



New Normal in the Post-COVID-19 of the Elders, Maeka Sub-District, Muang District, Phayao Province

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Abstract

This research aims at 1) studying forms of the so called ‘new normal’ adopted by the elders in Maeka Sub-district, Muang District, Phayao Province, and 2) proposing how to adjust to the new normal after the COVID-19 epidemic for the elders. The data were collected by means of observations, non-formal interviews, and focus group discussions drawn from the 40 informants consisting of visiting lecturers, volunteer teachers, and elderly students in Elderly Learning Center of Wat Maekahuaykhian, Maeka Sub-district. It was found that the so called ‘new normal’ is a type of new way of life after the pandemic of COVID-19 throughout the country since 2020. It significantly affected the forms of elders’ living in Maeka Sub-district in 4 aspects: 1) beliefs and traditions with lesser congregations in the monastic affairs, festivals and traditions, 2) health care with more awareness in life such as wearing masks, keeping personal distances, 3) the economic difficulties with more bills concerning the medical payments such as masks, sanitizing alcohol, and 4) social relations with fewer usual gatherings and celebrations. For the lessons learnt of how to adjust in accordance with the situations, it was found that there should be the fourfold mode of living: ‘learning, accepting, adjusting, and changing’. That is to say, 1) being open-minded to ever learn new emerging things such as COVID-19, 2) being mindful and accepting it as a temporary threat, 3) adjusting behaviors in accordance with the pandemic, and 4) changing into the new normal.

Keywords: New Normal, COVID-19, Adjustments, Elders



Introduction

Since the worldwide pandemic of Virus Corona at the end of year 2019 which was later named ‘COVID-19’, the world has encountered the so called ‘New Normal’, the new mode of living that significantly affected the common way of life. Everybody regardless ages, sexes, beliefs, social status and countries has shared the same norms, especially personal distancing, wearing masks in public, staying at home or working from home, etc. No matter ones liked or disliked the norms, still they were eventually driven to changes. Normally, changes are threats to the nostalgia. Therefore, changing things that once were familiar to life is not easy for the elders, especially those who are poor and uneducated. The change forces them to learn and accept the new situations unfamiliar to them, while their conditions in physical health, willpower, social status, and incomes are limited. That is to say, old aging causes the organs decaying, the mental health with less active responses, the retirements from jobs or positions, and the financial expenses depending on others. Therefore, to hate or ignore the changes will not help the elders overcome the threats. Only way to survive is to learn and adjust in accordance with Charles Darwin’s Origin of Species, “it is not the most intellectual of the species that survives; it is not the strongest that survives; but the species that survives is the one that is able best to adapt and adjust to the changing environment in which it finds itself” (Leon C. Megginson, 1964, online access). The adaptation occurs when people respond positively to environmental changes, and it is the process and outcome of individuals and groups who use conscious awareness, self-reflection, and choice to create human and environmental integration (Sister Callista Roy, 1976, online access).

There were some studies showing examples of adaptations and guidelines for elders in order to cope with the changing environment including the new normal way of life. Sukanya Buasri et.al. (2022) carried out the research on the promotion of holistic health of the home-bound and bed-bound elders. It was reported that since the elders in the home-bed-bound conditions have less social activities, isolating themselves at home, thus, they feel lonely and have low self-esteem. They should understand and pursue the happiness in 5 dimensions: healthy body, fun, elegance, wisdom, and peace along with the Buddhist principle of Bhavana 4 or the fourfold development: physically, mentally, socially, and intellectually. To help them access and promote the aforesaid dimensions, the right and appropriate contents were created and propagated through the multi-innovative media such as printed materials, Line, TikTok, YouTube, etc. In addition, Supranee Tangwong et.al. (2022) conducted a study concerning the adaptive behaviors on new normal after the COVID-19 epidemic of elderly. The study applied the Roy’s Adaptation Model as the framework in order to find out the adaptive behaviors on new normal assessment including the physiologic mode, the self-concept mode, the role function mode, and the interdependence mode. The study focused on the elders in elderly club at Ban Pong District in Ratchaburi Province. The results revealed that the adaptive behaviors on new normal after the epidemic situation of COVID-19 of elderly was at the very good level, and those in the urban area had

better adaptive behaviors than those in the rural area. Further, Chulasak Charnnarong (2021) pointed out the Buddhist principles as guidelines for health care during the Covid-19 pandemic. The key Buddhist principles for health care, especially the mental health, during the Covid-19 crisis included the Mindfulness (Sati), the Four Noble Truths (Ariyasacca), contemplation on impermanence (Anicca), and self-contentment (Santosa).

Maeka Sub-district, Muang District, Phayao Province became an aged society where the elderly populations gradually increase. Traditionally, Buddhist monasteries here have been elders' assembly for social affairs and making merits. Out of 10 monasteries in the sub-district, 2 key monasteries established the so called 'Elderly School' where elderly populations from various villages have attended. Having established in 2014, the elderly schools stand the taste of 'no one is too old to learn'. However, the big challenges occurred when COVID-19 emerged. It affected their way of life in all dimensions: be they physically, mentally, socially, and intellectually. It also affected learning activities conducted in the elderly schools, for the schools run on and off due to the state lockdown declared. The elderly students with special reference to those who have been students in the Elderly Learning Center in Wat Maekahuaykhian encountered the COVID-19 environment just like elsewhere. As a result, the elders here need adaptations in order to survive, so that their lives can move on. The questions raised in this study were that of how the COVID-19 affected the elders' lives in Maeka Sub-district, and how the Learning Center helped the elderly students deal with the new threats during the pandemic and even after, in order to remove insults that elders hardly learns new tricks.

Objectives

1. To study forms of the so called new normal adopted by the elders in Maeka Sub-district, Muang District, Phayao Province
2. To propose how to adjust to the new normal after the COVID-19 epidemic for the elders in Maeka Sub-district, Muang District, Phayao Province.

Methodology

This research employed the qualitative research methodology as follows:

1) Key informants

There were the 40 informants, consisting of 3 visiting lecturers from the University of Phayao, one from Tambon health promoting hospital in Maeka Sub-district, and other from the office of non-formal and informal education of Muang Phayao, 5 volunteer teachers, and 31 elderly students from various villages in Maeka Sub-district with special reference to those from Villages Moo 1, 2, 3, 7, 10, 12, and Moo 16, who regularly attended the class in the Elderly Learning Center in Wat Maekahuaykhian. It should be noted here that the number 31 of elderly students were not counted in the same time



in attending all lectures and activities, since the elders did not attend the class in the same time with the same amount due to the preventive measure of COVID-19. The 31 elders, out of the enrolled 70 elderly students, represented the consistency of the elders repeatedly attending class.

2) Tools and Data Collections

2.1 Participant Observations were made on and off depending on the state declarations of the lockdown and self-quarantine. The researcher as one of volunteer teachers, closely took parts in lectures and activities conducted by the Elderly Learning Center throughout the academic years (during October 2020 - October 2022).

2.2 Non-formal Interviews were conducted over the key informants including the elderly students, volunteer teachers, and visiting lecturers throughout the aforementioned academic years.

2.3 Focus group discussions were run by means of eventual group activities, such as the self-care activities, lessons learnt activities, that took place during the aforementioned academic years.

3) Data Analysis

The collected data were examined, categorized, analyzed, and presented according to the content analysis.

Results

So far the participant observations, non-formal observations, and focus group discussions were thoroughly made during October 2020 - October 2022, the data were continuously collected, except during the lockdown period, the data were lectures-based during the period of the personal distancing regulation as per the state policy and activities-based during the period of lessening the regulation and the following endemic. The lectures and activities can be divided into 2 types: the regular ones by 5 volunteer teachers and the special ones by other 5 visiting lecturers, i.e. 3 from the University of Phayao, 1 from the Tambon health promoting hospital in Maeka Sub-district, and 1 from the office of non-formal and informal education of Muang Phayao. The class is normally conducted every Saturdays with delivering lectures in the morning and activities in the afternoon. When the COVID-19 emerged and spread over the country including Phayao in March 2020, the people in Maeka Sub-district were confused and panic about it due to the overload information through various media. The elders and children were firstly warned at risk. For the elders, they were suggested to be self-isolated at home. Thus, the elderly school in Wat Maekahuykhian was officially closed in the following month according to the preventive measure. All the mass activities in the community of Maeka Sub-district were also cancelled or postponed. The class has been re-open again in October 2020 and continued till date.

As a result, a new normal way of life of the elders significantly changed in the following 4 forms:

1) Form of beliefs and traditions

The elders reflexed that in the beginning of the outbreak, they could not attend the merit-

making affairs in the monasteries as per usual local calendar because of being panic. In their community, there are certain activities concerning Buddhism and local beliefs according to the local calendar. For example, Vanphra Days or Dhammasavana Days depicted every seven days a week, Songkrant Festival in the mid-April, annual sacrifice ceremony to the village spirit, etc. Just as one interviewee pointed out, 'I've been old, and afraid of not making merits (offering alms food to monks) at the temple in Vanphra Days. The death will not frighten me, but lacking opportunity to accumulate merits.' While the other said that she has considerations for her family members' feelings of her children and grandchildren, so better she stayed at home. The elders believed that the pandemic could be overcome by the power of sacredness and merits. After a month of the outbreak, they learnt more about the situations and self-care regarding COVID-19 from the class. They could casually go to the temples and attend some important affairs in the community, but undergo the preventive measures such as wearing masks, keep distancing, using sanitizing gel. However, the elder appreciated two remarkable by-products taking place in the period of defensive measures: the happiness sharing boxes (ตู้ปันสุข) and the economized and minimized scale of social affairs such as the funeral ceremony, wedding, celebrations. The former action referred to Maeka people's kindness and compassions over the poor and suffered, while the latter showed the new norms instead of more expenses and being prolonged performances before the pandemic.

2) Form of the health care

Out of the medical terms relating to their aging such as the diabetes, high blood pressure, depression, the elders have to get along with the new terms introduced side by side with COVID-19, such as many brands of the preventive vaccine, self-quarantine, wearing masks, work from home, etc. Further, the news and information of how to secure and cure oneself from the COVID-19 were spread quickly and widely. The elders need to undergo the preventive measures prescribed by many sources, be they the new media, family members, friends, physicians, and even the fortune-tellers. According to one interview, an old man reflected that though he did not like wearing the masks and frequently washing hands, still he needed to do so as to protect himself and to consider for the social gossip. He said that COVID-19 is an invisible disease and harmful to the elders, no one knows where it is. The only thing he could try his best was to create immunity within oneself. Another interviewee said that she focused on the mental health exercise according to Buddhist principle learnt from the Center, i.e. chanting, spreading loving-kindness, and basic meditation practice in breathing in and out. This helped her not to be more confused in the news and toll of death and being infected from the outbreak.

3) Form of day-to-day economic activity

Due to the long-term outbreak and lockdown measure, the economic recession took place countrywide including Maeka Sub-district where the main incomes are available from the business and entrepreneurs around the University of Phayao. When the lockdown measure was enacted, the Univer-



sity run the online classes and most of the staff worked from home and almost students went back to their home. More business sectors, i.e. vendors, restaurants, shopkeepers, and owners of the dormitory had less customers. Some elders who are the owners of rest houses and dormitories cried out about their increasing living costs. Almost rooms in the buildings they own were vacant, so COVID-19 affected their only main incomes. Some owners reduced the fees for a fewer students left. Further, they had special expenses in this period in terms of medical fees and costs regarding the preventive measure of COVID-19 like vaccines, masks, medicines, and sanitizer gel, with their saving moneys. For those elders who are not the entrepreneurs, they mostly depend on the elderly living allowances given by the state and some more expenses were paid by their children. They turned to be more self-sufficient and contented, for example, planting home-grown vegetables and herbs, as to save daily costs.

4) Form of social relations

The kinship system is traditionally adopted in all villages in Maeka Sub-district, except in the urban area around the University of Phayao where almost latent populations have been from every corners of the countries pursuing for the jobs and higher study. The elders have a close relationship among their neighbors. Traditionally, the local rituals and festivals bind the people therein and lead to sense of belonging. Rituals and festivals interlink with 2 dimensions: worldly and religiously. That is to say, the worldly gatherings were conducted at home by the host or co-hosts through a party and celebrations along with music and drinks, whereas the religious ones at the monasteries through the Buddhist rituals. For example, Songkrant festival is joyfully celebrated at home with splashing water on each other, having a party among family members and friends, and was religiously performed at a monastery with making merits such as giving alms food to monks, chanting, and splashing water over the Buddha's statue. Tanguaysalak or the ritual of dedicating merits to the departed, is another unique ritual generally conducted in the northern part of the country. It is joyfully prepared and celebrated at home, then moved to the monasteries and given to the monks. Most interviewees stated that they hosted less the party or even stop it and hardly join it due to the preventive measure. A remarkable by-product is to not wasting times, and to reduce costs in preparing food and drinks, since the essence of the rituals is making merits, not just making fun. So they eventually join the gatherings run by the monastery in order to collect merits. Having awareness in the preventive measure, the monastery followed the new norms for the congregations such as cancelling some religious functions, preparing the distancing seats, providing alcohol gels.

To help the elders cope with the prompt skills about COVID-19, the classes at the elderly school were designed with contents and activities mainly focused on the COVID-19 know-hows. They can be concluded as follows:



Skills to be achieved	Moderators/Facilitators	Contents	Activities
Getting to know CO-VID-19	-Visiting Lecturers from Schools of Nursing, Pharmacy, and Allied Health Sciences, Univ. of Phayao -Director of Tambon Health Promoting Hospital in Maekahuaykhian -Village Health Volunteers	-What is COVID-19 -Symptom -Healing -Acquiring immunity -Norms and practices in daily life -Media literacy in the pandemic (Rumors and fake news)	-Quiz and reward after lessons -Demonstrating how to follow the right preventive measures such as how to wear masks, to use sanitizer gels, etc. -Sharing and analyzing the examples of news
Using medicines and herbs close to home	-Visiting lecturers from Schools of Nursing, Pharmacy, and Allied Health Sciences, Univ. of Phayao -Director of Tambon Health Promoting Hospital in Maekahuaykhian -Volunteer teachers	-Indigenous wisdom close to home -Local plants as medicines and food -Examples of products made of local plants	-Quiz and reward after lessons -Making herbal compress balls and demonstrating them -Planting local vegetables and herbs -Distributing seeds and young plants
Dhamma Practices	-Abbot of Wat Maekahuaykhian -Volunteer Teachers -A visiting lecturer from Non-Formal Education Office	-Five Precepts, Meditation and Insight (Sila, Samadhi, Panna) -Four Noble Truths (Ariyasacca) -Three characteristics of life (Tilakkhana) -Causes of ruins (Apayamukkha)	-Undertaking ceremony of Sila -Preaching ceremony -Practicing meditation -Reciting and chanting prayers -Contemplation practice on impermanence, suffering and non-self -Demonstrating how the numbers in lottery work and cheat



Exercises and recreations for elders	-Visiting lecturers from Schools of Nursing, Pharmacy, and Allied Health Sciences, Univ. of Phayao -Director of Tambon Health Promoting Hospital in Maekahuaykhian -A visiting lecturer from Non-Formal Education Office -Volunteer teachers -Students from Schools of Political and Social Science, Nursing, Pharmacy, and Allied Health Sciences, Univ. of Phayao	-Exercising positions for elders -Self-massages -Music and dance -Singing -Elderly sports	-Demonstrating and practicing positions of exercise -Matching and practicing massages -Karaoke singing activities -Team dancing in local style -Playing folk musics: Angkalung (อังกะลุง) and Salor Zor Zung (สะล้อซอซึ้ง) -Composing folk poem 'Khao Zor' (ข้าวซอ) -Joining the elderly sports -Ballroom dancing practice
Earning extra incomes	-A visiting lecturer from Non-Formal Education Office -Volunteer teachers	-Active Ageing -Reducing daily costs -Increasing incomes -Sufficiency Economy	-Preparing local foods and drinks -Herbal medicines and dish-washing liquid -Embroidery -Cultivating Mushrooms

The contents and activities above were relevant to the adjustments in accordance with the new normal during the pandemic and endemic. So far the study was conducted, the know-hows for adjustments have been drawn into the fourfold mode of living: 'learning, accepting, adjusting, and changing' or in Thai 'เรียนรู้, ยอมรับ, ปรับตัว, และเปลี่ยนแปลง' accordingly.

1) Learning here refers to being always open-minded in searching and acquiring new knowledge just like Socrates, a great Greek philosopher, usually claimed that the only thing he knew is that knowing nothing, and behaved as a life-long lover of wisdom. Knowing nothing reminds oneself to find out knowledge. The elders have been often reminded the proverbs run thus, 'no one is too old to learn', and 'no one is literate since the mother's womb'. The elderly school renders the mission of being the center of 'Life-long Learning' process that helps the elders stay foolish and hungry in endlessly seeking new knowledge. The elderly students here eagerly attended the class and tried to learn about COVID-19 though some of them are illiterate, they never give up, but try to take parts and

inquiry. At last, they could roughly understand its background, characteristics, and preventive measures.

2) Accepting means admitting COVID-19 as a new disease just like any other diseases that live side by side in the body. Disease is an organism that once emerged, exists for a while, and disappears or mutates sooner or later, it also needs adaptations as to survive just like human beings. The elders have learnt to know the nature of it from its origin, pandemic, mutation, and becoming an endemic. So they accept it as it really is, without being over-panic and hateful of it. While those elders who do not understand it are always fearful and lonely stay at home.

3) Adjusting refers to promptly adaptation of oneself in accordance with the changing environment. For examples, the elders here learned about wearing masks and cleaning with sanitizer gels repeatedly till they could get along properly. They were also provided information about the vaccine so that they could become confident and got jabs of the first vaccine and the following boosting doses as to acquire immunity.

4) Changing means ability to adopt a new way of life, for the environments continuously change and men are not always the same. Just like Heraclitus, a great Greek philosopher, reminded that no one ever jump into the same river twice, for it is not the same stream, and one is not the same person. Though COVID-19 is one of most disrupting factors to mankind in this millennium, the elders who can survive till date prove them best changeable and adjusted to the new normal. Most interviewees stated that they have aspirations in life to come and see friends in the elderly school every Saturday and learn together. They are subject to changes as they have been taught here to get along with new tricks in life such as being freshmen like a school boy and girl, using a smart phone and connecting the social media.

Conclusions

The findings in this study showed 2 durations of the pandemic and endemic of COVID-19 in Maeka Sub-district, Muang District, Phayao Province since October 2020 to October 2022. The study focused on the elders who have been students in the elderly learning center in Wat Maekahuaykhian. It can be concluded that during the first wave of outbreak, the elders as a vulnerable group were frightened and panic due to the fast and deadly spread of COVID-19 including different information and news about it. The so called 'new normal' was generally made known as the new way of life in the situation of COVID-19 with special focus on awareness in health care and following preventive measures. It significantly affected the elders' normal way of life in 4 dimensions: 1) beliefs and traditions, 2) health care, 3) economic activities, and 4) social relations. That is to say, the elders encountered big challenges in life starting from their in-depth beliefs and traditionally expressions concerning monastic affairs and community festivals with lesser congregations, but elders were satisfied with new by-products taking place, they were the happiness sharing boxes and economized scale of ceremony.



Regarding health, elders had to pay more attentions both physical care by observing the preventive measures and mental cultivation according to Buddhist practices. For economic activities, they paid more intention to follow the self-sufficiency way of living. For social relations, they reduced the worldly parties and celebrations, but participated in the religious affairs with more concerns about the social preventive measures.

The lessons learnt from the elders in Maeka based on the learning process organized in the elderly school revealed the know-hows to deal with COVID-19 in the fourfold mode: Learning, Accepting, Adapting, and Changing. The fourfold mode should be accordingly promoted by an elderly club or elderly school or any other kinds of the learning center for elders as to help them get along with new emerging situations. Firstly, stimulating love of wisdom is most needed in order to learn about COVID-19 which was unclear or unknown before. Learning helps elders understand and accept it as it really is. Accepting paves the way to adopt reasonable forms of living to fit the situation related. Having fitted to a new environment, elders transformed into the new normal which will later become a normal way and be subject to change whenever the newer thing takes place. Elders in Maeka were introduced to the contents and activities about COVID-19 and its contexts. Thus, they could understand and accept the Corona Virus as an existing organism and try to adapt oneself fit to it. Lastly, their way of living has been transformed to the new normal at present, and yet move on.

Discussions

The findings as shown above can be put into the following discussions:

Out of the 4 forms of living adopted by Maeka's elders: beliefs and traditions, health care, economic activities, and social relations, the last 3 dimensions were consistent with TDRI's survey made in the pandemic 2019 that social impacts towards the elders can be sum up in a high level (70-90%) through various activities. For examples, the elders had difficulties in the self-care such as getting a haircut, exercising, buying things, travelling, and acquiring medical services. Whereas the economic impacts took place in a lower level than the social impacts, since the elders were retired from the permanent jobs and consumed less than the youths who were laid off and had more expenses or living costs. However, the elders who were not the government officers or entrepreneurs still have the economic difficulties and need extra supports and welfares from the state. There is a considerable reflection between this research and the TDRI's survey that most elders in the country are still poor, but the poor elders may encounter different fate in life or have the different socio-economic impacts. That is to say, poor elders' lives in the big cities just like in Bangkok, Chiangmai, Songkhla, have more living costs and have been surrounded with modernization and urbanization. Whereas the elders in rural area or in a small town like Maeka Sub-district were overwhelmed with the kinship system with close relationship in villages and with the self-sufficiency way of life.

For the adjustments in accordance with the new normal, it was found that in the beginning of the pandemic, the elders in Maeka were panic and confused with the new emerging. It is in the same line with the survey made by TGRI in 2020 that 1 in 4 of the elders encountered mental health during the first outbreak. Most of them were anxious, bored with food, lonely, and unhappy. The situation of elders in Maeka at the outset was just like that, but later, they eventually learn about COVID-19, understand and adapt their way of life in accordance with the new normal, and get along with the new normal, consequently. This finding was consistent with Supranee Tangwong et al. (2022) who stated that the adaptations made by an elderly club in Ban Pong District, Ratchaburi were done well, and pointed out that the elders in the urban area had better adaptive behaviors than those in the rural area. Because those in the urban area had a better opportunity in accessing information about COVID-19 through multimedia, whereas those in rural area were mostly farmers and seldom accessed the multimedia. It should be noted that the elders' opportunity in acquiring the trustable information should be firstly prioritized. An elderly club or elderly school might play an active role in screening, collecting and sharing information to the elders in community just like the elderly club in Ratchaburi and the elderly school in Wat Maekahuaykhian have been doing. A good information is a source for learning. Learning leads to accepting things as they really are, and trying to adjusting. After adjustments, changing in life occurred accordingly. In fact, things are regarded as 'new' as long as they are not yet familiarized. When they have been made well known, they eventually become 'normal'.

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