

The Happiness of Tai Lue Elderly

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On a research field trip to study the Tai Lue Elderly in Chiang Kam, Phayao, I had a chance to participate in their activities and observed them gathering together at the guardian-spirit shrine of the village at Ban Thung Mog, Tambon Chian Khan in Chiang Kam, Phayao. They have formed a Thung Mog elderly occupational group, which has 11 members; 9 females and 2 males and almost all of them are relatives. The group formed on July 11th, 2006 and they used the community hall near Phraya Kam guardian-spirit shrine of the village as a center. The Community Development Department offer advice and support during the first stage but later the Chiang Ban Sub-district Administrative Organization took care of budget. The activities were 1) making artificial flowers, 2) making wood flowers for cremation, 3) making fabric flags and 4) making fabric bags. The members joined these activities and kept a record of who come to work each day so they can pay back to those members after they sold their goods.



Tai Lue people in Chiang Kam, Phayao.

After talking and observing the work of the elderly, I found that everyone was very happy to come to work and meet each other. Some said they felt lonely when they were alone at home during the daytime so they wanted to meet their friends of the same age. They packed food and ate together, talking and confiding in their friends. The income is not important to them. What is important or motivates them to get together is their need to have friends and they can take care each other when anyone is sick.



Local food that elderly brought for lunch

After talking about their happiness, everyone agreed that happiness for them is 1) wealth, 2) living with children or having someone to take care of them, 3) living in the same area with relatives (Mo Lo Yue), 4) time for chatting or talking with others

I collected interesting data after talking with Inkaew Jaikla, the 72-year-old head of the elderly occupational group. She reported that:



Inkaew Jaikla (72 years old), head of Tai Lue elderly occupational group

- she is healthy and in a good mood.
- she has 4 children but now lives with 2 daughters, one a nurse and the other a teacher.
- Tai Lue people always take care of their parents, trying to build a big house for them.
- she wants her children to have a good job with a good salary. It is like winning many lotteries.
- food: Her children take care of that. They cook and sometimes buy food at the market. She doesn't eat seasoning powder and ice because it is not good for health. She also grows some home-grown vegetables.
- she travels with her daughters very often. Her daughters pay for her.
- she doesn't have any financial problem because her children give her money every month and she doesn't have to pay for anything. She lives in her own house and her children cook for her.
- she comes to the group to meet her friends and relatives. If there wasn't a group, they wouldn't have a chance to meet each other and would feel lonely.
- her husband is a retired teacher. They went to Singapore and India together. Last month, she went to Xishuangbanna with her daughter and could communicate with Tai Lue people there because they use the same language.

- she also sang Lue songs with a singer in Xishuangbanna. (It's interesting that the Lue language doesn't change much)
- she doesn't want to live in Xishuangbanna because the toilets aren't clean. The food is also different. She didn't dare to eat the vegetables there because they use human excrement as for fertilizers.
- the Tai Lue in China invited her to hug the house pole (Tai Lue traditional way of welcoming) and share a meal together because she could communicate with them.
- Tai Lue houses in China don't have fence which is different from those in Thailand.
- she played ntsum pob with the Tai Lue in China. It's the same tradition as in Thailand.
- she went to Tai Lue Temple in China and saw an illuminated Buddha image with a six-tiered flag. In Thailand, we have three-tiered flags.
- she has never had serious illness because she always works and doesn't like being inactive.
- she always has a good night's sleep because she doesn't take things seriously. She goes to bed at 9pm and wakes up about 1 or 2 am to go to the toilet.



Tai Lue food for the elderly, mostly vegetables and fish from neighbor

- the Phraya Kam guardian-spirit shrine is forbidden for woman because it is a sacred place. Only man can enter. The guardian-spirit has communicated with the villagers before.

- a person who wants to redeem his/her vows to the spirit should bring a pig's head or a live pig for slaughter there. There is a book for recording how many pigs are offered for redemption and lists of forbidden food before and after redemption.

- the new generation of Tai Lue still respects the Phraya Kam guardian-spirit. During New Year or Songkran period, many Tai Lue return to redeem their vows to the spirit.

- the Tai Lue elderly have a motto "a log without mushrooms is like the elderly without wealth", so no child will take care them. They have to make money for their children.

- Tai Lue live to eat with a lot of people as in their proverb "e-kin-ha-lai e-tan-ha-kwang" which shows their generosity.

So if you want to be happy like the Tai Lue elderly, you have to live a satisfactory life with help and support from your community. And you will be happy without comparing yourself to those in other societies.