

Changing Meaning of the Elderly in Nan Province, Northern Thailand : From “Khon Thao Khon Kae” to “Phu Sung Ayu”

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Abstract

In this paper, I deal with the group named “the elderly” in the guardian spirit ritual in the Tai-Lue villages in Nan province, Northern Thailand. These groups appeared after the decline of the traditional role of the elderly in the ritual, and are connected with the recent social situation including the national policies towards local cultures and the elderly.

Village elderly carry out newly invented performances in the ritual as a new culture of the elderly, not transmitted from their ancestors. One can say that the role of the elderly in the ritual has changed from that of “Khon Thao Khon Kae” (an older person who has traditional knowledge) to that of “Phu Sung Ayu” (a person over 60 years of age, who can receive welfare services).

However these newly invented activities of the elderly in the ritual are voluntarily initiated by them. They have tried to find their own world of activities even in the stream of “welfarization.” They are given a new arena of self-representation and activities, i. e. performing as the Tai-Lue “elderly.” So they are in a sense defined by the state, but they adapt those definitions for their own purposes.

Keywords: the elderly, Tai-Lue, local culture, cultural policy, welfare policy, guardian spirit ritual

I Introduction

Recently the average life span in Thailand has become longer because of much improved nutrition, medical services and standards of living. Therefore the proportion of the population over 60 has increased: in 1970, the proportion of the population over 60 was 4.66%, but in 1990, it has risen to 5.98% [Khochakor Sangkhachad 1993].

In 1982, at the World Assembly on Aging held in Australia, “the elderly” was defined as people over 60 years old.¹⁾ In Thailand, the elderly are called “Khon Thao Khon Kae,” which implies an older person who possesses the traditional knowledge. Since the Assembly, the Thai government has used the word “Phu Sung Ayu” as the official word to refer to a person over 60. It did so as part of its medical and welfare programs for the

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1) The definition of “the elderly” by W.H.O. is people over 65, but in Thailand, it is the definition of this Assembly.

“Phu Sung Ayu” [Samakhom Sapha Phu Sung Ayu Haeng Prathet Thai 1999: 5–7]. This new definition of the elderly is different from the traditional folk usage of “Khon Thao Khon Kae.”

In the late 1980s, there was a move to rethink local wisdom as the rapid economic growth brought about profound social change that disrupted communities and families. This was regarded by many as reflecting a “the crisis of modern Thai society.”

In the 1990s, the government promoted cultural decentralization as part of its broader policy of democratization, and declared that local wisdom was now a significant part of “National Culture.”²⁾ Government officials and intellectuals claimed that the disruption of traditional communities had led to a loss of their function of transmitting tradition. Hence to prevent this further decline, the government began the attempt to reformulate the role of the elderly towards regaining their function of transmitting knowledge to the next generation.

How is this movement of revival of local cultures as part of the National Culture related to the new definition of the elderly “Phu Sung Ayu”? This is the main question to be addressed in this paper.

Although many ethnographic studies described family life in Northern Thailand, especially in the 1960s–70s [cf. Davis 1984; Potter 1977; Kingshill 1974], there has been no description about the changing role of the elderly, except Suri’s study about the case study in Chiang Mai [Suri 1991: Section 3]. Suri’s study referred to the changing role of the elderly in the changing family in modern Thai society. However Suri did not examine the change within the context of the above-mentioned new top-down definition of the elderly “Phu Sung Ayu.” In this paper, I will focus on this new definition of the elderly in the context of rural development and local cultural revivalism through a case study of Tai-Lue villages in Thawanpa district, Nan province, Northern Thailand.³⁾

In the 1990s, the disruption of community and family was also recognized to be taking place in the Tai-Lue villages in Thawanpa, and the role of the elderly was also undergoing significant change.

Tai-Lue is one branch of the Tai speaking group, which is dispersed across mainland Southeast Asia. It is well known that it formed the Sipsong Panna chiefdoms in Southwestern China, now in Yunnan province. Most of the Tai-Lue in Northern Thailand migrated from Sipsong Panna, their original place, in the nineteenth century. Since migration, they have assimilated with their neighboring Tai-groups who shared linguistic and cultural similarities with the Tai-Lue. However, in the late 1980s, a Tai-Lue cultural revival movement emerged and the Tai-Lue in Thawanpha particularly began to

2) This is the point noted in the 1997 constitution.

3) I have conducted research in Thailand since 1990 till now, including the term I studied at Chiang Mai University, from 1990 to 1991, with permission from the National Research Council of Thailand. This paper is based on this research.

promote their own identity, especially through their guardian spirit ritual which has been enlarged for reasons connected with rural development and local tourism.⁴⁾

In the process of enlarging the ritual, the traditional role of the elderly has declined. A new group of villagers named “Phu Sung Ayu” appeared in the ritual. It seems that the role of “Khon Thao Khon Kae” in the ritual has been transferred to the “Phu Sung Ayu.” I begin by briefly describing the changing role of the elderly in the changing guardian spirit ritual. Then, to understand the social background to this changing role in the ritual, I will explore the changing role of the elderly in village life and focus on the appearance of the new activities of “Phu Sung Ayu,” the newly defined elderly. Finally I will return to focus on the new groups named “Phu Sung Ayu” which appeared in the guardian spirit ritual, in the context of reconstruction of the Tai-Lue identity in their cultural revivalism. In this way, I will examine the changing meaning of the elderly in the Tai-Lue society in Nan.

II The Role of the Elderly in the Changing Ritual

In the three Tai-Lue villages (N, D and T villages) in Thawanpha, the guardian spirit ritual, named Chao Luang Muang La ritual, has been conducted since they migrated from their original place, Muang La in Sipsong Panna. In the ritual, they celebrate several guardian spirits who constitute the pantheon of the main spirit, Chao Luang Muang La. The ritual is held for three days every three years. A buffalo, a cow, a black pig and a white pig as sacrificial animals are offered to the spirits.

The ritual has changed drastically, especially in the 1990s because of rural development in this area. The following is the changing process.

In 1990, the ritual was enlarged to promote it among outsiders including tourists, by new leaders of rural development including schoolteachers, but only N village who led the enlargement of the ritual benefited from this move. For example, the Tai-Lue textile in N village was more attractive to the tourists. Therefore a psychological conflict occurred between N village and D village. In D village are found the descendants of the chief of their home place, Muang La, and many of the spirits comprising the pantheon of the main spirit, Chao Luang Muang La, so D village had always played an important role in the ritual. However it could not gain any benefit from the enlargement of the ritual led by villagers of N. In 1996, the ritual began to be performed in two places rather than one, both N village and D village. It was then that T village joined the ritual held in N village.

During this period, the main practitioners of the ritual had changed from traditional ritual specialists such as spirit priests, to leaders of development referred to as “the group for village development” which included the schoolteachers.

4) I presented several papers on this topic [Baba 1993; 1996; 1998; 1999; 2002; 2004].



Fig. 1 Chomron Dontri Phunmuan Phu Sung Ayu
(The Elderly Traditional Northern Music Group)

Performance in the ritual had also undergone significant changes. Traditionally in the ritual, Chang Khap, a traditional folk singer, used to sing Khap Lue (Tai-Lue traditional folk song). Until 1990, on the first day of the ritual, two male singers from N village and two female singers from D village used to sing with each other in question-answer style to celebrate Chao Muang in D village. Until 1987, on the second day, one male singer likewise sang to invite spirits after a sacrificial ceremony.

In the early 1990s, there were four Chang Khaps, 65 to 70 years old, in N and D villages, none of whom had any disciples because there were very few young people who were interested in Khap Lue. In place of the Chang Khap, in 1990, the Khap Lue of a village women's group appeared. In the 1990, 1993 and 1996 rituals, the group sang a song not only praying for the spirit like a traditional singer, Chang Khap, but also referring to individual well-being.

In the 1999 ritual, the Khap Lue disappeared altogether, and in its stead Chomrom Dontri Phunmuan Phu Sung Ayu (an elderly traditional northern music group) appeared in the rituals of N and T villages. As I will explain later, they played Northern Thai traditional music, not Tai-Lue music. Tai-Lue people in Northern Thailand can also play Northern Thai traditional music. In N village, they sang the song of Tai-Lue migration, praying for Chao Luang Muang La in So style (Northern Thai style singing), rather than Khap Lue. In N village, they played music in several ceremonies such as house building ceremony, wedding ceremony and funeral ceremony, besides the guardian spirit ritual. This was the role of the Chang Khap before their role in the village declined.

In the 2002 ritual, Klum Phu Sung Ayu phua Patthana Sukhaparp (The Elderly Group for Improving Health) was established and they performed aerobic dance in front of the statue of Chao Luang Muang La in N village. When they exercised, they counted "one, two, three..." with Tai-Lue pronunciation to express Tai-Lue identity in front of their guardian spirit.⁵⁾ Besides this, in the 2002 ritual, a dance party for the elderly was held led

5) Villagers usually speak Tai-Lue language, a Tai dialect, in their everyday life.



Fig. 2 Klum Phu Sung Ayu phua Patthana Sukhaparp (The Elderly Group for Improving Health)



Fig. 3 Sao Wai Thong (Girls of Golden Age)

by members of the old women's dancing group, named "Sao Wai Thong" (Girls of Golden Age). They sold tickets to the people who joined the party, and allotted the benefit to the village elderly fund.

In the 2005 ritual, though a dance party was not held, the aerobic dancing in front of the statue of Chao Luang Muang La in N village was performed by "Klum Phu Sung Ayu phua Patthana Sukhaparp" (The Elderly Group for Improving Health). In their procession to the ritual place, the Khap Lue referred to their aerobic dance in a song. Khap Lue was revived in the ritual of this year. It was sung by some ordinary elderly who like to sing, instead of Chang Khap (traditional folk singer).

In this process of ritual change, the role of traditional specialists has declined, but various groups formed and named as "the elderly" (Phu Sung Ayu) have appeared in the recent rituals. To understand this, I will explore the changing role of the elderly in the village life and new activities of the elderly in the following sections.

III Changing Traditional Role of the Elderly

Traditionally, in Northern Thailand, the basic family role of the elderly is to look after grandchildren. However, this role of the elderly has declined in recent years, because of the change of family structure and the popularization of school education. After the rapid economic growth of the late 1980s, and the cost of living increase, the number of children per family had inevitably decreased. And with every child attending elementary school for six years as part of the Thai state's compulsory education and with many going to kindergarten for two years, the role of the elderly in the family has been taken over by the school education systems. Given this situation, the elderly now need to find alternative activities to make use of their own time [Suri 1991: 4]. Such was the case in the Tai-Lue villages of Thawanpha. In the case of N village, for example, the establish-

ment of the village nursery center (Sung Dek Lek) in early 1990, whose responsibilities included looking after pre-kindergarten children (one to three years old) had reduced the time the elderly spend with their grandchildren.

In a report by Kriksak, Suri and Somsak on the situation of the elderly in the rural and urban areas of Chiang Mai province, they noted that the activity sphere of the elderly had diminished considerably, when compared to that of young people. They also noted that elderly visiting of neighboring people and time spent for religious activities had gone up [Kriksak, Suri and Somsak 1990: 4]. This pattern is evident in N village, where the elderly, realizing their declining role in the family, have begun spending more time with neighboring friends and in religious activities. One old woman over 80 says she used to enjoy going to the temple to pray and to meet friends. But because of pain in her legs, she has shifted to other similar activities, praying at the Buddhist altar in her house and visiting neighboring friends. They have kept these traditional customs, while on the other hand, the vigorous old women around 60–65 years join the aerobic dance for the elderly (see next section). Nowadays many of the elderly under 70 years old have begun to join these new activities.⁶⁾

Traditionally, in Northern Thailand, the elderly have a role in temple activities. In N village, for example, the elderly men and women live and work in the Viharn (assembly hall) of the temple before and during Wan Phra (Buddhist day). There the men sit in the front and women sit in the rear. Then an old man, who is called Acan Wat, leads laymen and laywomen in recitation. Yet now even in the temples, the elderly role has changed. In 1996, a high school for novices (Ronrien Phra Pariyattham Saman Suksa) opened in T village situated across the river from N village. During daytime, monks of N temple would work in that school, and novices of N temple would go to study there. Thus, as nobody appeared to stay anymore in N temple, some male elderly have taken over guarding the temple. Also, on the occasion of Songkran Festival (New Year Festival), in a traditional event called Samma Kharawa (often held April 15), lay villagers make offerings to monks and the elderly. Under Prime Minister Thaksin, however, April 13 was designated as National Day of the Elderly and henceforth the elderly, who received offerings in the ritual, were to be formally designated as people over 60 (Phu Sung Ayu).

In March 2005, I had a chance to observe one funeral ceremony in N village. In the preparation for the ceremony, people worked following traditional roles allocated by

6) These data were collected as part of the research project, “Quantitative Research on the Self-care and Lifestyle of the Female Elderly, Compared Japanese and Thai” (The leader of the research project is Takami Tanaka), supported by the President’s Fund of Mie Prefectural College of Nursing.

Many elderly in N village spoke about the difference in society between the past and the present. Most of them say that elder brothers and sisters used to look after their younger brothers and sisters in the temple in olden times, but now such customs cannot be seen.



Fig. 4 Funeral Ceremony

generation and sex. The male elderly made offerings of coconut and other things to the dead person while the female elderly decorated the offerings. Middle-aged men then prepared the cemetery while the middle-aged women prepared the dishes for the ceremony. During the three days of preparation for the funeral ceremony, the female elderly also performed aerobic dancing every morning. After these arrangements were made, the male elderly moved to the playground, established in 2000, and began to play *petank*, a French sport for the elderly, recommended by the King's Mother for the elderly in the first half of 1990s before her demise in 1996. Henceforth, to the religious activities of the elderly were added new activities like *petank*. In the next Section, I will examine the process of popularization of newly created activities and its social background.

IV New Activities of the Elderly

As the average lifespan in Thailand had risen, the percentage of Thais over 60 had increased. Yet, the role of the elderly had gone the opposite direction — declining in the family, and forcing them to find new activities in day-to-day life. This was the context in which Samakhom Sapha Phu Sung Ayu Haeng Phrathet Thai (Senior Citizens Council of

Thailand) was established as a national organization in 1989, under the tutelage of the King's Mother in 1991. Since then, the Council has cooperated with many organizations like the Social Welfare Division, under the Ministry of Public Health, that offer welfare services for the elderly. The elderly were now recognized as having the right to receive welfare services such as free medical service [Samakhom Sapha Phu Sung Ayu Haeng Prathet Thai 1999: 10], and such services were coursed through provincial branches of the Samakhom Sapha Phu Sung Ayu Haeng Phrathet Thai.⁷⁾

In Nan province, the elderly club at the provincial level was established in 1984, and became the Nan branch of the Senior Citizens Council of Thailand in 1992, unifying Chomrom Phu Sung Ayu (the elderly club) at district, sub-district and village levels [Sakha Samakhom Sapha Phu Sung Ayu Haeng Prathet Thai Pracam Canwat Nan 1999].⁸⁾ The aim of this group is mainly to maintain the health of the elderly and mutual aid, but also to preserve traditional culture and thereby contribute to the local society. The group projects are as follows:

1. Activities related to health (lectures on nutrition, regular health check, and sports such as *petank* and *taikaek*)
2. Mutual aid (funeral ceremony, looking after sick members)
3. Alternative occupations for the elderly (bamboo craft, artificial flower craft, blacksmith work, etc.)
4. Promoting traditional herbal medicine
5. Promoting the preservation and transmission of traditional culture (traditional music, dance, ceremony, etc.)

The leader of the Nan branch of the Council however admitted that implementation of these activities was uneven because transportation problems often made it difficult for people in the remote areas to access the places where the activities are held. The economic conditions of some areas are so bad that people do not have enough time to join the activities of the club.⁹⁾

The situation of the elderly is different in urban and rural areas. The most active

7) I conducted research on the elderly in Nan province from 1999 to 2000, in cooperation with Mr. Somchet Wimonkasaem, a teacher of Satri Si Nan High School, financially supported by the Japanese Society for the Promotion of Science, including the Core University Program of the same society. The title of the research project is "Modern Welfare-system and Traditional Mutual Aid: Comparative Study on the Case of Thailand and Japan." I compared the activities of the elderly in Nan province, Thailand with those in Mie prefecture, Japan. I published a research report in Japanese [Baba 2001] and for the part of the elderly activities in Nan province published in Thai [Baba and Somchet 2005].

8) Prachakom Nan (Nan Civic Society) was established in 1996 for networking several kinds of community groups. Chomrom Phu Sung Ayu (the elderly club) is networking with this [Prachakom Nan 1996].

9) Suri investigated three socio-economic levels of the elderly in Chiang Mai province. The way of spending time is different between each level [Suri 1991].



Fig. 5 *Petank*



Fig. 6 Aerobics of the Elderly

clubs can be found in the Nan City area, and their active members, mostly retired governmental officials have time to spare for club activities. In the rural areas, however, most people are farmers who do not experience a specified retirement, and who continue to work in the fields even after they turn 60. When the activities of the elderly club were introduced, these were not well received in rural areas. But in villages where economic conditions have comparatively improved, farmers welcomed these activities.

I will describe the activities of the elderly in the case of N village, Pakha sub-district where economic conditions were good and where able leaders were present, so that the sub-district has often been chosen as the model area for rural development.¹⁰⁾ In Pakha sub-district, workers of the Community Health Center (Sathani Anamai) in T village, have assisted the village elderly with programs such as health check, aerobic dancing, *petank* and *tai kaek* (Chinese martial arts). The Center also holds seminars on health twice a year. The response has been quite ambivalent, with one monk saying that “Health checking system and mutual aid among the elderly are useful, but some activities introduced by public health officers, for example aerobic dance and *petank*, are not so welcomed by the elderly in rural areas. Traditional music and dances should be promoted for the elderly.”

The activities that appeal the most are aerobic dance and *petank* which they can manage by themselves: *petank* being favored by male elderly while aerobic dancing, by female elderly. In 2000, a *petank* ground was established in the compound of the temple in N village. The compound of the temple used to be the traditional place where villagers gathered and talked with each other freely, and thus public acceptance of the *petank* ground was gradual. Aerobic dance was initially popular among 30–40 years old women thanks in part to the training of a village woman in a training center in Bangkok supported by the Ministry of Public Health. This form of exercise was eventually

10) For example, the first meeting of the project called Muang Na Yu Ban Na Yu (Healthy City Plan, one W. H. O project) was held in T temple in 1998.

introduced to the elderly and accepted gradually. Today more than half of the people between 60–69 have joined these activities.¹¹⁾

It is said that these new activities of the elderly are part of the new culture of the elderly of the village society and that behind all this is the separation between the elderly and young people in recent society. This is a frequent explanation heard among villagers of which the statement below is representative:

Recently the rural area has been connected with urban society by market economy influence, and people who go to work in the city have increased. So young people tend to be interested in the new culture from outside, not in the traditional culture. It has made the life styles different between the elderly and young people. It seems that the traditional knowledge of the elderly in day-to-day life has become useless.

In the 1990s, in Pakha sub-district, a number of villages, including N village, built their own museums to show the traditional way of life in each place. Their motivation was fairly straightforward, as attested by the following claim: “Young people do not know the traditional way of life, so traditional goods must be displayed for keeping them in their minds.”

These new activities of the elderly have also served to accomplish the above goals. A new relationship between them and the young people developed through the *petank*, which is also favored by young people. Thus the *petank* ground had become an arena where the elderly can communicate with young people. Some members of the traditional northern music group, as mentioned in Section II, are also trying to transmit the traditional music to young people.

In the next Section, I will focus on the group of the elderly in the changing ritual, considering the appearance of their new activities.

V The Group of the Elderly in the Changing Ritual and Its Social Background

Here, I will return to the subject of the guardian spirit ritual mentioned in Section II. The change in the guardian spirit ritual of Tai-Lue villages in the 1990s took place in the process of the cultural reformation in the Tai-Lue villages. This transformation consisted of two parts.

In the first phase, new leaders such as school teachers led the recently enlarged ritual and tried to make it an intrinsic and useful part of village development. They were not

11) According to 1999's data, the number of the elderly 60–69 years old was 73 (31 males, 42 females) in N village.

interested in the traditional ritual knowledge which had been transmitted by ritual specialists. They were more concerned with the cultural performances that accompanied the ritual as a means of potentially attracting outsiders. So from their perspective, it became unimportant to transmit this knowledge through the hand of the ritual specialist. New leaders seemed to be creating a new cultural tradition. In the second phase, groups named “the elderly,” such as the elderly traditional northern music group, aerobic dancing for the elderly and dance group of the women elderly appeared. These are connected not only with the movement of preserving local wisdom but also with the movement of improving health.

These groups which all include “the elderly” in their titles are not parts of the elderly club, Chomrom Phu Sung Ayu, of which most village elderly are members. Unlike the elderly club which was founded in the top-down style, these groups were voluntarily initiated by the village elderly. They were formed according to the recommendation of the cultural and welfare policy of local government, but the details of the activities came from the villagers. Except for the dance group of women elderly, their activities are not confined to the Chao Luang Muang La ritual (the dance group of women elderly is totally formed by the idea of villagers). The elderly traditional northern music group plays music on several ceremonial occasions, and aerobic dancing for the elderly is performed almost every day.

Chomrom Dontri Phunmuan Phu Sung Ayu (The elderly traditional northern music group), which appeared in the 1999 ritual, was encouraged to be formed by the National Cultural Council of the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Public Health. It is concerned with preserving traditional culture as well as in keeping the village elderly healthy. In T village, when they played music in the 1999 ritual, they wore uniforms provided by the Ministry of Public Health.

In Pakha sub-district — the model area for rural development as mentioned above — five villages established Chomrom Dontri Phunmuan Phu Sung Ayu. They formed a traditional northern Thai style musical band that used traditional instruments like the *salo* (bowing instrument), *pin* (plucking instrument) and *kui* (vertical bamboo flute). The members numbered around 6 to 10 depending on the village. In the neighboring sub-district, however, no such groups were formed because people always played together spontaneously without forming a fixed group. On the occasion of a festival or Sukhwan (calling soul) ritual, three elderly play traditional music together, two playing *pin* and one playing *salo*. These three are not fixed members, so any three elderly can play together. This, according to one villager, is the “real” traditional way of this area, something different from other places in Northern Thailand. Bands in Pakha sub-district, however, are formed in typical northern style although some use musical instruments of central Thailand such as *ranat* (Thai xylophone) and sometimes play songs of central Thailand. These may be formed as part of cultural policy, but the details of their activities derive from the villagers’ ideas.

In the late 1990s, in Nan province and Thawanpha district, the Cultural Council of Province and District (under control of the National Cultural Council), tried to reform the culture through the movement of preserving local wisdom, and decided there was a need to seek the advice of the elderly familiar with traditional culture. This, they claimed, was a way of constructing a role for some of the elderly in their changing rural society.

Actually this is inventing “true culture” in the name of preserving tradition: it is a standardization of culture. A member of the district’s Cultural Council claims that traditional funeral ceremonies are conducted without regulation and the way of conducting has become varied among villages. To avoid further modifications, they argued that there was a need to preserve the real traditional ways. What the council ignores is that for the villagers, such variations have always been there, dating as far back as the olden times.

The elderly traditional northern music groups were formed under this cultural policy. However only those selected elderly with musical skills could join the group: this despite the fact that the groups were also portrayed as useful instruments for health improvement. Another specific elderly group for improving health on the other hand could accept every elderly person, and was more connected with the public health improving movement. The dance group of the women elderly could accept every old woman, and all elderly could join its dance parties. This open-door policy is the product of the growing importance of the female elderly in the Chao Luang Muang La ritual. They have become important since 1993, when a newly constructed stage for village entertainment in N village held an “Elderly beauty contest” alongside the usual beauty contest of village girls. In the past, it is said that women were forbidden to enter the ceremonial place because they were considered to be easily possessed by spirits.¹²⁾ This view has weakened in the recent years as the departure of men to search for job outside the village and the province, and the increasing attraction of the local textiles (which women turned into beautiful clothes) to outsiders and tourists, has transformed women into important village actors. In the Khap Lue (Tai-Lue folk song), the declining presence of the Chang Khap (traditional singer) was replaced by village women singing the Khap Lue and dancing in their traditional clothes.

In the changing ritual process in Tai-Lue villages, the public perception is that they maintain a strong Tai-Lue identity. The truth of the matter however, is that the Lue people are collectively “performing as a Lue” through their movement of preserving local wisdom and cultural revivalism [Baba 1998]. New elderly groups that appeared in this process of changing ritual are also related with “performing as a Lue.”

12) In Northern Thailand, it is said that men have strong souls (*kwan kheng*) and women have weak souls (*kwan on*), so women are easily possessed by spirits. Most sorcerers who can drive the attack of spirits away are male and most spirit mediums are female. This does not mean that there is a status distinction between male and female.



Fig. 7 The Ritual of Chao Luang Muang La

The style of the elderly traditional northern music is totally northern music style, with the *salo*, the *pin* and the *kui*. The style of singing is So (Northern Thai style folk song), not Khap Lue (Tai-Lue folk song), so there is no special Tai-Lue musical character. However, during the ritual of Chao Luang Muang La, they do sing the song of the Tai-Lue history of migration, albeit in So style. When the elderly group for improving health exercises in front of Tai-Lue spirit, they likewise count in Tai-Lue pronunciation.

They act a role of performing as Lue in the ritual as a part of the new culture of the elderly separated from young people.

VI Conclusion

In this paper, I dealt with the group named “the elderly” in the guardian spirit ritual in the Tai-Lue villages in Thawanpha district, Nan province, Northern Thailand. Chomrom Dontri Phu Sung Ayu (The Elderly Traditional Northern Music Group), Klum Phu Sung Ayu phua Patthana Sukhaparp (The Elderly Group for Improving Health) and Klum Sao Wai Thong (Girls of Golden Age Group [Dance group of the women elderly]) appeared after the decline of the traditional role of the elderly in the ritual, and are connected with the recent changes in national policy towards local cultures and the elderly.

The elderly traditional northern music groups are formed under the rubric of the cultural policy of preserving local wisdom. The Thai state’s officials of public health also make the claim that such groups are useful for improving health. Such pronouncements, of course, are evidence of social change affecting the village communities. In particular, the traditional role of the elderly in the family has been transferred to the school education systems as the latter’s expansion and modernization reach down the village level. The chance of transmitting traditional knowledge to young people has decreased as school education systems dominate and as young people become less and less interested in the traditional culture. So the elderly now need to seek other roles and other

methods of spending time. This is the stereotyped general explanation, and the situation of Tai-Lue society can be explained likewise, but there is still need for more detail in order to fully appreciate the extent of the changes at the local level.

After the Senior Citizens Council of Thailand was established, new activities of the elderly were introduced all over the country, and in Nan province, they prevailed gradually by the latter half of the 1990s. At the same time, a parallel movement for preserving local wisdom via the elderly was also promoted by the National Culture Council. These activities became a new medium for the elderly who were feeling the pangs of separation from the culture of young people and irrelevance vis-à-vis their traditional roles in the community. The groups that were formed were named “elderly” and adopted the guardian spirit ritual as one of their forms of activities alongside more “modern ones” like aerobic dancing and the *petank*.

As all these activities were being played out, the elderly was able to re-establish ties with the young people and transmit the method of playing musical instruments to the latter.¹³⁾ The youth also became attracted to *petank*, so in the *petank* ground, prepared at the temple, the elderly could communicate with their proteges.

The group named “elderly” is related to the act of “performing as a Lue” in the Tai-Lue guardian spirit ritual. The elderly traditional northern music group does not play Tai-Lue music but sings for Tai-Lue spirit. Aerobic dancing also introduced a new way of improving elderly health and they offer the dance to Tai-Lue spirit by counting in Tai-Lue pronunciation.

These are newly invented performances in the ritual as a new culture of the elderly, they are not transmitted from their ancestors. One can say, therefore that the role of the elderly in the ritual has changed from that of “Khon Thao Khon Kae” (a person who has traditional knowledge) to that of “Phu Sung Ayu” (a person over 60 years of age, who can receive welfare services). With the emergence of the age of “Phu Sung Ayu,” the role of the elderly has been reformed by cultural policy and welfare policy by a more active Nation-State.

On the day before the Chao Luang Muang La ritual day in 2002 (which coincided with the King’s birthday), a health festival was held in the space in front of the district office. Many village women groups gathered and performed aerobic dance and an exhibition of “One Tambol One Product” promoted by Prime Minister Thaksin’s policy was also held. In the 2002 and 2005 rituals, the members of Klum Phu Sung Ayu phua Patthana Sukhaparp (The Elderly Group for Improving Health) wore yellow, the color of the King, T-shirts. These social phenomena might be named “welfarization” led by the government and the Royal family.

13) Bamboo craft is also promoted as an activity of the elderly club. This is also useful for the elderly who have bamboo craft skill, and is easier than playing a musical instrument. It may become the most prevalent activity among male elderly.

In this paper, however, I focused on the newly invented activities of the elderly in the ritual which were voluntarily initiated by them not in the top-down style. They have tried to find their own world of activities even in the stream of “welfarization.” They are given a new arena of self-representation and activities, i. e. performing as the Tai-Lue “elderly.” So they are in a sense defined by the state, but they adapt those definitions for their own purposes.

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