

DYNAMICS AND THE PROMOTION OF ELDERLY CARE IN THAILAND AND LAO PDR*

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Received 25 March 2026; Revised 27 April 2026; Accepted 28 April 2026

Abstract

This study aimed (1) to analyze and compare the cultural dynamics influencing patterns and methods of elderly care in Thailand and the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), and (2) to develop culturally grounded recommendations for promoting elderly care that are appropriate for contemporary society. A qualitative phenomenological approach with a cross-cultural comparative design was employed. The research was conducted in Nong Khai Province, Thailand, and Vientiane Capital, Lao PDR. Key informants were purposively selected and included 20 older persons and family caregivers, along with 10 stakeholders such as community leaders, monks, village health volunteers, and social welfare practitioners. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions using semi-structured guides, with audio recordings and field notes. Content and thematic analyses were applied. Findings indicate that filial piety remains the central cultural value shaping elderly care in both countries, with families acting as the primary caregivers and communities providing supplementary support through social networks. However, notable differences emerged. In Thailand, rapid socio-economic change and technological advancement have led to more diverse caregiving practices, including indirect care and increased reliance on digital communication. In contrast, Lao PDR continues to emphasize close, co-residential family care rooted in traditional practices.

* Settha Tepsan, Usa Ngammeesri and Wannaree Pansiri. (2026). Dynamics And The Promotion Of Elderly Care In Thailand And Lao Pdr. *Journal of Political Science Mahamakut Buddhist University*, 6(1), 97-104.

DOI:

Website:



Based on these findings, the study recommends integrating traditional cultural values with modern care systems, promoting collaboration among families, communities, and formal institutions, and encouraging flexible, context-sensitive care models. Such culturally informed approaches are essential for ensuring sustainable and effective elderly care in the evolving Thai–Lao context.

Keywords: cultural dynamics, elderly care, filial piety, Thai–Lao context, integrated care model

Introduction

The global community is currently undergoing a rapid transition into an aging society, driven by increased life expectancy and declining birth rates. This demographic shift presents significant challenges to the economic, social, and welfare systems of many nations. In the specific context of Thailand and the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), both governments have considered this issue, implementing national policies and legal frameworks such as the National Elderly Plan in Thailand; however, the increasing of rapid transition into an aging society and the Lao PDR. Following from Declining fertility and rising life expectancy have accelerated population aging in Lao PDR, with rapid demographic transition (United Nations, 2022). Fertility decline reflects improved education and healthcare (UNFPA, 2020). This shift increases dependency ratios and pressures healthcare and social protection systems (World Bank, 2016). These initiatives emphasize the necessity of developing systematic long-term care (LTC) and holistic support systems to ensure the well-being of the aging population in a sustainable manner.

Historically, elderly care in both Thailand and Lao PDR has been deeply rooted in the family unit. However, contemporary socioeconomic transformations including rapid urbanization, labor migration, and the shift from extended to nuclear family structures have significantly impacted traditional caregiving practices. Research by Knodel and Teerawichitchainan (2019) confirmed that while Southeast Asian societies still rely on the family as the primary mechanism for elderly care, migration increasingly leads to a phenomenon where elderly parents are left to live alone or receive only "indirect

care". This shift is further explained through the lens of "Cultural Dynamics," which posits that culture is not static but fluid, constantly adapting to changing social and economic environments.

Nong Khai Province (Thailand) and Vientiane Capital (Lao PDR) serve as unique focal points for this study, representing a "shared cultural space". Linked by the Mekong River, these two regions share a common language, similar religious beliefs, and a traditional way of life. Despite these shared roots and the common value of "filial piety" (Khwam Katanyu), which dictates that children have a moral obligation to care for their parents, the two areas exhibit different degrees of adaptation. Thailand shows a more pronounced trend toward indirect care, utilizing digital communication and relying on formal state support and community networks. Conversely, Lao PDR continues to rely more heavily on close-contact care within the family and informal community ties.

This disparity highlights that elderly care in these societies is not determined solely by structural factors but is deeply intertwined with evolving cultural dimensions. Therefore, studying the cultural dynamics influencing caregiving patterns and analyzing culturally grounded promotion strategies is vital for generating in-depth knowledge. This research seeks to bridge the gap between traditional values and modern support systems, leading to the development of a Cultural-Integrated Elderly Care Model. By integrating the roles of the family, the community, and the state, this study aims to provide recommendations that will allow the elderly to live with dignity and security in an ever-changing contemporary society.

Objectives

1. To analyze and compare the cultural dynamics influencing patterns and methods of elderly care in Thailand and Lao PDR
2. To develop recommendations for promoting elderly care based on local cultural contexts that are appropriate for contemporary society

Methodology

This qualitative research employed a phenomenological approach combined with a cross-cultural study.



Informants Participants were purposively selected from Nong Khai (Thailand) and Vientiane (Lao PDR). A total of 30 informants were included: 15 from Nong Khai and 15 from Vientiane. In each location, participants consisted of 10 elderly persons and caregivers, and 5 community stakeholders, including monks and health volunteers, ensuring a balanced representation across the two settings. A purposive sampling technique was employed, following the methodological approaches outlined by John W. Creswell (2014) and Ibrahim Etikan et al. (2016).

Instruments Data were collected using semi-structured in-depth interview guides and focus group discussion guides, validated by three experts. The instruments were revised based on expert feedback to improve question clarity, sequencing, and content coverage. A pilot test was conducted with individuals outside the study sample to assess interview duration and refine question clarity. Key themes included: (1) cultural dimensions of elderly care, (2) transformations in care patterns in contemporary society, and (3) culturally grounded guidelines for promoting elderly care.

Data Analysis Data from audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and supplemented with field notes. The transcripts were systematically coded using thematic analysis. Initial open coding was conducted to identify meaningful units, followed by grouping codes into categories and broader themes. Content analysis was then applied to interpret patterns and compare findings across the two cultural contexts.

Data obtained from the interviews were analyzed using Thematic Analysis following the framework of Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2006), in conjunction with Qualitative Content Analysis as proposed by Satu Elo and Helvi Kyngäs (2008). These qualitative analytical approaches emphasize the systematic identification, examination, and organization of patterns or themes within the data.

Results

The findings address the research objective by showing that filial piety remains the central cultural value shaping elderly care in both Thailand and Lao PDR. However, its practical expression differs due to social and economic changes.



Aspect	Thailand	Lao PDR
Care Pattern	Increasing indirect care	Predominantly direct care
Forms of Care	Financial support, video calls, mobile health monitoring, periodic visits	Daily physical care, co-residence, face-to-face interaction
Key Drivers	Labor migration, urbanization, technological development	rural lifestyles,
Role of Technology	Significant: families use smartphones, messaging apps, and telehealth to monitor health, send money, and maintain emotional connection	Limited but emerging: communication tools are used occasionally, physical presence
Community Role	Supportive but secondary to family and state systems	Central role: temples, monks, and village actively assist with daily care and social support

Technology enables distance caregiving in Thailand through communication, financial transfers, and remote health support, while Lao PDR relies mainly on direct family care supported by community groups such as family, co-residence, villagers. Effective elderly care requires adapting filial piety to modern contexts using digital tools and strengthening integrated systems where family, community, and the state collaborate to provide sustainable social, emotional, and practical support for older persons.

Discussion

The findings confirm that filial piety remains the central moral foundation of elderly care in both Thailand and Lao PDR, consistent with the work of John Knodel and Bussarawan Teerawichitchainan (2019), who emphasize enduring intergenerational obligations in Southeast Asia. However, this study extends their argument by showing that filial piety operates as a dynamic cultural system



shaped by socio-economic transformation. As family structures shift from extended to nuclear arrangements and younger generations migrate for work, caregiving practices are reconfigured. Direct physical care is increasingly supplemented by financial remittances, periodic visits, and digital communication, demonstrating how cultural change generates new caregiving forms while preserving moral responsibility.

At the community level, the findings support Robert D. Putnam's social capital theory, particularly in *Bowling Alone*, which emphasizes trust and civic engagement. In Lao PDR, limited formal welfare systems result in strong reliance on informal networks such as temples, monks, and village health volunteers. In contrast, Thailand shows a more structured integration of state welfare services with community participation. Rather than functioning separately, formal and informal systems interact dynamically depending on institutional capacity.

New Knowledge

Building on these insights, the study proposes the Cultural-Integrated Elderly Care Model in the Thai-Lao context. This model integrates culture, family, community, and state into an interconnected system, emphasizing adaptability to contextual changes. Labor migration encourages remittance-based support and community monitoring, while technological adoption enables remote caregiving and emotional connection. The model ultimately aims to ensure that older person's experience dignity, security, and social inclusion by combining traditional values with flexible, modern support systems suited to rapidly changing societies.

Cultural-Integrated Elderly Care Model in Thai–Lao Context

Proposed Conceptual Model



Cultural-Integrated Elderly Care Model in Thai–Lao Context

Recommendation

Policy: Thailand and Lao PDR should strengthen integrated elderly care policies, support digital caregiving tools, and expand community-based and state welfare systems for sustainable elder support.

Participation: Families, communities, and religious groups should actively share caregiving roles, maintain emotional support, and strengthen cooperation in elderly care activities

Future Research: Future studies should examine digital caregiving impacts, migration effects on elderly care, and conduct comparative ASEAN research for broader understanding.

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