

**IN-LAW TALES :**  
**A NOTE ON NORTHEASTERN THAI ETHNOGRAPHY**

by  
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The oral tradition of northeast Thailand is rich and varied and is best known and articulated in the bawdy, humorous, informative and instructive chants of those professional wordsmiths, the *mǎw lam* bards. However, several folktale categories which both provide insight into social concerns and anxieties, as well as serve as an acceptable institutional outlet for suppressed emotions, are not part of the traditional repertoire of the *mǎw lam* singers. Of particular interest and significance are the *hǎa pǎw* tales which detail the cravings and moral laxity of monks who have left their families to don the saffron robe; the tales wherein the folk-hero, Xien Mieng, through guile and craft, defeats rich and powerful officialdom in a never-ending battle of wits; and tales depicting the conflict and tension between daughter-in-law and mother-in-law on the one hand and son-in-law and father-in-law on the other. It is this last category of tales which I will discuss in this present paper.

Respect for one's parents, elders, teachers and monks has a high value-quotient in traditional Thai society. Respect is often reified not only in special forms of speech and gesture but in the performance of actual services. The relationship between daughter-in-law and mother-in-law and son-in-law and father-in-law in northeastern Thailand may be viewed in this context of respect and service and the interpersonal tensions and pressures resulting therefrom.

It is customary for the husband to live in the compound of the wife's parents and give service for a period of time before establishing a separate compound or household. In former times, this period of service often preceeded marriage and such service may be construed as a portion of the bride-price which is paid to the parents of the bride. The wife's father would naturally control his son-in-law's behavior, tasks and service and expect ritual respect to be given. Similarly, the wife comes under the firm direction of her mother-in-law and must serve her faith-

fully. As the wife does not usually live with her husband's parents, this relationship lacks the pressure of continual tension. However, those folktales depicting the strained relationship between the daughter-in-law and mother-in-law find both living under the same roof. In these tales, the husband and wife have gone to live with the husband's parents as there is no other son in the family or the father has died.

In the case of daughter-in-law and mother-in-law on the one hand and son-in-law and father-in-law on the other there is a natural tension as one chafes under the elder's control and direction. The tales usually stress the laziness of the daughter-in-law and son-in-law. The repressed antagonism against having to give unquestioned and continual service finds expression either directly or indirectly in these stories. The folktales provide an acceptable channel to give vent to these suppressed feelings, a sanctioned vehicle for protest. At the same time, there is an element of instruction as the correct social relationship is described by inference and indirection. One also suspects that these tales serve as a reminder to the elders that they should not abuse their honored and respected position.

Another vital factor causing stress in these relationships is the natural concern of the mother-in-law that her daughter-in-law is an all too successful rival for her son's affection. The fact that the son leaves his parents to live in the household of the parents of the wife further exacerbates the sense of loss felt by the husband's mother. In these folktales, one often finds the daughter-in-law using her husband's love against her mother-in-law. Similarly, the father-in-law regrets the "loss" of his daughter to his son-in-law.

The tension and stress in the relationships between the daughter-in-law and mother-in-law is given stark expression in the northeastern saying:

*aw lûg saphaj ma liaŋg yâ|pan aw (p̃hi) hâ ma sâi hyan*

(to have a daughter-in-law come to take care of her mother-in-law is like having cholera germs introduced to one's house)

Recognition of the emotional strain suffered by the daughter-in-law as a result of the psychological and social pressures inherent in the relationship with the mother-in-law can be seen in the often-heard injunction:

*Kaŵj od, Kaŵj jyn/jang ši dâj tâwn kam*

[Be patient—have fortitude, you will receive (your reward i.e. inheritance) in the evening (after death of mother-in-law)]

Both daughter-in-law and son-in-law use the identical special term of respect when speaking to their mother-in-law or father-in-law. The daughter-in-law and son-in-law refer to themselves as *kha-bad* or humble slave. This usage is limited to this relationship.

It is of interest to point out that the folktales do not describe tensions between the son-in-law and mother-in-law or between the daughter-in-law and father-in-law. Respect is accorded. Apparently, there is little anxiety in these latter relationships. Those folktales that concern these relationships are most often in a humorous vein emphasizing the shyness of a new daughter-in-law or the lack of skill in village tasks of a new son-in-law.

Some representative samples of northeastern folktales concerning this in-law relationship are herein presented.

1) Due to a pressing need for cash, an only son went to seek work in Thailand (Bangkok). His wife was sent to take care of her aged mother-in-law whose eyesight was failing. The mother-in-law was most demanding, always seeking attention and service. One day having heard a cow had died in a neighboring village, she told her daughter-in-law that she wanted some of the dried beef that would be available for barter. The daughter-in-law was both annoyed and lazy. She also was busy with her new born baby. She did not want to walk several kilometres to barter goods for the dried beef. After ignoring her mother-in-law's requests for the dried beef for several days, she finally said she would go and get some the following day. The next day while washing her baby's blanket in a nearby stream, the daughter-in-law saw a leech, the solution to her problem. She caught the leech, roasted and pounded it and presented it to her mother-in-law, saying she had been able to obtain the coveted dried beef. The mother-in-law eagerly started to suck on the meat but

the taste was strange and there was not the usual aroma. It was too tough to chew. As the meat was unpalatable, the mother-in-law slipped it in a slot in the wall. On her son's return home, she asked him to look at the uneatable dried beef she had been given by his wife. He surprised his mother by telling her it was not dried beef but a leech. The mother-in-law, full of bitterness, invoked a curse on her daughter-in-law with a silent wish that when she died her daughter-in-law must carry her coffin to the pyre and that she be unable to remove the carrying pole from her shoulder. And so it was. When the mother-in-law passed away, several sturdy men were unable to lift the casket and the daughter-in-law had to come and help. Only when she raised the pole to her shoulder were the others able to carry the burden. When the funeral pyre was reached the daughter-in-law was unable to detach the pole from her shoulder and was thrown on the pyre to be cremated with her mother-in-law.

2) A clever mother-in-law was always prodding her lazy daughter-in-law to be more industrious. One day the mother-in-law took her daughter-in-law into the forest to gather food. On seeing a wild mushroom, the mother-in-law told her daughter-in-law to pick it. The lazy girl disregarded her elder, murmuring "it's only one mushroom." The mother-in-law picked it instead. A little farther on another lone mushroom was spied. And again the daughter-in-law refused to pick only one mushroom. The mother-in-law gathered it as well. And this charade continued throughout the afternoon until the mother-in-law had a full basket of mushrooms. Later in the evening after returning home, the mother-in-law prepared a tasty mushroom soup. The daughter-in-law, having nothing to eat and being very hungry, passed by her mother-in-law's house where a tantalizing smell filled the air. She asked "what are you eating?" The mother-in-law replied with tongue in cheek "I am eating rice and one mushroom." The embarrassed and chagrined daughter-in-law had to come, dish in hand, to ask for some of the mouth-watering mushroom soup.

3) A recently married village girl, diffident and subdued in the presence of her mother-in-law, was offered a dry *kheng* berry. Being

shy and nervous, she politely refused. However, as soon as her mother-in-law left the room, she greedily gobbled down a handful of the berries. Alas, the berries stuck in her throat. When the mother-in-law returned, she heard her daughter-in-law making strange sounds and asked what was the matter. The daughter-in-law could only make a choking sound Eng-Eng—which sounded suspiciously like *kaen kheng* (the kheng berries have stuck in my throat).

4) A recently married son-in-law who was exceedingly lazy, but thought himself to be most clever, tried unsuccessfully to follow his father-in-law's instruction to weave a winnowing tray. The father-in-law next tried to teach him to weave a bamboo chicken coop. Alas, the father-in-law on finishing the coop found himself enclosed inside. He wondered how he would ever get out and finally asked the help of a young boy passing by. The child shook his head in amusement and said "Why don't you lift up one end and crawl out?" The son-in-law watching this episode muttered in disgust at his ignorant and foolish father-in-law. A few days later, the father-in-law took his son-in-law out to gather leaves to mend the walls of their village house. The son-in-law, being lazy, decided to take advantage of his father-in-law and hide in the basket with the leaves. His father-in-law called and called when it was time to return. There was no answer, so the father-in-law picked up the basket and struggled home carrying it on his shoulder. The father-in-law saw his son sneak out of the basket. He was very annoyed and plotted his revenge. A few days later on a trip into the forest to gather more leaves, the father-in-law hid himself in the basket expecting the son would carry him home. The son-in-law was not fooled and decided to punish his father-in-law. He put a lid on the basket, tied it tightly and placed it on the brink of the bank of a nearby stream. Moving away a few yards, he shouted "An elephant is chasing a mongoose; whoever left the basket by the bank of the stream quickly move it." The father-in-law was frightened and tried to get out but couldn't. While struggling, he toppled the basket into the stream where he was drowned. When the son-in-law returned to the village, his wife asked where her father was. The husband replied that the old man apparently had lost his way in the forest.

5) A newly married son-in-law was having great difficulty in weaving a winnowing tray. Throughout the morning he made little or no progress but was too shy and chagrined to ask help from his mother-in-law. His mother-in-law quietly observed his dilemma out of the corner of her eye. Having pity, but wanting to avoid embarrassing him, she solved the problem by chasing away the chickens nibbling on the rice left to dry on the veranda to the cry of "Go away chickens—jump over five go under two. Go away chickens—jump over two go under four" (Kaj mae ka kuum ha yaw song. Kaj ee yong kuum song yaw see). The son-in-law on hearing the formula quickly solved the riddle of how to weave a winnowing tray.