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Living to 100 With Purpose: An Ethnographic Study of Meaning-Making Among Centenarians in Loei Province, Thailand

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ABSTRACT: Thailand is rapidly entering a super-aged era; however, limited research has examined naturally occurring exceptional longevity in rural communities, particularly regarding lived experiences, cultural identity, and meaning-making processes. This study explores the lived experiences, lifestyle patterns, and socio-cultural, environmental, and health determinants of centenarians in Loei Province, Northeastern Thailand, with the aim of identifying community-based factors that support healthy ageing and developing a culturally grounded conceptual model of meaning-centered longevity.

An interpretive ethnographic approach was employed. Participants included 12 centenarians aged 100–108 years, 9 family caregivers, and 5 community informants. Data were collected through 26 in-depth narrative interviews, participant observations during home visits, and reflective field notes over a 14-month period to enhance data triangulation and contextual interpretation.

The findings indicate that exceptional longevity is shaped by a multidimensional interaction of factors rather than biological determinants alone. Five interconnected themes emerged: cultural identity and ancestral groundedness, life purpose and daily contribution, emotional–spiritual resilience, intergenerational connectedness, and wisdom integration and legacy transmission. Key determinants also include the consumption of natural and locally sourced foods, continuous functional movement, emotional balance, and strong family and community support systems. These findings informed the development of the ICE-L Model (Identity–Connection–Endurance–Legacy), which conceptualizes extended healthspan through the interplay of cultural, ecological, behavioral, emotional, and community-based dimensions.

This study contributes to ageing studies, public health, and community sustainability by demonstrating that healthy ageing in rural Thailand is deeply embedded in cultural

practices, local ecology, and social connectedness. The findings offer practical implications for sustainable ageing policy and community-based health promotion and align with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDGs 3, 10, 11, and 17.

INTRODUCTION

The global population is undergoing an unprecedented demographic transformation. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2015), the world's population aged 60 years and older is projected to reach 2.1 billion by 2050, more than doubling from 900 million in 2015. Within this rapidly expanding older population, centenarians—individuals who have reached or surpassed the age of 100—represent the fastest-growing demographic segment globally. The United Nations (2019) estimated that the worldwide centenarian population would increase from approximately 573,000 in 2020 to 3.7 million by 2050, reflecting advances in public health, nutrition, and medical care (Wider et al., 2024). Research on exceptional longevity has traditionally concentrated on biological and genetic determinants, with particular attention to regions identified as "Blue Zones"—geographically defined areas with disproportionately high concentrations of centenarians (Buettner & Skemp, 2016).

" geographically defined areas with disproportionately high concentrations of centenarians (Buettner & Skemp, 2016). These include Okinawa (Japan), Sardinia (Italy), Nicoya Peninsula (Costa Rica), Ikaria (Greece), and Loma Linda (California, USA). While Blue Zone research has yielded important insights into dietary patterns, physical activity, and social engagement, the psychosocial and cultural dimensions of exceptional longevity remain substantially underexplored. A recent bibliometric analysis of global centenarian research confirms that mortality, genetics, and cognitive decline — particularly dementia — dominate the scholarly literature, while qualitative studies examining the lived experiences and subjective meaning-making processes of centenarians are notably rare (Darviri et al., 2021). This gap is especially pronounced in non-Western contexts; Southeast Asian centenarian perspectives are virtually absent from the scholarly record.

Three theoretical frameworks provide complementary lenses for understanding the psychological and existential dimensions of exceptional longevity. First, gerotranscendence theory (Tornstam, 2005) proposes that aging involves a natural developmental shift from a materialistic, rational worldview toward increased cosmic, self, and social transcendence. Cosmic transcendence involves a redefined perception of time, space, and the meaning of life and death; self-transcendence entails the discovery of hidden aspects of the self and a decline in self-centeredness; and social transcendence involves more selective and meaningful social relationships. Recent systematic reviews confirm the ongoing relevance of gerotranscendence in contemporary gerontological research (Cozort, 2008), and empirical applications have been documented in nursing home settings, where gerotranscendence has been linked to enhanced life satisfaction and reduced existential distress (Haugan et al., 2024). However, the empirical validation of gerotranscendence has predominantly emerged from Western, predominantly Scandinavian cultural contexts, raising questions about its applicability in collectivist and Buddhist-influenced societies. Second, socioemotional selectivity theory (SST; Carstensen, 2021) posits that as individuals perceive their remaining time as increasingly limited, they prioritize emotionally meaningful goals and relationships over those oriented toward knowledge acquisition or future planning. Research grounded in SST demonstrates that older adults display enhanced emotional regulation, greater empathy, and more positive emotional experiences compared with younger cohorts. Third, meaning-making theory, rooted in Frankl's (2006) foundational work on logotherapy and extended by Wong's (2010) meaning therapy framework, emphasizes that the construction of purpose and coherence sustains psychological wellbeing across the lifespan. Steger (2021) notes that meaning in life is among the most robust predictors of positive health outcomes, including reduced mortality risk. Critically, while each of these frameworks offers valuable analytical lenses, they predominantly reflect Western, individualistic worldviews and lack grounding in collectivist, Buddhist-influenced cultural contexts where selfhood, purpose, and transcendence are constructed through fundamentally different cultural logics.

Thailand presents a particularly compelling context for investigating culturally embedded longevity. The country is experiencing one of the most rapid population aging transitions in Southeast Asia, having officially become an "aged society" in 2022, with over 20% of its population above the age of 60 (Knodel et al., 2013). In rural northeastern Thailand—known as the Isan region—traditional multigenerational household structures persist, with nearly 60% of older adults' primary caregivers being their own adult children, reflecting the deeply embedded cultural norm of *bun khun* (gratitude debt) that structures intergenerational reciprocity (Knodel & Chayovan, 2008). Buddhist philosophies, agricultural lifestyles, collective caregiving and intergenerational reciprocity collectively shape the wellbeing of

older Thais in ways that differ markedly from Western models of individual agency and independence. Chansarn (2012) identified active engagement, health behaviors, and social participation as key determinants of healthy aging among Thai elderly, while Wongpakaran and Wongpakaran (2018) documented the protective role of psychological resilience against geriatric depression. The broader social safety net for Thai elders operates through informal family-based care systems that coexist with, and often supersede, formal health and social service provisions (Siriwanarangsun & Suwanbamrung, 2016). Loei Province, situated in the mountainous northeast bordering the Mekong River and Laos, possesses distinctive characteristics that make it an ideal setting for studying centenarian longevity: a cool climate relative to the rest of Thailand, strong Isan cultural identity preserved through relative geographic isolation, traditional farming communities organized around rice cultivation, and notably a disproportionately high proportion of residents aged 80 years and above as recorded in provincial health statistics.

Despite growing global interest in exceptional longevity, three critical gaps persist in the literature. First, ethnographic studies of centenarians are exceptionally rare at the global level and entirely absent in Southeast Asia. The few qualitative investigations that exist have focused primarily on Western populations, such as Wright and Breheny's (2019) study of New Zealand centenarians' everyday experiences and Hong Kong-based research on positive psychological resources in oldest-old adults (Cho et al., 2015). Second, the meaning-making dimension of longevity specifically, how centenarians construct purpose, cultural identity, and existential coherence across the lifespan has not been explored in Thai cultural contexts, where selfhood is fundamentally relational and spiritually oriented. Third, no conceptual model currently exists that integrates cultural identity, spiritual resilience, intergenerational bonds, and legacy transmission as synergistic determinants of longevity from a non-Western perspective. The need for culturally grounded frameworks is underscored by the WHO Decade of Healthy Ageing 2021–2030 (WHO, 2020), which calls for action addressing age-friendly environments, combatting ageism, integrating care, and critically strengthening the evidence base with data from diverse global contexts. The United Nations (2020) further emphasizes that healthy aging policies must be informed by the lived realities and cultural value systems of older adults across all regions, not merely those of the Global North.

This study aimed to explore the lived experiences, cultural identity, and meaning-making processes underlying exceptional longevity among centenarians in Loei Province, Thailand. The following research questions guided the inquiry: (1) How do centenarians in Loei Province construct and sustain cultural identity across the lifespan? (2) What meaning-making processes contribute to their purposeful longevity? (3) How do intergenerational connections and community relationships support their wellbeing? (4) What culturally grounded conceptual model can explain meaning-centered longevity in this context? By addressing these questions, this study seeks to contribute both empirical evidence and theoretical innovation to the fields of cross-cultural gerontology, gerotranscendence research, and meaning-centered nursing practice.

OBJECTIVES

This study aims to:

1. To explore how centenarians in Loei Province construct and sustain cultural identity across the lifespan.
2. To examine the meaning-making processes that contribute to their purposeful longevity.
3. To analyze the role of intergenerational connections and community relationships in supporting their wellbeing.
4. To develop a culturally grounded conceptual model explaining meaning-centered longevity in this context.

Conceptual Framework

This study integrates three complementary theoretical frameworks to elucidate the psychosocial, cultural, and existential dimensions of exceptional longevity among centenarians in rural Thailand. These frameworks gerotranscendence theory (Tornstam, 2005), socioemotional selectivity theory (SST; Carstensen, 2021), and meaning-making theory (Frankl, 2006; Wong, 2010) provide a multidimensional lens for examining how cultural identity, intergenerational relationships, and purpose construction sustain healthspan within Isan cultural contexts.

Theoretical Foundations

Gerotranscendence Theory

Gerotranscendence posits aging as a developmental progression toward cosmic, self, and social transcendence, characterized by redefined perceptions of time, diminished self-preoccupation, and selective social engagement (Tornstam, 2005). In this

study, the theory is adapted to Buddhist-influenced collectivist settings, where transcendence manifests through ancestral continuity, merit-making (tam bun), and diminished attachment to material selfhood rather than Western individualistic autonomy.

Socioemotional Selectivity Theory (SST)

SST asserts that time perception shapes motivational priorities, with older adults favoring emotionally gratifying relationships over expansive social networks as perceived remaining time shortens (Carstensen, 2021). Within Loei Province's multigenerational households, this manifests as strengthened intergenerational reciprocity (bun khun) and selective engagement with kin and community, buffering against isolation and fostering emotional resilience.

Meaning-Making Theory

Rooted in logotherapy, meaning-making theory emphasizes purpose derivation through creative work, experiential connection, and attitudinal valor amid adversity (Frankl, 2006). Wong's (2010) extension highlights coherence, purpose, and significance as mediators of wellbeing. For Thai centenarians, meaning emerges relationally through daily contributions (e.g., childcare, ritual guidance), spiritual practices, and legacy transmission, aligning with collectivist self-construals.

Integrated Conceptual Model

The frameworks converge into a cyclical, relational model (Figure 1) where cultural identity grounds gerotranscendent shifts, SST-guided connections sustain emotional equilibrium, and meaning-making processes operationalize purpose amid physical decline. Environmental (local ecology, agricultural rhythm) and behavioral determinants (functional movement, natural diet) interact bidirectionally with psychosocial dimensions.

Text

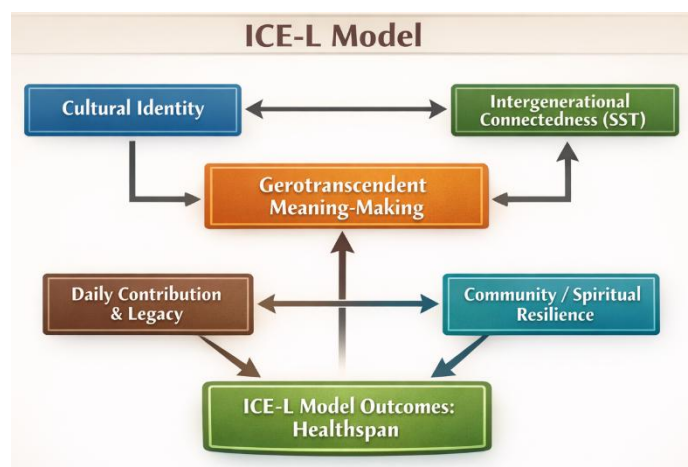


Figure 1. Integrated Conceptual Framework for Meaning-Centered Longevity

This model guided ethnographic inquiry, linking micro-level narratives to macro-cultural structures. Empirical findings validate and extend the framework through the emergent ICE-L Model (Identity–Connection–Endurance–Legacy), operationalizing transcendence within Thailand's rural aging context and addressing gaps in non-Western gerontology.

STUDY DESIGN

The first author (P.N.), a nursing faculty member with doctoral training in gerontological nursing and 15 years of clinical experience with elderly populations, conducted all interviews and participant observations. P.N. is female, Thai, and familiar with Isan culture through extensive professional and personal connections, though not originally from Loei Province. This positioning afforded cultural sensitivity and linguistic competence while maintaining sufficient analytical distance to recognize taken-for-granted cultural practices. Prior to fieldwork, P.N. completed advanced training in ethnographic methods, including courses in narrative interviewing, participant observation techniques, and reflexive practice. The second author (R.P.) contributed to study design, analytic interpretation, and manuscript preparation. A reflexive journal was maintained throughout

the study to document assumptions, emotional responses, emerging interpretations, and methodological decisions. No prior relationships existed between researchers and participants.

METHODS

Research Setting

The study was conducted in five rural communities across Loei Province, northeastern Thailand. Loei (registered population approximately 641,666, CEIC 2017) is a mountainous province situated along the Mekong River bordering Laos, characterized by a cool climate—unusual for Thailand—forested mountain landscapes, and strong Isan cultural traditions. Agriculture, predominantly rice farming and rubber plantations, constitutes the primary livelihood.

The selected communities maintain traditional Isan cultural practices, including Bun traditions (Buddhist merit-making festivals), spirit worship coexisting with Theravada Buddhist practice, and multigenerational household structures where elderly family members occupy positions of respected authority. Loei Province was selected as the study site because provincial health records identified a notably high concentration of centenarians relative to population size, and the province's relative geographic isolation has preserved traditional cultural practices illuminating the relationship between cultural identity and longevity.

Loei Province was selected as the study site because provincial health records identified a notably high concentration of centenarians relative to population size, and because the province's relative geographic isolation has contributed to the preservation of traditional cultural practices that might illuminate the relationship between cultural identity and longevity.

Participants and Sampling

Purposive sampling, supplemented by snowball techniques, was used to recruit participants across three distinct groups: (a) 12 centenarians aged 100–108 years (8 female, 4 male); (b) 9 family caregivers aged 40–72 years, primarily adult children or grandchildren providing daily care; and (c) 5 key community informants aged 55–82 years, including village headpersons, a Buddhist abbot, and community health volunteers. Inclusion criteria for centenarians were: age of 100 years or above (verified through national identification records), current residence in Loei Province, ability to communicate verbally (independently or with caregiver assistance), and willingness to participate. Exclusion criteria included severe cognitive impairment precluding meaningful communication, acute illness at the time of data collection, and unwillingness to participate. Fifteen centenarians were initially identified through community health worker networks and provincial aging registries; twelve met all inclusion criteria and provided informed consent. Three were excluded due to severe hearing loss precluding communication ($n = 1$) and advanced dementia preventing meaningful verbal exchange ($n = 2$). Participant characteristics are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1 Participant Characteristics

Group	N	Age Range (years)	Gender (F/M)	Description
Centenarians	12	100–108	8/4	Rural Isan elders, farming communities
Family caregivers	9	40–72	6/3	Adult children and grandchildren
Community informants	5	55–82	2/3	Village leaders, Buddhist abbot, health volunteers

Data Collection

Data collection occurred over a 14-month period (January 2024–February 2025) through three complementary methods designed to capture both the spoken narratives and the observable cultural practices of participants.

Narrative Interviews

A total of 26 semi-structured narrative interviews were conducted, averaging 45–90 minutes in duration. Interviews took place in participants' homes and were conducted primarily in Central Thai and Isan dialect, languages in which the first author is fluent. A semi-structured interview guide explored the following domains: personal life history and significant milestones;

cultural identity, traditions, and ethnic heritage; daily routines and sense of purpose; coping strategies and spiritual practices; family relationships and community roles; and reflections on the experience of longevity. All interviews were audio-recorded with explicit participant permission and transcribed verbatim within 48 hours by the first author. For centenarians with hearing or communication difficulties, caregivers provided contextual clarification while the researcher ensured that the elder's voice and perspective remained the primary focus. Repeat interviews were conducted with six centenarians to explore emergent themes in greater depth, clarify earlier responses, and build rapport.

Participant Observation

The first author spent approximately 120 hours conducting participant observations during home visits, family gatherings, temple activities, agricultural work, and community events such as Bun Phawet festivals and local merit-making ceremonies. Detailed field notes recorded physical environments, daily routines, social interactions, emotional expressions, nonverbal communication patterns, and observable cultural practices. Observations were documented using structured field note templates that captured descriptive, reflective, and analytical dimensions.

Reflective Field Notes

The first author maintained a reflexive journal throughout the study period, documenting methodological decisions, personal reflections on positionality and emotional responses, analytical memos linking emerging observations to theoretical constructs, and evolving interpretations that informed subsequent data collection and analysis.

Data Analysis

Analysis followed reflexive thematic analysis as articulated by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019), integrated with meaning-centered interpretation drawing on Wong's (2010) framework. The analytic process proceeded through six iterative phases: (1) familiarization through repeated reading of transcripts and re-listening to audio recordings, during which initial impressions and patterns were noted; (2) systematic coding of meaning units across all data sources — interviews, observation notes, and reflexive journal entries; (3) generating initial themes through pattern identification and clustering of related codes; (4) reviewing themes against the complete dataset to assess coherence, distinctiveness, and saturation; (5) defining and naming themes with particular attention to cultural meaning and resonance with participants' own language; and (6) producing an integrated analytical narrative. NVivo 14 qualitative data analysis software (Lumivivo, 2023) facilitated data management, coding, and cross-source triangulation. The ICE-L Model emerged inductively during Phase 5 as the research team recognized that the five themes organized into four interconnected domains that together constituted a coherent framework for understanding meaning-centered longevity.

Data Saturation

Theoretical Saturation

Theoretical saturation was assessed continuously from the 18th interview onward. After each interview, newly generated codes were compared with existing codes and themes. By the 24th interview, no new themes, subthemes, or substantial variations in existing themes were emerging across participant groups. Two additional interviews were conducted to confirm saturation, bringing the total to 26 interviews. Saturation was further supported by convergence across data sources, with observation data and caregiver accounts corroborating themes identified in centenarian narratives.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was established through multiple strategies aligned with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria. Credibility was ensured through prolonged engagement in the field (14 months), data triangulation across three data sources (interviews, participant observations, and reflexive field notes), member checking (narrative summaries were returned to 8 participants or their caregivers for verification, with all confirming accurate representation), and peer debriefing (three sessions with two independent qualitative research experts who critically examined emerging themes and interpretations). Transferability was supported through thick description of the research context, participant characteristics, cultural setting, and analytic processes, enabling readers to assess the applicability of findings to their own contexts. Dependability was ensured through a comprehensive audit trail documenting all methodological decisions, sampling rationale, and analytical steps. Confirmability was addressed through reflexive journaling maintained throughout the study and independent coding verification by the second

author on 30% of transcripts, yielding an inter-coder agreement of 87%, with discrepancies resolved through dialogue and consensus.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of Shinawatra University (approval no. SIU-IRB 2023/045). Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. For centenarians with reduced cognitive or communicative capacity, assent was obtained from the participant alongside proxy consent from a legally authorized family member, in accordance with Thai research ethics guidelines. All participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect confidentiality. Interviews could be paused, rescheduled, or terminated at any point at the participant's request. Particular sensitivity was exercised around discussions of loss, grief, and end-of-life topics. All data were stored on encrypted, password-protected devices accessible only to the research team.

RESULTS

Analysis of 26 narrative interviews, 120 hours of participant observation, and reflective field notes revealed five interconnected themes that collectively explain meaning-centered longevity among centenarians in Loei Province. These themes emerged consistently across data sources and participant groups, reflecting culturally embedded pathways through which centenarians construct and sustain purpose, resilience, and life coherence. The following sections present each theme with thick description, verbatim participant quotations (translated from Thai/Isan), and interpretive commentary. Representative quotes are organized in Tables 3 and 4.

Theme 1: Cultural Identity and Ancestral Groundedness

The first theme captures the profound sense of rootedness in land, ancestry, and cultural tradition that characterized the centenarians' self-understanding. This theme was immediately apparent from the physical settings of interviews. Visiting Grandmother Bua (aged 103) at her traditional wooden stilted house, surrounded on all sides by rice paddies stretching to the distant mountains, the first author observed a morning ritual that would prove emblematic: Bua rose before dawn, prepared a small tray of freshly steamed sticky rice, and walked to the front of her home to offer alms to passing monks. An altar in the corner of her main living area held photographs of her parents and grandparents alongside a gilded Buddha image, fresh flowers, and burning incense. This interweaving of ancestral reverence, Buddhist devotion, and daily domestic practice reflected a cultural identity that was not merely inherited but actively maintained through daily ritual.

Centenarians consistently articulated their identity through connection to land, family lineage, and cultural heritage. Grandmother Bua explained: "This land has been my family's for four generations. I was born here, my children were born here. The soil knows my name" (Grandmother Bua, 103). Land was not merely an economic resource but an extension of selfhood — a living connection to ancestors who had cultivated the same fields. Similarly, Grandmother Som (101) described her morning ritual as a bridge across generations: "Every morning I make merit [tham bun]. I have done this since I was a young girl. It connects me to my parents, my grandparents, to the Buddha" (Grandmother Som, 101). The ritual of merit-making functioned simultaneously as spiritual practice, ancestral communion, and cultural identity affirmation.

Cultural identity was also expressed through linguistic heritage, culinary traditions, and artistic practices specific to the Isan region. Grandfather Kham (105), one of the most articulate participants, captured this powerfully: "The Isan way is in my blood. Our songs, our food, our language — they keep me alive. Without culture, a person is just a body" (Grandfather Kham, 105). This statement reflected a recurrent pattern in the data: cultural identity functioned not as a static demographic category but as a dynamic psychological anchor providing continuity and coherence amid physical decline and social change. Observation data corroborated these accounts. During home visits and community events, centenarians were observed actively participating in cultural practices — singing traditional mor lam songs, preparing Isan dishes, speaking in Isan dialect with grandchildren, and performing ancestral offering ceremonies — suggesting that cultural engagement was not merely nostalgic reminiscence but ongoing identity work.

Theme 2: Life Purpose and Daily Contribution

The second theme reflects the centenarians' sustained engagement with purposeful activity and their conviction that continued contribution to family and community life was essential to their survival and wellbeing. Unlike Western conceptualizations of retirement as a defined life stage of withdrawal from productive activity, centenarians in Loei Province maintained active daily

routines well into their second century of life. Purpose was expressed not through grand ambitions or future-oriented goals but through the ordinary, repetitive activities of domestic and agricultural life.

Grandmother Noi (100) articulated this with characteristic directness: "Working gives meaning. Every day I weave, I tend the garden, I feed the chickens. It tells me I still belong to this world" (Grandmother Noi, 100). The phrase "belong to this world" is significant — it suggests that purpose is not merely psychologically beneficial but ontologically constitutive; without meaningful activity, one's very existence in the social world becomes uncertain. Grandfather Seng (104), a former rice farmer who continued to supervise planting despite failing eyesight, expressed a similar view with greater urgency: "People ask why I still work at my age. I say, 'If I stop, I die.' My hands need to be busy. My heart needs to feel useful" (Grandfather Seng, 104). The linking of cessation of work with death was not hyperbolic but reflected a genuinely held belief that purpose and survival were inseparable.

For many centenarians, purpose had shifted from physical labor to intergenerational teaching. Grandmother Lek (102) described this evolution: "I teach my great-grandchildren to plant rice. They laugh at my slow hands, but they learn. That is my job now — to teach" (Grandmother Lek, 102). This transition from doing to teaching represented not a diminishment of purpose but its transformation into a culturally valued role. Grandfather Thong (106), the oldest participant, demonstrated remarkable persistence in maintaining daily routines: "Even when my body is tired, I wake up early. There is always something to do — feeding the spirits, checking the garden, talking to neighbors" (Grandfather Thong, 106). Participant observation confirmed that centenarians maintained structured daily routines with remarkable consistency, rising early, performing rituals, engaging in domestic tasks, and participating in social interactions. The concept of *mi prayot* (being useful) emerged across interviews as central to identity, representing a culturally specific articulation of purpose that differs fundamentally from Western notions of productivity or self-actualization.

Theme 3: Emotional–Spiritual Resilience

The third theme encompasses the Buddhist-informed emotional regulation strategies and spiritual practices that centenarians employed as lifelong coping resources. All twelve centenarians described Theravada Buddhist teachings as foundational to their capacity to endure hardship, loss, and the accumulating challenges of extreme old age. The Buddhist concept of impermanence (*anicca*) — the understanding that all phenomena, including suffering, are transient — was repeatedly invoked as a source of comfort and equanimity.

Grandmother Bua (103), who had survived the loss of a husband and three children, expressed this with philosophical clarity: "Suffering comes and goes like the seasons. I have learned to watch it, not fight it. The Buddha teaches us — nothing lasts forever" (Grandmother Bua, 103). The metaphor of observing suffering rather than resisting it reflects a contemplative orientation toward adversity that resonates with mindfulness-based approaches to emotional regulation, albeit rooted in a distinct cultural and religious tradition. Grandfather Kham (105) elaborated on this practice using a vivid metaphor drawn from the natural environment: "Calmness is the medicine of the old. When problems come, I sit quietly, breathe slowly, and let them pass through me like wind through bamboo" (Grandfather Kham, 105). The bamboo metaphor — bending without breaking, allowing force to pass through rather than resisting — was echoed by multiple participants and captured in field notes as a culturally significant trope of resilience.

The accumulation of loss was a universal experience among participants, and Buddhist practice provided a structured framework for processing grief. Grandmother Pha (107) described her response to successive bereavements: "I lost my husband 30 years ago, two children before that. Each time, I thought I would not survive. But I went to the temple, made merit, and slowly the pain became smaller" (Grandmother Pha, 107). The practice of making merit (*tham bun*) at the temple served multiple functions: it provided social support through community gathering, spiritual meaning through the belief that merit transfers to deceased loved ones, and temporal structure through the rhythm of Buddhist ceremonies. Grandmother Som (101) distilled the emotional philosophy shared by many participants into a widely recognized Thai cultural concept: "*Jai yen* [cool heart] — this is what keeps me alive. I do not worry about what I cannot change. I accept what comes" (Grandmother Som, 101). *Jai yen*, the cultivation of a calm, cool emotional disposition, emerged as both a personal practice and a cultural value actively transmitted across generations. Field notes recorded numerous instances in which centenarians counseled younger family members to maintain *jai yen* in the face of difficulties, suggesting that this resilience strategy functions as intergenerational cultural capital.

Theme 4: Intergenerational Connectedness

The fourth theme illuminates the reciprocal caregiving relationships and family cohesion that surrounded centenarians and provided emotional security, practical support, and a sense of belonging. In contrast to Western models emphasizing older adults' dependency and caregiver burden, the centenarian-family relationship in Loei Province was characterized by mutual exchange, with centenarians contributing wisdom, emotional support, and spiritual guidance while receiving physical care and daily assistance.

Grandmother Noi (100) described this reciprocity with eloquent simplicity: "My children are my strength. They take care of my body, and I take care of their hearts. We need each other" (Grandmother Noi, 100). This statement captures the bidirectional flow of support that characterized intergenerational relationships — a pattern observed consistently across all participant households. Grandfather Thong (106) described the evening ritual that structured his family's daily life: "Every evening, my grandchildren come to my room. They massage my legs and I tell them stories of the old days. This is our time together" (Grandfather Thong, 106). The nightly massage-and-storytelling exchange was not merely pragmatic but deeply relational, creating a shared space in which physical care, cultural transmission, and emotional intimacy converged.

The cultural value of family interdependence was explicitly articulated by Grandmother Lek (102): "In our family, no one is alone. When I am sick, there is always someone beside me. When they have problems, I listen. This is the Thai way — family is everything" (Grandmother Lek, 102). Caregiver interviews provided a complementary perspective, revealing that the provision of care to centenarian elders was understood not as burden but as moral obligation and spiritual opportunity. Nong Pla (45), the granddaughter of Grandmother Bua, explained: "Taking care of grandmother is not a burden. It is *bun khun* [gratitude debt]. She raised me, and now I serve her. It brings merit to our family" (Caregiver Nong Pla, 45, granddaughter of Grandmother Bua). The concept of *bun khun* — a moral debt of gratitude owed to those who have nurtured and raised you — provided the cultural logic through which caregiving was experienced as spiritually meritorious rather than onerous. Participant observation powerfully corroborated these accounts. A field note from March 2024 captured a particularly emblematic scene: "During the evening meal at Grandfather Thong's home, four generations sat together on the raised wooden platform. The great-grandchildren served food first to the eldest, then sat close, listening as Thong recounted stories of surviving the great flood of 1960. The intimacy was palpable — an unspoken choreography of care, respect, and belonging" (Field note, March 2024).

Theme 5: Wisdom Integration and Legacy Transmission

The fifth theme captures the processes through which centenarians synthesized their life experiences into coherent narratives of meaning and actively transmitted accumulated wisdom to younger generations. This theme reflects a developmental accomplishment in which suffering, joy, loss, and achievement are integrated into a unified life story that provides both personal coherence and intergenerational value.

Grandfather Kham (105), widely recognized in his community as a source of wisdom, described this integrative process: "When you reach my age, you see life differently. The small things do not bother you anymore. You understand that everything is connected — your parents, your land, your grandchildren, even your suffering. It all makes sense" (Grandfather Kham, 105). The phrase "it all makes sense" signals the achievement of what may be termed existential coherence — a comprehensive understanding of one's life as meaningful and purposeful. Grandmother Pha (107) expressed the urgency of cultural transmission: "I want my grandchildren to remember the old ways — how to grow rice, how to respect the spirits of the land, how to live simply. If they forget, our history dies with me" (Grandmother Pha, 107). Legacy transmission was thus motivated not merely by personal satisfaction but by a sense of cultural responsibility — the awareness that centenarians served as living repositories of endangered cultural knowledge.

Grandmother Bua (103) offered a remarkably articulate reflection on how hardship itself had become a source of transmissible wisdom: "Looking back, every hardship taught me something. Poverty taught me gratitude. Illness taught me patience. Loss taught me love. Now I can pass these lessons to the young ones" (Grandmother Bua, 103). This statement reflects a process of meaning-making in which negative experiences are transformed into positive lessons, a process that benefits both the centenarian (through enhanced life coherence) and the community (through intergenerational moral education). Perhaps most striking was Grandmother Som's (101) expression of existential peace: "I do not fear death. I have lived fully. I have planted rice, raised children, served the temple. My life has meaning. What more can a person ask for?" (Grandmother Som, 101). This absence of death anxiety, expressed by most centenarian participants, suggested that successful meaning

integration — the sense that one's life has been purposeful and complete — diminished existential fear and supported emotional equanimity in advanced old age.

The ICE-L Model: A Conceptual Framework for Meaning-Centered Longevity

Through iterative analysis, the research team recognized that the five themes organized into four interconnected domains that together constitute a conceptual framework — the ICE-L Model — for understanding how culturally embedded meaning-making processes sustain purposeful longevity among centenarians in Loei Province. The model emerged inductively from the data during the fifth phase of thematic analysis as the researchers observed that themes were not merely parallel descriptions of different life domains but were dynamically interrelated, each reinforcing and sustaining the others. The four domains of the ICE-L Model are: Identity, Connection, Endurance, and Legacy.

Identity (I) encompasses Cultural Identity and Ancestral Groundedness, the domain through which centenarians maintained psychological grounding and life stability. This domain includes cultural continuity expressed through daily ritual practice, land-based identity connecting individuals to ancestral heritage, ethnic and linguistic heritage that distinguished Isan identity, and the symbolic structures — altars, ceremonies, songs, and foods — that anchored selfhood across the lifespan. Identity functioned as the existential foundation upon which other domains were constructed, providing the cultural substrate from which purpose, relationships, and meaning were generated.

Connection (C) encompasses Intergenerational Connectedness and community bonds, the domain through which centenarians achieved emotional security and social belonging. This includes the reciprocal caregiving relationships structured by *bun khun*, multigenerational household arrangements that ensured constant social engagement, community roles that maintained centenarians' social status and relevance, and the emotional intimacy created through shared daily rituals such as meals, storytelling, and physical care. Connection provided the relational anchoring that prevented isolation and sustained centenarians' sense of social purpose.

Endurance (E) encompasses Emotional–Spiritual Resilience, the domain through which centenarians maintained adaptive coping capacity across accumulated hardships. Buddhist acceptance (*ploi wang*), the cultivation of *jai yen* (cool heart), contemplative emotional regulation, and the social-spiritual practice of merit-making collectively formed a reservoir of coping resources that enabled centenarians to process grief, adapt to physical decline, and maintain emotional equilibrium. Endurance was not passive resignation but active, culturally structured emotional labor sustained through lifelong spiritual practice.

Legacy (L) encompasses Wisdom Integration and Legacy Transmission, the domain through which centenarians achieved life-course meaning synthesis and future orientation. Through storytelling, moral teaching, cultural preservation efforts, and the integration of life experiences into coherent personal narratives, centenarians transformed their accumulated experience into transmissible wisdom. Legacy completed the lifecycle of purpose by ensuring that individual meaning-making extended beyond the self to benefit future generations.

The ICE-L Model proposes that four domains—Identity, Connection, Endurance, and Legacy—operate synergistically rather than independently. Identity grounds the individual in cultural continuity; Connection provides relational anchoring; Endurance sustains adaptive capacity through adversity; and Legacy transforms lived experience into transmissible wisdom.

Critically, Life Purpose (Theme 2) functions as the dynamic core that activates and interconnects all four domains. Centenarians maintaining daily purpose engaged more fully across domains: purposeful activities reinforced cultural identity, deepened intergenerational connections, exercised emotional resilience, and generated wisdom transmission opportunities. Thus, meaning-making serves as the integrative mechanism mobilizing cultural, relational, spiritual, and experiential resources for longevity.

The integration matrix for the ICE-L Model appears in Table 5 (following Tables 2–4 in the Results section).

Table 2 Major Narrative Themes

Theme	Description	ICE-L Domain
Cultural Identity and Ancestral Groundedness	Deep rootedness in land, traditions, and ancestral heritage; cultural continuity as psychological anchor	Identity

Life Purpose and Daily Contribution	Sustained purpose through work, caregiving, guidance; "being useful" as essential to belonging	Core activator
Emotional–Spiritual Resilience	Buddhist acceptance, emotional regulation, and spiritual practice as lifelong coping resources	Endurance
Intergenerational Connectedness	Reciprocal caregiving, family cohesion, emotional security through belonging	Connection
Wisdom Integration and Legacy Transmission	Reflection, meaning synthesis, moral teaching, cultural preservation	Legacy

Table 3 Representative Participant Quotes by Theme

Theme	Representative Quote	Participant
<i>Cultural Identity and Ancestral Groundedness</i>	<i>"This land has been my family's for four generations. I was born here, my children were born here. The soil knows my name."</i>	Grandmother Bua, 103
	<i>"Every morning I make merit [tham bun]. I have done this since I was a young girl. It connects me to my parents, my grandparents, to the Buddha."</i>	Grandmother Som, 101
	<i>"The Isan way is in my blood. Our songs, our food, our language — they keep me alive. Without culture, a person is just a body."</i>	Grandfather Kham, 105
<i>Life Purpose and Daily Contribution</i>	<i>"Working gives meaning. Every day I weave, I tend the garden, I feed the chickens. It tells me I still belong to this world."</i>	Grandmother Noi, 100
	<i>"People ask why I still work at my age. I say, 'If I stop, I die.' My hands need to be busy. My heart needs to feel useful."</i>	Grandfather Seng, 104
	<i>"I teach my great-grandchildren to plant rice. They laugh at my slow hands, but they learn. That is my job now — to teach."</i>	Grandmother Lek, 102
<i>Emotional–Spiritual Resilience</i>	<i>"Suffering comes and goes like the seasons. I have learned to watch it, not fight it. The Buddha teaches us — nothing lasts forever."</i>	Grandmother Bua, 103
	<i>"Calmness is the medicine of the old. When problems come, I sit quietly, breathe slowly, and let them pass through me like wind through bamboo."</i>	Grandfather Kham, 105
	<i>"Jai yen [cool heart] — this is what keeps me alive. I do not worry about what I cannot change. I accept what comes."</i>	Grandmother Som, 101
<i>Intergenerational Connectedness</i>	<i>"My children are my strength. They take care of my body, and I take care of their hearts. We need each other."</i>	Grandmother Noi, 100
	<i>"Every evening, my grandchildren come to my room. They massage my legs and I tell them stories of the old days. This is our time together."</i>	Grandfather Thong, 106
	<i>"Taking care of grandmother is not a burden. It is bun khun [gratitude debt]. She raised me, and now I serve her. It brings merit to our family."</i>	Nong Pla, 45 (caregiver)

<i>Wisdom Integration and Legacy Transmission</i>	<i>"When you reach my age, you see life differently. The small things do not bother you anymore. You understand that everything is connected."</i>	Grandfather Kham, 105
	<i>"I want my grandchildren to remember the old ways — how to grow rice, how to respect the spirits of the land, how to live simply."</i>	Grandmother Pha, 107
	<i>"I do not fear death. I have lived fully. I have planted rice, raised children, served the temple. My life has meaning."</i>	Grandmother Som, 101

Table 4 Deep Thematic Meaning Analysis

Theme	Meaning Function	Psychosocial Outcome	Cultural Mechanism
Cultural Identity	Grounding in continuity	Life stability and coherence	Ancestral rituals, land connection
Life Purpose	Contribution and usefulness	Sense of belonging	Daily roles, agricultural work
Spiritual Resilience	Emotional–spiritual coping	Stress reduction and acceptance	Buddhist practice, meditation
Connectedness	Belonging and reciprocity	Emotional security	Multigenerational care, bun khun
Wisdom Integration	Life review and synthesis	Meaning coherence	Storytelling, moral teaching

Table 5 ICE-L Model Integration Matrix

Theoretical Framework	Identity	Connection	Endurance	Legacy
erotranscendence	Cosmic dimension (ancestral continuity)	Social transcendence (selective bonds)	Self-transcendence (detachment)	Wisdom integration
SST	Cultural networks	Emotional goals (bun khun)	Time perspective	Legacy prioritization
Meaning-Making	Coherence (cultural self)	Significance (relational roles)	Purpose (contribution)	Creative synthesis

DISCUSSION

Meaning-Centered Longevity in Cross-Cultural Perspective

The findings of this study extend the cross-cultural understanding of exceptional longevity by illuminating how meaning-making processes sustain centenarian life in a collectivist, Buddhist-influenced cultural context. The Cultural Identity and Ancestral Groundedness theme resonates with established constructs from other longevity research traditions. In Okinawa, Japan, the concept of *ikigai* — a reason for being that provides daily motivation and life satisfaction — has been identified as a key

psychosocial contributor to exceptional longevity among centenarians (Willcox et al., 2001). In Nicoya, Costa Rica, plan de vida (life plan) serves a similar function, providing an organizing sense of purpose that structures daily activity (Buettner & Skemp, 2016). However, a critical distinction emerges from the present findings: whereas ikigai and plan de vida are conceptualized primarily as individual psychological states, meaning in Loei Province is fundamentally collective rather than individual. Identity is inseparable from land, ancestry, and community; purpose is constituted through contribution to family and cultural continuity rather than through personal achievement or self-realization.

Comparison with other qualitative centenarian studies reveals both convergence and divergence. The Hong Kong centenarian study reported that positive relations with others, a positive life attitude, and hope were key resources for psychological adaptation among oldest-old Chinese adults (Cho et al., 2015), paralleling the present study's findings on intergenerational connectedness and emotional resilience. Wright and Breheny's (2019) study of New Zealand centenarians documented a "just another day" orientation in which centenarians normalized their advanced age and emphasized continuity with their earlier lives — a finding that resonates with the daily routinization of purpose observed in Loei Province. However, the present study extends this literature by demonstrating that in collectivist societies, meaning-making is not an individual psychological construct but a culturally embedded, relationally sustained process. Centenarians in Loei Province did not construct meaning in isolation but through continuous engagement with cultural practices, family relationships, and community structures that both shaped and were shaped by their meaning-making activities.

Theoretical Implications

The findings carry significant implications for three major theoretical frameworks in gerontology. First, Tornstam's (2005) three dimensions of gerotranscendence — cosmic, self, and social transcendence — are clearly evident in the centenarian narratives. The Emotional–Spiritual Resilience theme reflects cosmic transcendence through participants' acceptance of life's impermanence and their comfort with the mystery of death. The Wisdom Integration theme reflects self-transcendence through the redefinition of the self in relation to one's complete life story, and the diminished concern with material or status-oriented goals. The Intergenerational Connectedness theme reflects social transcendence through deepened emotional intimacy within a smaller but more meaningful social network. However, a crucial departure from Tornstam's formulation emerges: in the Thai Buddhist context, transcendence is not developmental in Tornstam's linear sense — progressing through discrete stages — but cyclical, embedded in Buddhist concepts of impermanence (*anicca*), interconnectedness (*paticcasamuppada*), and the continuous cycle of merit-making. This finding supports recent calls for culturally grounding gerotranscendence theory beyond its Scandinavian origins (Cozort, 2008; Haugan et al., 2024).

Second, the findings extend socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen, 2021) by demonstrating that in collectivist contexts, socioemotional selectivity operates through family and community structures rather than individual choice. Carstensen's theory predicts that as time horizons narrow, individuals actively prune their social networks, retaining only the most emotionally meaningful relationships. Centenarians in Loei Province did not "select" smaller networks through deliberate social withdrawal but maintained expansive intergenerational connections that deepened in emotional quality over time. The multigenerational household structure, cultural obligations of *bun khun*, and community ceremonial participation ensured continuous social engagement. The selectivity that occurred was qualitative rather than quantitative — relationships deepened in emotional richness rather than narrowing in number. Third, the ICE-L Model advances Wong's (2010) meaning therapy framework by situating meaning-making within cultural-relational ecosystems rather than individual psychological processes. Wong's framework, while acknowledging cultural influences, operates primarily at the level of individual cognition and therapeutic intervention. The ICE-L Model proposes that meaning is not merely constructed by individuals but is constituted through cultural practices, relational structures, and spiritual traditions that exist independently of any single individual's psychological processes. This represents a transcultural extension of meaning-centered approaches that may prove relevant to other collectivist cultural contexts.

Implications for Nursing Practice and Policy

The findings generate several implications for gerontological nursing practice. First, culturally sensitive assessment tools should incorporate meaning-making dimensions alongside conventional functional and cognitive assessments. The ICE-L Model provides a structured framework for assessing identity, connection, endurance, and legacy as domains of wellbeing among centenarian and near-centenarian populations. Second, community-based nursing interventions should leverage the cultural identity and intergenerational bonds identified as protective factors, for example through facilitated storytelling programs,

temple-based wellness activities, and merit-making ceremonies integrated into care plans. Third, training programs for gerontological nurses should include meaning-centered care approaches informed by the ICE-L Model, preparing practitioners to recognize and support the cultural, spiritual, and relational dimensions of wellbeing in elderly populations. Fourth, family-inclusive care models recognizing *bun khun* reciprocity should be developed, structuring formal care services to complement rather than replace informal family caregiving systems.

At the policy level, the findings align with multiple Sustainable Development Goals. SDG 3 (Good Health and Wellbeing) is advanced through the identification of psychosocial and cultural protective factors that complement biomedical approaches to healthy aging. SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) is addressed by giving voice to a marginalized population — rural centenarian elders — whose perspectives are systematically absent from aging policy discourse. SDG 11 (Sustainable Communities) is supported by demonstrating the critical role of community structures in sustaining centenarian wellbeing. These findings directly inform the WHO Decade of Healthy Ageing 2021–2030 (WHO, 2020) action areas, particularly Action Area 1 (changing how we think, feel, and act toward age and aging) and Action Area 4 (ensuring the delivery of integrated care for older people in communities). The ICE-L Model provides a culturally grounded framework that policymakers can use to design aging programs that respect and leverage traditional cultural resources rather than imposing standardized Western models of eldercare.

LIMITATION

Several limitations warrant acknowledgment. First, survivorship bias is inherent in centenarian research: studying only those who have survived to 100 cannot identify factors that may have prevented others from reaching this age, and participants' retrospective accounts may be colored by their exceptional longevity. Second, cognitive and communication challenges among participants aged 100 years and older presented methodological difficulties, although these were mitigated through caregiver assistance, observational data, and repeated interviews that allowed researchers to verify and deepen earlier accounts. Third, the single-province sample limits generalizability; findings from rural Loei Province may not transfer to urban Thai settings, other Isan provinces, or other regions of Thailand with different cultural characteristics. Fourth, the cross-sectional design captures meaning-making processes at a single point in participants' lives and cannot illuminate how these processes evolved longitudinally across the lifespan. Fifth, translation challenges are inevitable in cross-cultural qualitative research; some Isan dialect expressions lack precise English equivalents, and despite the first author's fluency and careful attention to translation fidelity, some cultural nuance may have been lost. Sixth, researcher positionality must be acknowledged: the first author's position as a university nursing faculty member may have influenced participant responses, potentially eliciting more positive or socially desirable accounts than might have emerged in conversations with peers.

Future Research

Several directions for future research emerge from this study. First, comparative ethnographic studies across Thai provinces and Southeast Asian countries (Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar) would test the transferability of the ICE-L Model across culturally related but distinct contexts. Second, longitudinal research tracking near-centenarians (aged 90–99) into centenarian status would illuminate how meaning-making processes evolve during the transition to extreme old age. Third, quantitative testing of the ICE-L Model through the development and psychometric validation of a measurement instrument would enable large-scale hypothesis testing of the relationships proposed by the framework. Fourth, intervention studies applying the ICE-L framework in community eldercare programs could evaluate whether meaning-centered approaches improve health outcomes and quality of life among older adults. Fifth, cross-cultural validation of meaning-centered longevity constructs through collaborative research with scholars studying centenarians in other collectivist societies (e.g., Japan, South Korea, rural China) would contribute to the development of a truly transcultural gerontological science.

CONCLUSION

Centenarians in Loei Province, Thailand, demonstrate that exceptional longevity reflects holistic, meaning-centered pathways deeply embedded in cultural identity, Buddhist spiritual practice, relational bonds, and legacy transmission. Through an interpretive ethnographic study of 12 centenarians, 9 family caregivers, and 5 community informants over 14 months, this research identified five interconnected themes—Cultural Identity and Ancestral Groundedness, Life Purpose and Daily Contribution, Emotional–Spiritual Resilience, Intergenerational Connectedness, and Wisdom Integration and Legacy Transmission—that constitute pathways through which centenarians construct purposeful lives of exceptional duration.

The ICE-L Model (Identity–Connection–Endurance–Legacy), developed inductively from these findings, offers a transcultural conceptual framework for successful aging in collectivist societies. By positioning meaning-making as the integrative mechanism connecting cultural identity, social bonds, spiritual resilience, and wisdom transmission, the model expands Western aging theories and addresses calls for culturally grounded frameworks in global gerontology. Findings carry implications for nursing practice—particularly meaning-centered care and culturally sensitive assessment tools—as well as community eldercare programs and aging policy aligned with the WHO Decade of Healthy Ageing (2021–2030)..

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