

COMMUNITY BRIEF

Highlights from the Lao Lu Mien Community in Alameda County: Health and Wellbeing of Young Children and their Families



The Lao Lu Mien Community Brief highlights the history, culture, needs and strengths of the Lu Mien community in Alameda County, CA. This brief is developed in response to a presentation by a Lu Mien community member, and is developed in collaboration with the Lu Mien community, community researchers and System of Care staff. Our purpose and collective goal is to document, share and increase awareness about Lao Lu Mien community's cultural practices specifically around raising young children and the role that community and family plays. We hope the highlights are used to educate providers, policymakers and general public re: the Lu Mien community, an integral part of Alameda County's growing diversity.

Who We Are

The Lu Mien community in China commonly self-identifies as "Yao". Many Lao Lu Mien people in America identify themselves as Lu Mien, which means "the Lu people".

There are over 3 million Lu Mien people worldwide. Of whom 2.6 million live in China, and more than 35,000 currently live in America, making up 0.4% of the U.S. Asian and Pacific Islander population. Over 87% of America's Lu Mien people live in California, and 5,000 live in the states of Oregon and Washington. Within California, the majority of Lu Mien people live in Oakland (4,500), Richmond, and Stockton. On average, there are about 11 people living in each household in Oakland. The Lu Mien community is spread out in China, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, Burma, Canada, United States, France, Canada, New Zealand, Denmark and Australia.

Our History

The Lu Mien community originates from the southwestern regions of China, but due to the Vietnam War and the migration throughout the 1950s to 1970s, many families migrated to Thailand, Vietnam, and Laos - often living in the rural countryside. During the fall of the government after the Vietnam War, many in the Lu Mien community immigrated to America.

"The Lu Mien community is about helping one another and being with others as in our homeland. We have adopted the same practices here in the US."

- Grandfather from the Lu Mien community



As a result of the Vietnam War, over 70% of the Lu Mien in Laos were forced to leave their villages and homes. Migrating families spent 2 to 3 months traveling by foot, settling in large refugee camps in Thailand. Following this, the United States government offered a refugee rescue program, which gave the Lao Lu Mien community a choice to immigrate to and reestablish themselves in the U.S. This resulted in thousands of families leaving the refugee camps in Thailand for America - and experiencing significant trauma from the war and stress due to migration and subsequent adaptation to a new world.

"Despite our relocations, both in peacetime and war, the Lu Mien have maintained its identity by having a strong community structure and preserving its culture. Our strength has sustained us over 30 years, when we fled our home country of Laos, when we went to refugee camps in Thailand, and when we came to the United States."

- Lao Lu Mien Culture Association (LIMCA)

Lao Lu Mien Culture: What Works

Building a Supportive Community

Soon after arrival in the U.S., the Lao Lu Mien community congregated into large “village-like” communities, or districts, predominantly in California and Oregon. This ensured that members of the Lao Lu Mien community could maintain ties with their culture, important traditions, and one another. The Lao Lu Mien Culture Association (LIMCA) and its members have played a key role in establishing the current informal leadership structure that retains the structure the Lu Mien people have lived within for centuries.

“Even though we are separated by the ocean, our hearts are still together.”

– Lu Mien folk song

Languages Spoken

Lu Mien communication is predominantly oral, as there is no written language. The community speaks predominantly Mien, while some have learned to speak Laotian, Hmong, and Chinese. Chanting is often considered a language. There are 3 “types” of languages: “vernacular” is considered everyday language, literary is defined as song language, and ritual language is used for performances in prose and poetry.

Religion, Spirituality and Emotional Wellbeing

Religion and spirituality are often at the core of Lu Mien culture. Many in the Lu Mien community do not distinguish between mental and physical illness. In fact, discussions of health and well-being are often related to the soul and spirit. When improving emotional wellbeing, many first seek out religious or spiritual guidance, before turning to counselors or doctors. For many in the community, shamans and spiritual leaders are the first essential mediators.

“Everything is a spiritual problem”

- Lu Mien Community Member

Problems are sometimes considered to be either “benevolent” or “malevolent” spirits being present. For example, speech delay concerns relate to one’s date of birth; while eating concerns indicate illness within a child’s soul. Indeed “soul loss” is a phenomenon that many in the Lu Mien community believe to be a serious cause of illness.

Religious/Spiritual and Healing Practices

The majority of Lu Mien people practice Taoism or Buddhism; while one third of people in U.S. have converted to Christianity.

“Our ceremonies mark major life passages, such as birth, marriage, and death.”

- LIMCA

In most families, special ceremonies are conducted by a priest or shaman. In addition to these ceremonies, specific rituals are practiced for different developmental stages of life, such as informing ancestors of a new baby and curing illness. Under traditional Lu Mien culture, children are protected through performing specific spiritual ceremonies. Ceremonies may include sacrificing of cows, pigs, and chickens. The treatment for “soul loss” is a ceremony with rice and eggs called the “calling of the soul”.

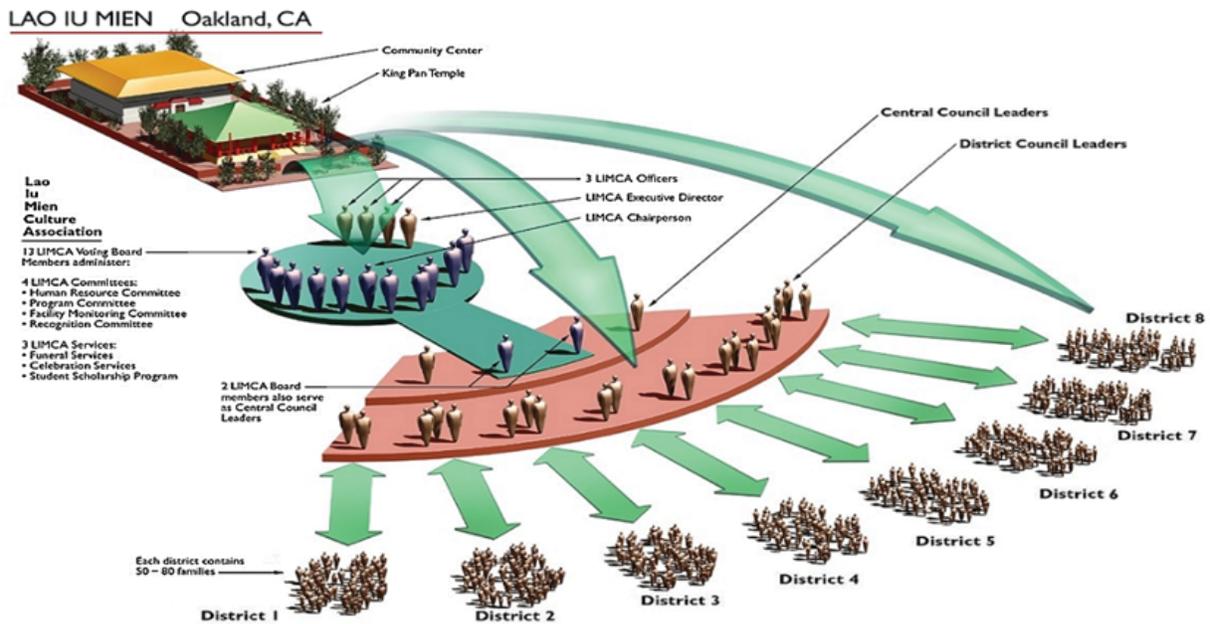
Strong Sense of Community and Leadership

Lao Lu Mien Culture Association (LIMCA)

In 1982, the Lao Lu Mien Culture Association, Inc. (LIMCA), a non-profit organization, was opened to help refugees and assist in preserving the Lu Mien culture. LIMCA has played a significant role in ensuring that the Lu Mien culture is both maintained and represented throughout Alameda County and nationally. Along with numerous activities and events daily and throughout the year, LIMCA has social and cultural programs to “facilitate the Lu Mien integration into the economic and cultural life of the United States.”

The Role of Community Leaders

LIMCA’s efforts have spread throughout the country, particularly in Oakland, which opened the first Lu Mien Cultural Center in the United States in 2000. In keeping with the tradition of Lao Lu Mien culture in Asia, appointed LIMCA leaders, based on home villages, designated the community into 8 districts of 50-80 families. Each district chooses 1- 4 senior leaders. For example, in the city of Oakland, 21 district leaders collaborate with 4 senior leaders from the Oakland Lu Mien Community Council. This council functions as a communication channel for the Lu Mien community, which had no written language until the early 80’s when the Romanized alphabet was developed for the Lu Mien language.



The Role of Community Leaders (continued)

District leaders are also in charge of domestic disputes, family concerns, as well as individual problems of Lu Mien community members. Problems and disputes that cannot be resolved by district leaders are brought to the central community council. The Lu Mien community council located in Oakland further maintains the history and culture of the Mien community by communicating with the mayor of Oakland, ensuring the voice of the Lu Mien community is heard.

Health and Wellbeing of Children

In early 2012, two focus groups were conducted with men and women of the Lu Mien community, in which primarily grandparents shared their perspective and vision for health and wellness of young children and their families.

What is our vision of a healthy child?

Overall, the community voiced that their vision of a healthy child includes social-emotional wellbeing, proper eating, and positive peer interactions. They hope that “children grow up, be talkative, independent, go to school and socialize with other children”. Women in the community may envision an obedient child who plays well with peers and has a positive attitude; while men voiced that they want to see their children and grandchildren meeting their developmental milestones (eating, speaking, crawling, and teething “on time).

What role do grandparents play?

Grandparents often serve as the primary caregivers and are responsible for ensuring the health and safety of young children. In addition to performing ceremonies, grandparents may cook, feed, and transport the child to and from school and appointment. Given this significant role, grandparents often serve as a positive source of stress relief for parents and local community members.

“The biggest hope is to see children grow up, [be] talkative, independent, go to school, and socialize with other children.”

*- Grandmother,
Lu Mien Community Focus groups*

Connecting to Services and Supports

It is important for mental health services and supports to be available and accessible to the Lu Mien community in a culturally and linguistically responsive manner, to ensure that families feel their culture is understood and respected by the medical and mental health system. However, there are numerous language, transportation and other barriers that prevent Lu Mien community from accessing and using services. The box on the right highlights some of the needs that the Lu Mien community voiced in the focus groups regarding connecting to a system of care.

System of Care within the Lu Mien Community

Community members seem to use both traditional Lu Mien religious ceremonies as well as Western medicine and doctors. If the treatment plan from a doctor proves ineffective, members of the Lu Mien community may seek out the help of a shaman and re-perform the Bouav Quaa - a ceremony which diagnoses the causes of a child's "illness". Both men and women are regulars at the Temple to pray for children/grandchildren. Friends and community members are strong sources of help and support when a parent is concerned over their child's growth.

Voices from the Community

Need Language Interpreters

"Sometimes there are no interpreters to help us. We ended up waiting for extremely long hours and we do not feel they are giving us the full attention that we need. We do not just go directly to see a social worker or a counselor unless a doctor or nurses refers us to go."

- Grandmother from the Lu Mien community

Need Transportation and Respite Help

"We need transportation support and interpreters to help us if there is a child care center or at the hospital so we can be more assistance to the grandchildren. We also need respite help too."

- Grandmother from the Lu Mien community

Fear of Judgment

"If children are bad, parents are embarrassed to talk about their children or to seek help. They are afraid that they are being judged by their parenting abilities or who they are as a person."

- Grandmother from the Lu Mien community

What a System of Care Can Do to be More Culturally Responsive

Following are suggestions of how a system of care can better meet the needs of parents and grandparents with young children in the Lu Mien community in partnership with the Lu Mien community, to ensure all Lu Mien children are healthy, happy and thriving.

1. Increase Supportive Resources for Child Care

Members of the Lu Mien community have shared a strong desire for accessible child care resources and affordable preschool for children under 5 years old. This includes the following:

- ◆ School preparedness for children under 5 years old
- ◆ Respite care for grandparents
- ◆ A daycare center at LIMCA



2. Improve Provider-Family Communication

This includes increased efforts to communicate with families and let them know why certain questions are asked of them during diagnosis and treatment.

- ◆ Ask families how they normally treat illness/conditions/problems
- ◆ Involve the client and family in all decisions
- ◆ Inform the family of proper/affordable health and medical coverage for grandparents
- ◆ Do not operate under a coercion approach
- ◆ Respect cultural beliefs
- ◆ Examples of what to say to clients include:
What do you call the problem? What do you think the cause of the problem is?
- ◆ Provide services in the Lu Mien language
 - Members of the Lu Mien community would like translation/interpretation services, as opposed to relying on family members to interpret

3. Educate Providers about the History and Structure of Lu Mien Culture

- ◆ Collaborate with community leaders to educate the providers
- ◆ Work with community leaders to identify and better serve families with young children with serious concerns
- ◆ Understand the role of history and culture on spirituality and mental health
- ◆ Understand that stigma is associated with mental illnesses for some families in the community
- ◆ Provide family members more information about resources and services available for young children and their parents.

4. Integration of Western and Traditional Healing

- ◆ Make efforts to combine Western and traditional healing by providing alternative options on how to carry out services
- ◆ Incorporation of Shamanism as part of a client's treatment or healing

"In order to become productive citizens in America, we need to maintain and preserve our cultural values, our confidence in our worldview, our sense of security in ourselves, and our identity."
- LIMCA

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Made Possible by Funding from the
US Department of Health and Human Services,
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Act (SAMHSA)
Grant #SM059045

