellness programs, and luxury care options (Department of Business Development, 2023). Therapeutic practices also evoke ancient traditions. Just as Japanese shamans enlisted animals as conduits of spiritual connection, modern therapists engage with therapy animals to facilitate emotional healing. These animals impart solace in times of distress, offering individuals navigating grief, anxiety, or psychological hardship a sense of grounding. Their presence signifies a transformation of pets from mere companions into indispensable partners in fostering emotional equilibrium and resilience.

Burial in Thai Beliefs and Buddhism: Ceremonies to Send Pets to the 'Dog Star/Cat Star'

Animals have long coexisted with humans, weaving themselves into the fabric of domestic life. In Thailand, pet funerals—rooted in Buddhist customs—have surged in popularity, providing grieving owners with a meaningful way to honor their beloved companions. These ceremonies often mirror human funerals, with monks performing rites believed to guide animals toward higher reincarnations. A common belief holds that creatures such as dogs and cats ascend to celestial realms like the “dog star” or “cat star.” While rural communities traditionally buried pets informally on private land, urbanization has prompted a demand for more elaborate cremation services, particularly in Bangkok (e.g., the daily pet funeral services at Klong Toey Nai temple with full Buddhist rites) (Reuters, 2010; The Nation, 2025). Over the years, what began as rare rituals has evolved into a widely accepted practice, offering emotional relief to those grappling with loss. Temples such as Wat Krathum Suea Pla in Soi On Nut 67, Bangkok, have embraced

this trend, hosting pet cremations in tranquil settings. These ceremonies unfold within Thai-style pavilions, surrounded by serene landscapes, Buddha statues, and the peaceful Prawet Buriom canal, creating an atmosphere that eases grief. Families can enhance the service with offerings, floral tributes, and personalized rituals, tailoring the experience to their needs. Accessible through online platforms, these services have attracted local and international clients, underscoring the growing appeal of formal pet memorials. The increasing demand for pet funerals has fostered specialized businesses catering to these needs.

According to Urban Creature (2019), Pet Funeral Thailand, founded by Teerawat Sae-Han, has expanded by addressing both the emotional and practical needs of pet owners. Teerawat highlights that the establishment of the business required extensive negotiations with temples to ensure religious customs were respected and aligned with community expectations. While some may perceive these ceremonies as excessive, they provide essential emotional closure for pet owners, allowing them to part with their pets in a dignified manner. The ceremonies include forgiveness chants, offerings to monks, and symbolic ash-scattering rituals, reinforcing their spiritual significance. Moreover, these services cater to a variety of species, such as turtles, fish, snakes, and rabbits, demonstrating the inclusivity of these funeral practices (Urban Creature, 2019).

As Thailand's urban landscape transforms, the need for innovative memorial solutions has grown, especially in areas where traditional burials are impractical. According to Sanook (2014), Pet Master provides a wide range of services, including pet transportation, water burials, and customized memorial products such as coffins, urns, and commemorative items. The company's founder, Ploysai Patsornsir, notes that

international clients have diverse expectations regarding pet funerals. Japanese and Chinese customers tend to favor aesthetic embellishments, while Western clients in Pattaya seek personalized and meaningful ceremonies. Additionally, high-density urban areas such as Sukhumvit, where space limitations restrict traditional burial options, have emerged as key locations for such services, addressing the evolving needs of contemporary pet owners (Sanook, 2014).

The rise of pet memorialization embodied a broader cultural ethos, intertwining personal loss, spirituality, and tradition. Buddhist principles encourage rituals aimed at generating merit, believed to aid both the pet's spiritual journey and the owner's healing process. Temples that offer these services operate as both sanctuaries for animals and communal spaces, underscoring the interconnectedness of human and non-human lives within Thailand's religious landscape. This blending of roles demonstrates the depth of affection many Thais feel toward their pets, positioning them as companions deserving of both care in life and honor in death.

Pet Ownership and Attitudes Toward Animals in Italy

Recent statistics show the growing role of companion animals in Italian households. In 2024, 37.7% of families owned pets, an increase of 4.6% from 2023, with dogs (41.8%) and cats (37.7%) being the most common. Surveys further indicate that 79% of pet owners regard their pets as family members, while 56% of Italians overall have at least one pet (Ipsos, as cited in La Stampa, 2024). Beyond ownership, many Italians oppose animal slaughter, hunting, fur use, and circuses; 7.2% identify as vegetarian and 2.3% as vegan. Financial commitment is also significant, with most owners

spending over €30 monthly on veterinary care and maintenance. Despite this cultural affinity, Italy still faces challenges, with an average of 384 animals abandoned per day in 2023 (La Stampa, 2024).

From a cultural-historical perspective, Italian attitudes toward animals are deeply rooted in longstanding symbolic associations. As Giardino and Zappatore (2023) show, dogs in Southern Italy have long been linked to the afterlife, with archaeological and ethnographic evidence of dog burials alongside humans. This enduring symbolic role reflects how animals are interwoven into Italian understandings of loyalty, death, and spirituality, extending beyond simple utilitarian relationships.

Contemporary practices, such as pet funerals and cremation services, also build upon these cultural traditions. According to Servizi Funebri Animali, Italy has more than 270 registered animal funeral service providers nationwide, illustrating the institutionalization of pets' place within human family life. Such rituals suggest that pets are not only companions in life but also honored in death, affirming their moral and emotional status within Italian households. (Servizi Funebri Animali, n.d.).

In addition, end-of-life decisions reveal the emotional complexity of human-animal bonds. Vonk, Bouma, and Dijkstra (2022) found that European pet owners often delayed euthanasia for cats compared to dogs, influenced by high empathy and attachment levels, which sometimes heightened guilt over timing decisions. This finding resonates with Italian patterns, where strong attachments and ritualized mourning highlight how empathy and cultural expectations shape caregiving choices.

These perspectives underscore that Italian pet ownership is not merely about rising statistics or economic spending. It represents a broader cultural phenomenon: one

where historical tradition, empathy-driven care, and institutionalized funerary practices converge to reinforce the perception of pets as true family members.

Continuities and Differences Between Italy and Thailand

Italy and Thailand exhibit a shared trend toward the increasing humanization of pets. In both countries, animals are no longer regarded merely as companions but embraced as integral members of the family. This anthropomorphism emerges in the way pets are named, nurtured, and memorialized. In Italy, the legal apparatus has developed to accommodate this transformation. Decreto Legislativo (Legislative Decree) No. 36 of 21 February 2005, which incorporates provisions of EU Regulation No. 1774/2002, stipulates that the remains of pets must be disposed of through regulated burial or cremation, expressly prohibiting abandonment or uncontrolled elimination. Owners are required to follow bureaucratic procedures immediately after death. For instance, they need to obtain veterinary certification of the cause of death and confirmation that the animal did not bite anyone in the preceding 15 days. The local health authority (ASL) must then be notified to cancel the pet from the municipal register. Failure to comply can result in fines, since carcasses are classified as Category 1 material under EU law, hence treated as hazardous for public health. Beyond the bureaucratic dimension, Italian practice tends to convey the emotional bonds between humans and pets. Cremation has become the most common option, with two recognised forms: collective cremation, in which remains are incinerated with those of other pets, and individual cremation, where the process is reserved for a single animal, often with the possibility for owners to attend and receive the ashes.

Similarly, in Thailand, the practice of Pet Parenting and the availability of elaborate funeral rites underscore the profound attachment many Thai families have toward their pets. However, the underlying frameworks of animal welfare in these countries diverge substantially. In Italy, there is a long-established commitment to animal protection. Animals are regarded as sentient beings, with codified rights and safeguards. This ensures that they receive honorable treatment throughout their lives and after death. Conversely, Thailand's approach is deeply anchored in cultural customs, with animal care practices shaped by Buddhist philosophy. Theological principles in Catholicism and Buddhism further illustrate divergent perspectives on the spiritual essence of animals. In Catholicism, animals are acknowledged as part of God's creation but are not generally considered to possess immortal souls. In contrast, Thai Buddhism embraces the concept of reincarnation, wherein animals can progress to higher forms of existence. This belief informs rituals such as pet funerals performed with Buddhist rites, intended to guide the pet's spirit toward a favorable rebirth.

Results

The analysis identified several prominent themes related to the anthropomorphizing and memorialization of pets in both Italy and Thailand. In Italy, animals are regarded as integral members of the household, with a deep cultural appreciation for their role in human life. Practices such as pet memorials, including burial or cremation rituals, demonstrate the emotional significance attached to these companions. Italy's approach to pet parenting is rooted less in religious tradition and more in legal and social frameworks that formally recognize animals as sentient beings. Policies

such as the “Pet Bonus,” which allows tax deductions on veterinary expenses, and the legalization of pet burials alongside human owners, demonstrate how the state provides institutional support for companion animals. Catholicism continues to shape some cultural practices, yet Italian pet parenting is increasingly defined by secular welfare protections and the integration of pets into family life.

In Thailand, pet ownership is strongly influenced by Buddhist beliefs that emphasize compassion (metta) and non-harming (ahimsa). These values are reflected in cultural practices such as merit-making through releasing animals and the growing popularity of Buddhist-inspired pet funerals. More temples throughout the country offer funeral services for pets, where monks conduct rituals believed to facilitate a peaceful rebirth. These ceremonies highlight the seamless integration of animals into both private and public practices, elevating their status beyond mere companions. Thailand's approach reveals a synthesis of spiritual ethos and practical care, where compassion for animals is closely linked to narratives about interconnectedness between humans and non-humans. However, challenges remain, particularly the uneven welfare standards between companion animals and those regarded primarily for economic purposes, such as livestock.

This contrasts with anthropocentric views that regard animals primarily through the lens of utility and ownership. Transforming these perceptions requires cultural shifts that foster greater moral consideration for animals. Both Italy and Thailand continue to reshape how animals are perceived and valued in their societies, balancing evolving economic, environmental, and ethical concerns. These findings highlight both the shared trend of humanizing pets in contemporary societies and the distinctive cultural pathways

that shape this process. While Thailand's pet parenting practices emerge from spiritual and cultural traditions that imbue animals with moral significance, Italy's practices are reinforced through legal recognition and welfare policies. The comparison underscores how cultural and institutional contexts differently frame the responsibilities, privileges, and emotional bonds of pet ownership.

Conclusion

The study of animals in Italy and Thailand highlights the ways in which cultural and emotional elements shape human-animal relationships and how cultural norms and values distinctly shape. In Italy, companion animals are integrated into family life through legal recognition, welfare protections, and memorial practices that reflect a secular yet socially embedded commitment to animal wellbeing. Catholic traditions influence rituals of blessing, but state policies such as tax benefits and the allowance of pet burials alongside human owners highlight the institutional reinforcement of pets' status as family members. Pets hold significant roles within families, with rituals and memorial practices that reinforce their status as beloved companions.

In Thailand, compassion and empathy for animals are influenced by Buddhist teachings, which stress kindness toward all living beings. This is evident in merit-making practices, the growing prevalence of monk-led pet funerals, and the symbolic extension of religious compassion to companion animals. Spiritual traditions, such as pet funerals officiated by monks, offer both emotional and spiritual solace to grieving owners. These rituals are especially prevalent in urban areas, where pets serve as emotional constants in evolving family structures. However, Pets are increasingly regarded as family members,

with “Pet Parenting” becoming more common. At the same time, challenges persist, particularly the unequal treatment between companion animals and those raised for economic purposes.

Despite differing cultural contexts, both Italy and Thailand reveal a shared trend that pets are increasingly anthropomorphized and valued as integral members of households and communities. Rituals of remembrance—whether legal and familial in Italy or spiritual and religious in Thailand—demonstrate how deeply pets are woven into cultural understandings of kinship, grief, and belonging. By situating pet parenting within broader cultural frameworks, this study underscores the importance of examining both similarities and divergences in human–animal relations. Further research could explore these dynamics through qualitative and quantitative methods across additional societies to provide a broader understanding of human-animal bonds worldwide.

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