

# จารีตกับความอยู่ดีมีสุขของผู้หญิง 4 ชนเผ่า ในภาคเหนือของประเทศไทย

## Ethnic Traditions: Women's Well-being in Four Ethnic Groups in Northern Thailand

บทความวิจัย

วารสารพยาบาลศาสตร์และสุขภาพ

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### บทคัดย่อ

การวิจัยเรื่องนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาการรับรู้สุขภาวะของผู้หญิงชนเผ่าลื้อ ลัวะ เมี่ยน และม้ง ในจังหวัดน่าน ภาคเหนือของประเทศไทย โดยใช้การวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพมีผู้ให้ข้อมูลหลักเป็นผู้หญิงอายุ 18-60 ปี ของ 4 ชนเผ่า เก็บข้อมูลด้วยวิธีการสนทนากลุ่ม และสัมภาษณ์เชิงลึกในระหว่างเดือนตุลาคม 2552 ถึง สิงหาคม 2553 วิเคราะห์ข้อมูลด้วยวิธีการวิเคราะห์เนื้อหา ได้ข้อค้นพบที่สำคัญ 4 ประการคือ 1) สุขภาวะของผู้หญิงเกี่ยวข้องกับจารีตประเพณี และชีวิตครอบครัว 2) ผู้หญิงชนเผ่าลื้อ และลัวะมีอำนาจในครอบครัวและในชุมชนมากกว่าผู้หญิงชนเผ่าเมี่ยน และม้ง 3) พลังจารีตมีอำนาจต่อชีวิตผู้หญิงสูงกว่าพลังกฎหมาย และ 4) ผู้หญิงชนเผ่าม้งมีสุขภาวะด้อยกว่าผู้หญิงชนเผ่าลื้อ ลัวะ และเมี่ยน ข้อค้นพบนี้ชี้แนะว่าจารีตประเพณีดั้งเดิมที่เข้มงวดทำให้ผู้หญิงคับข้องใจ และสกัดกั้นการมีสุขภาวะที่ดี การให้โอกาสเฉพาะการศึกษาและอาชีพไม่ใช่สิ่งที่จะประกันว่าผู้หญิงจะมีสุขภาวะที่ดีได้อย่างแท้จริง

คำสำคัญ: เพศภาวะ สุขภาวะ มาตริปไตย ปีตริปไตย ประเทศไทย

### Abstract :

**Objective:** This study aimed to explore the perceived well-being expressed by women of four minority ethnic groups, the Lue, Lua, Mein, and Hmong, in the Nan province of northern Thailand.

**Design:** Qualitative study was employed. Seventy women aged 18-60 of the Lue, Lua, Mein, and Hmong participated in focus group discussions and in-depth interviews conducted in October 2008-August 2009. Content analysis was employed.

**Results:** The four major findings were 1) women's well-being is related to ethnic traditions and family life, 2) Lue and Lua women exert more control over family and community life than Mein and Hmong women, 3) ethnic traditions are more powerful in women's lives than state law, and 4) Hmong women experience poorer well-being than Lue, Lua, and Mein women.

**Conclusion:** Strong ethnic traditions create conditions that frustrate women's efforts to achieve well-being. Increasing opportunities for women to gain education and employment alone do not guarantee the conditions necessary for women's overall well-being.

**keywords:** gender, well-being, matrilineal, patrilineal, thailand

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## Introduction:

Ethnic groups share a distinctive culture. Their traditions and customs are internalized and passed down from generation to generation. These traditions may include religious beliefs, family or kinship relations, patterns of residence, marriage, ritual, and work. There are an estimated 400 million indigenous people of various ethnic groups living in more than 70 countries worldwide, and they are among the world's most marginalized population groups. They are poorer and less educated; they die at a younger age, are much more likely to commit suicide, and are generally in worse health than surrounding populations<sup>1,2</sup>. According to World Health Organization's Constitution, health refers to "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity". This definition reflects a similar understanding of well-being by indigenous people. They regard well-being as the harmony that exists between individuals, communities and the universe<sup>3</sup>. In the northern region of Thailand, there are 24 ethnic groups. However, limited data exist on women's well-being. Ethnic traditions are strongly practiced in minority groups, especially the Lue (Thai Lue), Lua, Mein (Yao) and Hmong (Miao). Each has a long history of residence in Thailand<sup>4-12</sup>. Although the four ethnic groups share a belief in spirits, their traditions are different. Lue people believe in animism, but they have also adopted Buddhism. Each Lue village has its own shaman. The Lue people are famous for their textile weaving. Similarly, Lua customs are also influenced by Buddhism. Mein culture, on the other hand, is centered on the family structure and the spirits that protect it. The Hmong believe in a mixture of animism, shamanism and ancestral worship.

Ethnic traditions deeply affect one's well-being. Well-being refers to a positive state of being with others in society, in which needs are met, one can act effectively and meaningfully to pursue ones' goals, and one is able to experience happiness and overall satisfaction<sup>13-16</sup>. The ability of a person to achieve well-being depends largely on the structure of society. To understand the well-being of a person, it is important to understand the role that wider social collectivities play in creating the conditions that support or frustrate efforts to achieve well-being. Studies have indicated that gender plays a major role in ethnic traditions and women's well-being.<sup>17-19</sup> It is crucial, therefore, to understand women's well-being in specific ethnic groups by exploring the influence ethnic traditions have on their lives.

**Objective:** To explore the perceived well-being of Lue, Lua, Mein, and Hmong women in Nan Province, Northern Thailand.

## Study methods:

The study was conducted in the one district of Nan Province, a province in the northern region of Thailand. This area was selected because 1) it is home to various ethnic minority groups, 2) daily life there is not affected by the tourism industry and 3) the area is accessible. A qualitative method<sup>20</sup> was employed from October 2008 to August 2009. Four ethnic groups, including the Lue, Lua, Mein and Hmong, were chosen because they were the major indigenous groups and because they offered the opportunity to compare patrilineal and matrilineal societies and their impact on well-being. All women aged 18-60 are invited to participate in the study. Seventy participants, including 18 Lue, 21 Lua, 10 Mein and 21 Hmong women aged

18 to 60, were selected as key informants (KI). The selection was based on voluntary and competency in communication using Thai dialect. The characteristic of KIs is shown in Table 1.

The study was approved by the Human Subject Review Committee of Khon Kaen University to assure that the rights of subjects are protected. All

KI provided written consent to participate in the study. Twelve focus group discussions and ten in-depth interviews were conducted to explore women's way of life in each specific ethnic group. Each focus group discussion and interview was tape-recorded with the KI's permission.

**Table 1** Characteristics of the key informants (N=70)

Characteristics	Lue (18)	Lua (21)	Mein (10)	Hmong (21)
	N	N	N	N
Aged (years)				
18-35	3	8	4	7
36-45	10	9	4	7
46-60	5	4	2	7
Marital status				
Single	3	1	0	2
Married	13	19	9	11
Separate	1	0	0	3
Divorce	1	1	1	5
Religion				
Buddhist	18	0	0	0
Buddhist + Spirit	0	21	10	19
Christ	0	0	0	2
Education				
No school	2	8	4	10
Primary school	9	5	6	3
Secondary school	6	8	0	6
High school	1	0	0	2
Occupation				
House work	4	3	0	4
Small business	9	3	8	7
Farm work	2	15	2	7
Wage labor	3	0	0	3

### Data analysis:

All transcripts were analyzed verbatim using a content analysis method<sup>21,22</sup>. Each of transcripts was read and re-read and coding was devised. Thematic categories were applied to each transcript coded. To enhance the accuracy of this study, bracketing and reflection were performed, and trustworthiness was established by ensuring credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability<sup>23</sup>.

### Results:

There were four major findings related to women's well-being.

#### 1. A woman's well-being is related to ethnic traditions and family life.

All of the women who participated in this study indicated that their lives are improving with economic development, social modernization, and better access to health and family-planning technology. However, there has been little change in their status in the family and community.

Because they migrated to the Pau District of Nan Province more than 100 years ago, the Lue regard themselves as the local people of this area. They hold traditional beliefs, values, ways of life and interpersonal ties. Their beliefs are based on the combination of animism, Hinduism, and Buddhism. They pay high respect to the elderly (both men and women) and the head of the household (normally men), who hold decision-making authority in various matters. The Lue people are matrilineal, and they are particularly concerned with the cult of domestic spirits. Their marriages are monogamous, and post-marital residence is decided pragmatically based on which household requires the services of the couple. Although domestic work is performed mainly by women, official duties have been conducted mostly by men. As a famous

Lue proverb says, "a man is the foreleg of the elephant and the woman the hind leg". Most Lue girls and young women are now completing primary and secondary school, and many are also attending university. In addition, more women are taking up paid employment. Their decision-making powers, however, are still low. The Lue people mostly live in remote mountainous areas. Only a few small groups reside in the urban lowlands. The Lue who live in the highlands have a remarkable ethnic identity and native-dependent lifestyle. They maintain their traditional way of life, which includes house designs, animistic beliefs, wedding ceremonies, and cultivation traditions. Some traditions have been changed, such as the use of local and central Thai dialects, modern clothing, diets, and everyday tools. The Lue people who live in the city are almost completely integrated into local Thai culture, customs, and traditions.

The Lue society is matrilineal, and their marriages are monogamous. They practice animism and ancestral worship, and they combine these traditional beliefs with Buddhism. Respect and remembrance is paid to ancestral spirits on the mother's side of the family. After marriage, the man must live with his wife's family. Responsibilities within the household are divided according to age and gender. Although women are expected to perform household chores, men are expected to repair and maintain the house. On the farm, all family members, both men and women, are expected to help. Although Lue men perform most roles in traditional ceremonies, the Lue people perceive men and women as equals. All Lue girls marry at a young age (15-18 years old) and have 2-4 children. According to tradition, women must be protected, and they must work side by side with the men. Lue women, therefore, are not allowed to travel far from

their homes or villages. Sometimes, when the nearest school is outside the village, only a few Lua girls are able to attend school. As a result, few girls complete secondary schools. They confine themselves to home and the farm. Lua women who live in the urban area, however, enjoy greater freedom. Some are enrolled in universities, and some work in offices.

The Mein are also known as the Yao. However, they prefer to call themselves Mein, which means human, rather than Yao, which means barbarians. They are one of the most dominant tribes in Nan. The Mein migrated from China to Nan through Vietnam and Laos. Mein culture and beliefs are closely tied to their Chinese origins. They use Chinese characters, and their beliefs are a combination of animism and Taoism. The Mein people believe strongly in the spiritual world. They hold many rituals and ceremonies to invite the good spirits to protect them from illness and tragedy.

The Mein are a patrilineal, patriarchal society that lives as an extended family. They are monogamous, and, after marriage, the wife must live with her husband in his parent's house. The father is head of the family. Children are counted as part of their father's family lineage. The male child receives inheritance and is expected to take care of his parents for the rest of their lives. The Mein people are usually corn and rice farmers. After the planting season, women work in industries such as cloth and silver wear. Women are also responsible for housework and raising children. Men, on the other hand, enjoy free time. In addition to farm work, some produce soy milk and sell it in the city. A woman in the study described how "*we (women) were brought to be wives so that we have to obey them (husbands)*". This reflects the relationship of power between men and women in Mein society. Men have much more power than women in decision-making as well as access and control over resources.

Even though Mein women have less power than men both in the family and society, they are able to control reproduction. They are able to refuse unwanted marriages and choose how many children they want. Mein families prefer that their children pursue higher education, and, as a result, Mein girls receive the same educational opportunities as boys if the family can afford higher education. Highly educated women are accepted as leaders of the community.

The Hmong are the second largest hill tribe in Thailand after the Karen. The belief of origin among all Hmong people is animism; however, they still have a strong traditional cult of ancestors. They organize their social relationships based on this patriarchal ancestral cult. In their society, men are the keepers of traditional beliefs. The male head of the family and those who represent him after his death have the authority to make decisions affecting the household and lineage.

When a woman is born, she belongs to her father's lineage. Daughters are often referred to as "*other people's women*". All Hmong women are expected to marry. After their wedding, they are cut off from their family. They must join, practice, and honor the beliefs of their husbands. If a woman divorces or her husband dies, she is not able to return to her lineage of birth. She has to seek remarriage to avoid becoming a "lost soul".

Hmong men have prominent social, political and religious responsibilities, whereas women meet the domestic and material needs of the family. Men provide for both the physical and spiritual welfare of the family, whereas women care for the children and maintain the household. At mealtime, a woman is allowed to eat only after her partner finishes his meal. As one male Hmong said, "*Man is the middle finger, a woman is the forefinger. The middle is higher (longer) than the fore*

*finger. It is nature; a woman is never ever equal to a man”.*

The Hmong who participated in this study earn their living from farming and trading. They grow rice and corn, and many do silver work. Some Hmong men run businesses (restaurant, hotel, silver factory) in the city, and some are leaders of a local political party. A number of Hmong women make clothes to sell to tourists, and others are government employees.

Although formally prohibited and illegal in Thailand, forced marriage is occasionally practiced among the Hmong. Normally, if they do not attend school, Hmong girls marry at a young age (14-15 years old). A Hmong male is allowed to have as many wives as he wishes and can afford. If a wife does not have a male child, her husband often seeks a new wife. Married women who have sons are considered to be fortunate. Hmong families desire both boys and girls to pursue a high level of education. At present, a number of Hmong women attend university. However, following marriage, a woman belongs to her husband’s lineage and must follow his traditional beliefs regardless of her level of education or position in the workplace,

Women in matrilineal (Lue and Lua) and patrilineal (Mein and Hmong) ancestral cults hold predominant roles in the domestic rather than the public sphere. The traditional practices in the matrilineal system allow women to have power in private (individual and family) and public (community and society). In contrast, women in the patriarchal system have limited power in both the family and society. Nevertheless, women from the four ethnic groups share a similar picture of well-being, which emphasizes their nurturing role within the family.

**2. Lue and Lua women exert more control over family and community life than Mein and Hmong women.**

The Lue and Lua are matrilineal. Matrilineal societies exhibit an interesting variety of residence patterns, such as a man residing with his wife’s matrilineal kin, a wife residing with her husband’s paternal kin, couples settling down together in a new residence, or couples living with their respective natal groups following a duo-local pattern. The families of the Lue and Lua have a variety of residence patterns, and their property is transmitted through and owned by women. Whatever a male member of the family earns belongs to the family.

Following the matrilineal system, the Lue and Lua women have access to and control of family resources. Women take care of family life, whereas men take care of traditional ceremonies and the external environment. Both domestic and public activities are valued. Their ethnic traditions give power to women to make decisions for themselves and family members. Men take the lead in traditional ceremonies, but they regard social responsibilities as a balance between male and female roles. Lue and Lua women, therefore, have an opportunity to control their lives and well-being. The Mein and Hmong are patrilineal, and men effectively control property and decision-making. A child’s lineage is determined by his father and grandfather rather than through the maternal line. Women of the Mein and Hmong who participated in the study regarded themselves as “property of the husband”. Husbands control both the family and community.

Following marriage, the Mein and Hmong women formally lose their first name. They will be called instead by the first name of their husband or by their social position in the family (e.g., daughter-in-law, sister-in-law, etc.). They must follow the orders of their husbands, the mother-in-law and

the lineage. All women of the Mein and Hmong who participated in the study presented a similar household hierarchy. The highest status in the family is her father-in-law, followed by the husband, male siblings, mother-in-law and sister-in-law. She is at the bottom of the lineage. Her status improves if she has a male child or, even better, produces many boys for the family.

Once married, a woman in Hmong society no longer belongs to their parents' lineage. Instead, she is adopted into her husband's spiritual domain through the rites of marriage. Informally, however, she is still a member of her birth family and is expected to visit her parents, especially on special occasions such as New Year. However, if she divorces or becomes a widow, she might be able to return to her birth family, but she will not be able to live in her parent's home. She must live separately because only people with the same lineage can live in the same house. Hmong women who participated in the study mentioned that sometimes highly educated and economically independent women refuse to marry to avoid oppression. A single, non-married Hmong woman prefers to enjoy low visibility in her parents' household rather than adopt the status of daughter-in-law. However, she may be faced with the social stigma of a "no man's land" or a woman who no man wants to marry.

The Mein and Hmong women are not able to perform traditional rituals. A woman absolutely needs a man to accomplish these rites. If single, her father or brother will take care of these. If married or widowed, she has to lean on her husband or the religious chief of his lineage. If she divorces or her husband dies, she can remarry and enter her new husband's lineage. Thus, an unmarried, divorced woman faces many problems because she is no longer part of her parents'

or ex-husband's lineages. She encounters difficulties in completing the traditional rites.

The power of Mein and Hmong women rests on the production of male offspring and the economic support of the family. They have less control over their lives than Lue and Lua women.

### 3. Ethnic traditions are more powerful in women's lives than state law.

*"He dragged me to his house and forced me to be his bride in a wedding ceremony that he planned without my knowledge. I was raped that night. ... My parents got angry and asked his family to give them 50,000 baht for my loss. ... He refused and yelled at me. ... He said he did no wrong because he followed the Hmong traditions. When I reported him to the police, everybody turned back to me and my family. .... I want to kill myself."*

(18-year-old Hmong woman)

The case above reflects the influence of ethnic traditions over a woman's health and well-being and the power of these traditions over the laws of the state. Women of the four ethnic groups who participated in the study are all aware of the national constitution and its declaration of the equality of men and women. They have learned that a Thai woman is allowed to maintain her prefix as "Nang Sow" (Miss) and can choose not to change her last name after marriage. Their rights are protected by registration. In this study, women mentioned that their well-being is related to their acceptance by their ethnic group, the accomplishment of traditional rites and the maintenance of familial happiness.

The Lue or Lue women belong to close-knit communities with strong cultural traditions that value women's roles in both family and community matters.



In addition to respecting the elderly and household leaders, they maintain traditional Lue costumes in various ceremonies and rituals, traditional food consumption, usage of the Lue language in daily life, belief in both spirits and Buddhism, and Lue weaving. The Lua women who participated in the study mentioned that they were poor and that their living was based on wage labor and farming. Adult men and women work side by side. They also enjoy equal power in traditional ways of life. However, with the introduction of the National Economic and Social Development Plan, Lua women now have less power than men because of a decline in the social value of women's traditional knowledge, including their knowledge of technology and rituals concerning forest conservation and the sustainable use of natural resources. As a result, Lua women perceive that, although ethnic traditions have limited them to the domestic arena, modern life has taken away their power. Men, on the other hand, are responsible for external chores, and they are aware of this unintentional shift in power, which has provided them with more access to and control over resources. The Mein women reported that ethnic traditions resulted in endless work for the happiness of the family. Aside from domestic chores, they make clothes, silverware and costumes in an effort to earn as much money as possible to support their family. They are left with no free time. They understand that the constitution affords men and women the same rights, but in Mein tradition a woman is a man's property and must obey his orders. She may be able to refuse tradition, but she would neither be accepted as a member of the group nor protected by ancestral spirits from illness and tragedy.

The Hmong women who participated in the study had a higher economic status than the Mein

and Lua. However, they reported that their lives were miserable. Traditional gender roles in Hmong society are strong. The husband is always head of the household, whereas the wife has no authority in either the family or community. Even if highly educated, she could only be accepted as a leader of a women's group. A Hmong participant explained that being a good woman in Hmong society was very hard. She had to "enjoy" oppression.

Because the Hmong value a social system with paternal authority as the norm, a daughter is expected to marry and become accustomed to people from outside her familial group. She will not perform social functions of importance for the family or ancestral line. The Hmong believe that the reincarnation of the soul will only occur if men perform rites. Although the law places great emphasis on the lives of ordinary people, certain ethnic traditions, such as those analyzed above, have greater power over women's lives.

#### **4. Hmong women experience poorer well-being than Lue, Lua and Mein women.**

All participants in the study thought that life for Hmong women is hard. The Hmong women themselves stated that they sometimes felt like nobody. In the following reflections, Hmong women describe themselves as powerless:

*"We are female Hmong. We have to stay with a male Hmong. We have to be good women; not argue, if they are wrong. If we criticize them they would return us to our parents. This is what the elders and my husband told me."*

*"Boys eat meat, girls eat vegetables. Women eat food left over from the men."*

*"Women are inferior to men. If we satisfy them, they (men) will let us (women) stay with them. If not, they will kick us out of the house, even though we have 4-5 children. They do nothing wrong."*



*“They (men) insult us like slaves. Yes, we (women) are treated like slaves.”*

The Mein have more power than the Hmong women. They are able to lead community activities, and they are not limited to female groups. However, they must prove their capability through education, personality and leadership.

### **Discussion:**

The study revealed that ethnic traditions strongly influence women’s well-being. The Lue, Lua, Mein and Hmong participants indicated that their state of well-being in society is dependent on their performance as a good woman according to their cultural beliefs. Lue and Lua women, who live in matrilineal communities, have greater power to meet their needs and experience happiness. Hmong women, on the other hand, are subordinate. Even though Mein and Hmong women tend to be better educated and more economically successful than Lua women, they are still unable to avoid the traditions that oppress them.

Gneezy, Leonard and List<sup>24</sup> studied the link between gender and competition using experimental task. They found that women in matrilineal societies choose a competitive environment more often than men of the same ethnic group. The women even choose to compete more often than men in patriarchal societies. Their study may help to explain the perceptions of well-being among Lue, Lua, Mein and Hmong women. The Lue and Lua have the freedom to control their life so that their abilities to challenge the competitive environment were learned by nurture. In the Mein and Hmong societies, there is no model available. Furthermore, the Lue and Lua participants found themselves more capable than the Mein and Hmong women. Matrilineal societies create conditions that

support Lue and Lua women’s well-being. Their needs are met, they can act effectively and meaningfully pursue their goals, and they are able to experience happiness and satisfaction.

Participants from the four ethnic groups mentioned that the social and political system of Thailand is male-dominated<sup>25,26</sup> and that, as a result, traditional matrilineal communities are changing<sup>27</sup>. Female wisdom, which is passed on through the matrilineal family<sup>28</sup>, is challenged by the educational and economic systems of urbanization and modernization. Das Gupta<sup>29</sup> stated that if husbands are more educated in matrilineal societies then there is a greater chance that the matrilineal system may shift toward male dominance. If women and men are engaged in agriculture, then they are more likely to follow the traditional matrilineal structure.

This notion can explain why Lue women feel subordinate to men. Although they live in a matriarchy, women confine themselves to household chores, textile weaving, and small business. Lue men play a major role in politics, advanced technology and industry; therefore, they have greater power in the macroeconomic system. Whereas Lua men and women still live in an agricultural community or else work in construction, Lua culture in general does not change.

Although the Mein and Hmong enjoy better economic status than the Lua and Lue and both men and women are encouraged to seek higher education, only the highly educated women of the Mein are accepted as politicians or community leaders. Even though highly educated women are able to enter employment, their decision-making power remains unchanged. In a strongly patriarchal society<sup>30</sup>, neither women’s educational level nor their economic status create conditions sufficient to support their well-being.

The relationship between ethnic traditions and women's well-being is complex. Well-being cannot simply be gained through education or participation in a paid labor market<sup>31,32</sup>. However, women's opportunities to access education and employment, as well as their ability to control resources through political power, should continue to be studied.

Mein and Hmong found themselves oppressed, insecure and the victims of violence. The Mein and Hmong women may find their material needs satisfied, but this does not mean they experience well-being. A miserable life with material wealth does not lead to well-being. Patriarchal systems recognize women as valuable assets only so far as they indicate male power<sup>33,34</sup>. The current study found that patriarchy does not create adequate conditions for women's well-being.

### Conclusions:

The study showed that the well-being of Lue, Lua, Mein and Hmong women is tied to their ethnic traditions. Women from the matrilineal Lue and Lua enjoy greater freedom than women from the patriarchal Mein and Hmong communities. Strong ethnic traditions, especially among the Hmong, create conditions that frustrate women's efforts to achieve well-being. Moreover, the study revealed that the promotion of economic development by the Thai state has transformed the matrilineal societies of the Lue and Lua. This program of modern development shifts the balance of power toward male dominance. Increasing opportunities for women to gain education and employment alone do not guarantee the conditions necessary for women's overall well-being.

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