

Body and bone: Cultural embodiment in Northern Thai bone healing

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This ethnographic study about the healing practice of an elderly Northern Thai woman shows how Northern Thai culture is practiced in bone fracture treatment and how this medical knowledge is recreated by the healer in response to patient needs over the last three decades during the rapid socio-economic and cultural change in Thailand. This paper also demonstrates the power of shared, internalized and unconsciously communicated familiar symbols in Northern Thai everyday practice. These taken-for-granted symbols are implicitly expressed through, the therapeutic environment, patient–healer conversations, Northern Thai dress, and culturally defined body language exhibited by healers. This form of bone healing appears to be extremely powerful when it is situated in a context in which, familiar and meaningful symbols are condensed and encapsulated, as in the healing practice of the elderly woman and surrounded by the powerful signs of Buddhism or spirit worship. The practice of healers and patients includes the experience and reproduction of the past and present Northern Thai social and supernatural world.

[culture, symbolism, bone healing, ritual healing, Northern Thailand]

Northern Thai bone healing features comprehensive local knowledge of human anatomy embedded in ritual. Like other Northern Thai medical knowledge systems, it is part of a shared culture of Thai and surrounding ethnic groups in Southern China, Laos and Vietnam (Mulder 1985; Rhum 1987). Rooted in magical-religious belief, bone healing is dynamically adapted to socio-political change. Bone healers create their own treatment activities, a mix of personal insights and various kinds of available knowledge. The female bone healer in this study, for example, combined bone fracture treatment with massage therapy, egg-rubbing, and biomedical knowledge. In an egg-rubbing treatment, the white of a boiled egg is squeezed around a silver coin and wrapped in a handkerchief. After that, it is blown over with charms (*khatha*), and the painful area is rubbed gently. The coin turns black or green, which indicates the type of toxic substance in the patient's body. Green indicates a toxin from a bad spirit and the patient will be told that he or she should consult a specialized healer.

In Northern Thai cultural belief, bone healing treatments require supernatural power. A healer has to receive the potent charm or *khatha* called *khwak sui*, which is

believed to be a strong *khatha* or charm. During treatment, the healer blows his *khatha* over the reset fracture, and then wraps the area tightly with elastic bandage or a bamboo cast. *Khatha* is also breathed over the painful area during spot-pressing massage. Sometimes it is called a hot *khatha* in the sense that people who receive this *khatha* must have special power to control it. Such persons are men who have already been ordained as a Buddhist novice or monk. It should be noted that as a rule healing treatment involving magic is carried out by men, since it is cultural belief that the female body is polluted and can destroy the magical power. Moreover, most charms were written in Northern Thai manuscripts, which most women cannot read (Brun & Schumacher 1994: 37). According to my interviews with five traditional healers, if a woman (such as the female bone healer in this study) does read and write Northern Thai and was born under a strong astrological constellation, she can overcome this taboo.

In Northern Thai as well as in other traditional beliefs, illness is not only caused by a disorder of the physical body but also from ruptured relations between people or between human beings and spirits. If a patient's physical disorder is diagnosed as due to a violation of cultural taboos and/or the disruption of social rules, the healer will suggest that he consults other ritual healers for specific ceremonies to ask for forgiveness from other spirits or to reconcile himself with other people in the kin group or community. Such a patient may, for example, be injured in a car accident, or suffer from severe and chronic pain due to the violation of taboos or social rules. Northern Thai bone healers deal with patients' problems not only in relation to their physical bodies, but also with regard to their social relations with other people and spirits.

It should be noted that in the twentieth century, when Northern Thailand became part of the Thai nation-state and underwent the rapid changes of the globalization era in the 1980s, Northern Thai culture, including bone healing, experienced great changes as well. Significant changes appear to have happened during the period of Thai national identity policy together with the policy of the tourism industry by which Thai massage, spa businesses and medical tourism are heavily promoted. Moreover, the National Institute for Thai Traditional Medicine (NITTM) of the Department for Development of Thai Traditional and Alternative Medicine, under the Ministry of Public Health, which was established in 1994, has provided many supporting activities and substantial funds to community based organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), local health care centers, hospitals and the business sector to promote 'Thai' traditional medicine. Northern Thai traditional knowledge has been therefore reproduced and reinvented to legitimate itself among these powerful interventions. To understand the reproduction and reinvention of Northern Thai culture in the context of such change, then, insight into bone healing as Northern Thai cultural practice is of critical importance.

This article aims to illustrate the ways in which an implicit Northern Thai culture embedded in everyday life has been practiced as a response to the dominated Central Thai medical knowledge and commercialization during bone healing treatment. The article is based on ethnographic fieldwork between June 2003 and August 2004, and in May and June 2005. The information about 'Northern Thai bone healing' was collected through participant observation and intensive in-depth interviews with a female

bone healer, her descendants and their clients. During my study (in October 2003), *Ui Chan*, the female bone healer passed away, which implied a great change in the meaning and representation of Northern Thai bone healing. Therefore, this paper offers a good opportunity to study the changes and reinventions of bone healing practice created by her descendants.

To focus on the practice of Northern Thai healing, I found it useful to use the notion of *habitus* as elaborated by Bourdieu (1977, 1990). This concept leads us to concentrate on cultural power in practice. Bourdieu shows how culture is embodied and regulates people, and, in turn, how people actually practice cultural rules. According to his theory, an individual is not a totally free agent, as one's actions are formed by *habitus*, a shared cultural structure that is embodied in a person or in a certain group. A person has, however, some ability to creatively represent him or herself or to 'improvise' under the shared cultural rules. This shared cultural rule is a 'structure embedded in the agents' bodies in the form of mental disposition schemes of perception and thought' (Bourdieu 1977: 15, 78). This common cultural rule and the symbolic strategies that people use to shape this rule work unconsciously in practice. For Bourdieu, this social practice is both a process of repetition and reconstruction of the shared socio-cultural system. Since practical meanings are dynamic and cannot be understood out of context, I focus on the healing context and the processes of patient–healer interaction and communication. These interactions take place, for example, in therapeutic settings, through the symbolic meanings of the body, the charisma of the healers, and the idioms of communication (Pratt & Mason 1981; Young 1987).

Northern Thai bone healing treatment: The case of *Ui Chan*

A Northern Thai perspective, as embedded in the practice of bone healing, can be seen in the case of *Ui Chan* (Grandmother Chan), an eighty-five-year-old female bone healer. She provided treatment at her house in a small village about three kilometers from the main road. Without the help of signposts, patients found the way to her house from the information given by friends or relatives who had been treated by her. On the cement wall surrounding her house was written, in large Central Thai and in Northern Thai script, 'ban *Ui Chan*' (*Ui Chan*'s house). Since few people can read and write Northern Thai, the inscription in this language can be seen as a representation of her authentic Northern Thai healing. In fact, many other aspects of this therapeutic setting are typical of Northern Thai culture.

Meaningful ritual space

When *Ui Chan* was still alive, her place appeared as an old, shaded, Northern Thai style home, surrounded by fruit trees. The wooden house was raised about one and a half meters above the ground. On the front of the house, near the roof, an inscription noted the year it was built: *Buddhist Era 2501* [1958]. There were three more houses, belonging to her daughters, and a rice granary near her house. In the past the strict rule was

that relatives had to build their house near that of their parents and keep rice in the family granary. This practice has now become rare. Near the entrance steps of the house, there was a large number of walking sticks left behind by recovered patients. Culturally, keeping used walking sticks in a house suggests that the owner of the house has strong magic and moral power to control bad luck. Since a walking stick is a symbol of a bad fortune or suffering, it is forbidden to keep it in a house after a patient has recovered. It is suggested that the patient leave a walking stick in a special place that can control evil, for example in a temple or a house of a person who has strong charms. For many patients, the presence of these walking sticks was a confirmation of her bone healing expertise. Middle-class people perceive the image of *Ui Chan's* house as a symbol of their own childhood home and their imagination is led to recall the past.

Ui Chan's house was an old shaded local style filled with a sacred atmosphere. It represented a relaxed environment and the simplicity and serenity of the Northern Thai life style that I dreamt of. *Ui Chan's* smiling face looked kind and trustworthy and many clients were waiting for her treatment. I was rather convinced the first time I visited her house that she must be an expert traditional healer. Moreover, she met my own criteria that an expert traditional healer should not be a talkative person, but a calm and practical person (Interview with Malee, a 55-year-old female, lecturer at the Faculty of Medicine Chiang Mai University, 11 February 2004).

The first time I visited *Ui Chan's* house, I felt as if I went back home and was free from 'tough business'. It seems that time passes very slowly at that place. She reminded me of my mother since they were at the same age and dressed in the same style outfits. It made me remember a happy childhood when I lived with my family in a similar style house. At that time, I felt pain in my whole body and she provided an egg-rubbing treatment for me. She gently rubbed my almost naked body with a warm squeezed egg wrapped with a handkerchief. At that moment, I felt as if I had become a child again and was being taken care of by my mother. I asked her to be my second mother and we continued our close relationship until she passed away (Interview with Peng, a 54-year old male, owner of a lathe plant, 7 June 2004).

However, nearby villagers perceive this house as a common and familiar place, very different from the hospital.

Before I had a treatment by *Ui Chan*, I was examined at a private hospital. They asked 80,000 baht for an orthopedic surgery, which was too expensive. I also went to a district [public] hospital and had a physical therapy for almost two months. I did not recover. My neighbors told me about *Ui Chan* and accompanied me to her house. Within two weeks I felt better and could sew clothes all day. During the two weeks I had a treatment at her house, I went there very early in the morning with my prepared breakfast [food and rice] hoping to be the first client. I usually helped her cook food in her old style kitchen. After that we had breakfast together, rested and talked before beginning the treatment. She sometimes gave me fruits and local snacks her clients had given to her to take home. It is certain that I never met such an atmosphere at any hospitals (Interview with Nui, a 50-year-old female dressmaker, 5 February 2004).

The whole scene of both *Ui Chan*'s house and her treatment session told familiar stories of Northern Thai culture and the spiritual beliefs that are practiced in daily life. Below the ceiling of the east wall of the house, was a shelf with four Buddha images and two electric candles. Pictures of the King and the Queen were hung on this wall below the shelf. On a table under this shelf, there was a local foot-tall red offering-tray (*khan*) with flowers, candles and popped rice, where patients placed the teacher spirit fee. Flowers, candles and popped rice are the three basic offerings for worshipping teacher spirits. Traditionally, patients have to bring them from their houses. Many people did not know this tradition; so *Ui Chan* prepared all three items for them. To the left of this *khan* was a directive whiteboard announcing the treatment fees. The teacher spirit fee was 108 baht and a bottle of rice liquor, whereas, the treatment fee for fixing fractured or dislocated bones was 1,000 baht and 150 baht for massage only. Since a minimum wage of workers is 100 baht per day, the treatment fee is rather expensive for villagers.

It should be clarified here that showing the teacher spirit fee, as well as the detailed treatment fees on the directive whiteboard, was a new way of management invented by *Ui Chan*'s son. It was a clever method that brought some criticisms from a few elderly persons such as *Ui nan Khwai*, *Ui Chan*'s cousin. Here are some of their criticisms.

Traditionally, a healer should extend treatment to all sufferers, even if they have no money. In such cases, the healer has to provide the money to the teacher spirits [rather than the patient] (Interview with *Ui nan Khwai*, a 78-year-old male traditional healer, 18 May 2003).

Ui Chan's son felt that to force his mother to pay for the teacher spirit fee was unfair. She was very old and received small sums of fee. Some of her patients cheated her. They disappeared when they were recovered, just leaving her with a headache because the teacher spirits had been offended. Generally, people understood why the son had helped by putting up the directive board for his mother. He told people informally about his reasons. From my point of view, people understood her generosity because *Ui Chan* gave the money back to her community. She made generous donations to Buddhist monks and needy elders on special merit making occasions. Moreover, the directive but not mandatory teacher spirit fee was not practiced strictly, especially in the case of local needy people. If the illness was not serious, such as a suffering from mal-alignment of *sen* (invisible lines that pass through muscles and are attached to joints), *Ui Chan* only rearranged the *sen* free of charge. In these non-serious cases, she used only her technical knowledge and did not require the teacher spirits to intervene.

On the floor, near a set of tables, for the installation of a Buddha image, stood a money tree, decorated with crisp clean bills as her personal donation to the temple near her house. It is quite common that when local people want to donate a large amount of money for some temple activities, such as for the construction cost of a new building; they normally prepare a money tree (*ton ngoen*). The trunk and branches of a tree are made of bundled straws. Each branch is decorated with crisp, clean money bills that look like they were leaves of a tree. This money tree will be put in a prominent place within the house in order to invite other people to join this temple fund raising. Another wall was covered with photographs of *Ui Chan* and her relatives. Near the top, on the



Figure 1 Ui Chan talking to staff members of NITTM on the raised floor. At the background, on the right side of the picture, stood a white board showing the treatment fee and a money tree was on the left side. Near the house pillar located a basket of mak , a dish of miang, local snacks and bottled drinking water

right side of the wall, was a picture of her mother. Another picture showed her uncle who taught her the art of bone healing. Two pictures of her deceased husband and one of herself hung on this wall. Other pictures, of her deceased son, of herself while traveling or while attending her son's graduation ceremonies, were hung lower.

The therapeutic scene described here expresses Northern Thai cosmology, which is a mixture between spirit cults, Brahmin and Buddhist beliefs. The hierarchical arrangement of the pictures on the walls of the house depicts the structure of power relations according to Northern Thai belief, of which, Lord Buddha has the greatest power. The King and the Queen, considered as deities themselves, have less power than the Lord Buddha but more power than ordinary persons. The teacher of bone healing and a healer's relatives have approximately equal power. The teacher spirits have less power than the Lord Buddha and the deities, but more than a healer. The belief of hierarchical power is expressed through the routine practice of *wai* that marks the beginning of each traditional treatment. *Wai* is a gesture of respect bringing both hands palm to palm and raising them to the face or forehead. A patient '*wais*' the Buddhist statues first, then the picture of the King and the Queen, and after that he or she should place the teacher spirit fee on the offering-tray and *wai* the teacher spirit. Simultaneously, while paying respect, the patient usually asks Lord Buddha, the deities and the teacher spirits to grant supernatural power and to support the treatment procedure.

Another important contrast within the therapeutic contexts of commercialized 'Thai' traditional medicine and biomedicine is the meaning of money or therapeutic fee. A modern calculation of the cost of those treatments in terms of time used for treatment (per hour) implies treatment as therapeutic business transaction. In contrast, the money given for the treatment by *Ui Chan* has cultural symbolic meaning. Al-

though patients were explicitly informed of the treatment fee, it was charged on the basis of a patient's illness. By putting money on the red offering-tray it implies that the money has been received by the teacher spirits. The money tree near the Buddha shelf suggests that this money in part went to the temple. In other words, and in accordance with Buddhist belief, offering money for therapeutic treatment is an indirect way of gaining merit. In addition, the fact that all treatment procedures were practiced in front of the symbols of Lord Buddha and the teacher spirits seemed to testify to the healer's rectitude.

Moral bone healing expertise

While all therapeutic settings display *Ui Chan's* qualification of her healing effectiveness like doctor's certificate hanging on his clinic wall, *Ui Chan's* expertise and morality were represented through symbols of Northern Thai culture. This was expressed in both her healing practice and her charisma.

In the house of *Ui Chan*, two cupboards with glass doors stood near the wall, below the picture of her relatives. One cupboard was filled with pillows for use during treatment, a certificate as an expert of Northern Thai bone healing from the NITTM (1999), and a certificate as a great Buddhist, awarded by the district religious committee in 2000. These two certificates were put in a case. They were not put on display as they usually are in other healing settings. As *Ui Chan* saw it, certificates were not very important to underwrite her expertise. Healing expertise in Northern Thai culture is not expressed in the form of certificates but through complicated symbols, such as, large piles of walking sticks left behind by the recovered patients, in combination with their narrative accounts, which symbolize the effectiveness of her healing. Moreover, according to Northern Thai culture, the technical skills of a healer increase with the morality of her or his environment. The relationship between *Ui Chan's* morality and her expertise was obvious. Patients perceived her high morality in the way she represented Buddhist ideology and in her charisma of being a great Buddhist.

Ui Chan's Buddhist understanding of life and death is implied by the more than twenty large, beautifully crafted silver-like bowls called *sa-lung*, on prominent display in another cupboard. Almost everyone, including myself, asked *Ui Chan* about the purpose of keeping such a large number of silver-like bowls. She replied that she kept them for her funeral ceremony, a gift to monks. Although Buddhists generally see death as a fact of life, to prepare for it as *Ui Chan* did is certainly unusual. It indicates her attainment of the supreme Buddhist value: to be not attached to possessions, not even to her own life. This not only represented her morality but also implied that she gave treatment not primarily for financial reasons, but to achieve merit (*bun*). This value is further attested to in the stories told about her. Her son and daughters and the villagers reported that she had prepared spun cotton threads for tying her wrists after she died and a local reed mat to wrap her body in. According to Northern Thai traditional belief, a corpse is arranged in the *wai* position of giving respect to Lord Buddha. The hand palms are vertical placed against each other; the wrists are tied by cotton threads and raised above the chest. Flowers, candles and joss-sticks wrapped in banana

leaves are put between the two palms. Thus the deceased brings the three basic offerings – flowers, candles and joss-sticks – to worship Lord Buddha. Before placement in the coffin, the corpse is wrapped in a *suea* (local reed mat). Another story frequently told is about her donation of a large amount of money for Buddhist activities such as the ordination of novices and the construction or repair of temples.

The charisma of *Ui Chan*, rooted as it was in Northern Thai belief, provided crucial evidence of her strong healing power. A bone healer needs more than technical skills to provide treatment, and must possess a strong charm (*khata*), called *khwak sui*, to connect his or her healing power to the power of the teacher spirits. It is a common cultural belief that, if a bone healer fails in following strict observance of the five Buddhist precepts (refrain from killing, refrain from stealing, refrain from lying, slandering, gossiping and spreading rumors, refrain from sexual misconduct, and refrain from taking intoxicants), *khwak sui* can create negative effects. Not only will his or her (magic) power diminish, but it will also affect the healer's body and possessions. The healer's skin will darken, he or she will look dirty and poor, and his or her home will appear uninviting and insignificant. Only in an environment of high merit can a healer control this strong *khatha*. The positive consequences of a healer's capability to control this strong *khatha* are that he will increase the effectiveness of his healing and accumulate greater charisma. People believe that this kind of charisma is noticeable via a healer's body, and that his abode spreads a sense of warmth. Since *Ui Chan* was an attractive old woman with a light complexion and a smiling face, and because her house looked charming and inviting, she met the criteria of a healer who is able to control the strong power of the *khwak sui*.

After the death of her husband, *Ui Chan* usually went to the temple to practice meditation during the nights of every Buddhist day (*wan phra*). She had nothing to worry about so that she could maintain her moral purity. She never gossiped or talked to people with bad words and never killed any kind of animal. She offered a lot of the money she received from her patients to the temple and the elders. She was the kind of older person who thought and did only good things. She was a rare commoner [not an elite person] who was able to offer a *chaw pha*, the spire of a temple's roof. [which people consider as providing much merit or *bun barami*] She did many good deeds so that the older she became, the more she looked charismatic and respectful (Interview with Su, a 55 year old housewife, 10 September 2003).

I deeply believe, *Ui Chan*'s *khatha* was very efficacious. If she said that this wound would recover, it really happened. Her words were very powerful (*sak-sit*). Nearly all my family members were her patients. [...] As a 'female' bone healer, she never drank alcoholic beverage [whereas a male bone healer often does]. She was very kind and polite, never talked to people with bad words. As a widow whose daughter and sons had already grown up, she was able to lead a very strict life of a devout Buddhist. This is why she still maintains charisma. Her house looked appealingly warm and openly radiating, whereas other [male] healers who had received such a kind of strong *khatha* have an opposite personality and had only a few possessions (Interview with Lamoon, a 67 years old housewife, on 23 May 2004).

The raised floor

Ui Chan provided treatment on the raised wooden floor of her house, called *toen* in Northern Thai language. It is the main area of the house. On this floor, near one of the house pillars, stood a beautiful old basket for *mak* (a set of areca nuts and betel leaves smeared with lime which elderly persons in the past commonly chewed), a dish with *miang* (fermented tea leaves for chewing), bottled drinking water, glasses, and fruit or local snacks such as rice crackers. These were provided to anyone who visited the house (see Figure 1). An earthenware water jar (*mo nam*) stood in the other corner of the house for those who preferred drinking water from the well. *Mak*, *miang*, *muli* (cigarettes) and the jar comprised the traditional set to welcome guests. Nowadays, these items have all but disappeared from Northern Thai life, though they were still present in this house.

When there was no patient, the raised portion of the floor was used to receive guests, to carry on daily activities, take meals and sleep on the reed mat (*suea*). Some patients rested briefly after the massage; others brought food to share for lunch with *Ui Chan*. During the process of treatment the raised floor was a special treatment area. The patient and *Ui Chan* with her assistants (her daughter and a niece) sat on the raised floor. Others would sit on the lower floor while observing the treatment. The setting was like that of a stage act, including performers and audience. During therapy, all elements of the house seemed to play a role because of their symbolic meanings. Everything surrounding the raised floor, such as the Buddha statues on the top shelf of the east wall of the house, the picture of the King and Queen near this shelf, the picture of the uncle who was *Ui Chan*'s teacher, and the ritual tray under the shelf of the Buddha statues – all of these turned into elements of a stage ritual. Even the rather expensive treatment fee shown on the directive whiteboard was overshadowed by the meaning of the 'big' money tree. The scene evoked trust in the effectiveness of *Ui Chan*'s treat-



Figure 2 *Ui Chan* in a Northern Thai style dress providing *sen* treatment for a female patient on the raised floor

ment. *Ui* Chan's therapeutic environment was a curious combination of a warm, welcoming house and a meaningful healing area.

Movements of the body

Not only was the house full of symbols, but *Ui* Chan's dress and the way she moved were symbolic as well. Her bodily movements represented the aura of a gifted Northern Thai healer that deeply touched people's feelings. *Ui* Chan naturally represented herself as an authentic Northern Thai traditional healer who brought the past to the present. The patients' feelings were induced by the symbolic expressions of her body. Besides her warm-hearted personality, interpreted as a result of her high morality and religious conduct, her dressing style also contributed to her charisma. She dressed in neat and rather expensive clothes, a white lace blouse and a long traditional skirt (*sin*) (see Figure 2). It corresponded with her beautiful antique basket for *mak* and the ritual setting described above. She always chewed *mak* while sitting on the floor in a typical traditional manner, folding both legs beside her erect body, the *pub-piap* position, which is considered polite conduct, but rarely practiced nowadays (see Figure 3). For some patients, especially those from a middle-class background, her style of dress and posture met their image of an authentic Northern Thai women. Some of them mentioned that *Ui* Chan reminded them of their mothers or grandmothers.

Although *Ui* Chan looked kind and calm, while providing treatment her bodily movements showed a combination of physical strength and modest cultural refinement. Her healing process was not an exotic treatment, as practiced by the spirit mediums studied by Tanabe (Tanabe 2002) and Thawat (Thawat 2002). In simple cases she relied on her knowledge of anatomy only. For more complicated treatments she invoked the power of her teacher spirits by quietly reciting charms, while rearranging bones or *sen* of patients. Since her spirit and the teacher spirits were connected through the ritual ceremony of receiving the teacher spirits (*rab khun khru*) when she was young, she did not need to go into trance. The power of the teacher spirits could be transmitted into her body merely by reciting charms or *khatha*. During treatment she usually taught patients the local knowledge of the invisible human anatomy, by pressing certain spots on their bodies to let them feel the existence of *sen* that link those spots to typical areas by the feeling of prickling at certain points. Moreover, the way she welcomed patients as neighbors and kin, called herself *ui* or grandmother instead of *mo* or doctor, and her attitude made patients feel at home as if being taken care of by a relative.

Treatment involved not only knowledge of Northern Thai human anatomy but also the Northern Thai hierarchy of power. This is expressed in the way Northern Thai position their body. When a patient lies down, the head as most superior part of the body should point east, toward the Buddha images. But when *Ui* Chan knelt on the floor, her head bowed, to bow her *khatha* over younger persons' feet; the inversion of the hierarchy prescribed another direction. For patients and their relatives, *Ui* Chan's positioning of her body in this direction provided them with an impression of a kind-hearted healer who did not care for her higher position while giving treatment.

Whereas the standardized Thai traditional masseuses used their fingers, hand palms, elbows, legs and heels, *Ui Chan* and her assistants used only their hands and sometimes their feet to give spot-pressing massage. It should be noted that the way they used their feet – culturally considered as an inferior part of the body – to give spot massage is culturally appropriated. This way is called *yiap kha phae* (using a foot to press someone's crossed legs). A patient lies on one side with crossed legs, the lower leg in a straight position and the upper leg crossed over in an angled position. The healer stands on the patient's straight leg and presses certain spots with her foot (see Figure 4). It is a technique frequently practiced by the Northern Thai in the past. It evokes the feeling of a journey back into the past for patients who learned of this familiar with technique from their parents or grandparents.

When I got *yiap kha phae* massage by *Ui Chan*'s descendents, I remembered my village life. When I was young, I usually massaged my parents and grandparents with this technique. Since they worked at the paddy fields, they came back home with strained muscles. I remembered that I began to massage them when I was only six or seven years old. The weight of a child at that age is suitable for standing on an adult's body. Although at that time I did not know how to do a good massage, they told us step by step how to press certain spots to relieve their strained muscle. Now I have two children but I cannot ask them to massage me. Life is not as it was (Interview with Thim, a 35-year-old woman, an owner of a big florist, 27 June 2005).

Ui Chan's therapy, then, is enriched by subtle symbolic meanings that Northern Thai experience through their bodies. As she carried out her integrated ritual and body treatment, it seemed that all people who participated in that process – healers, patients and their relatives – knew automatically how and where to position themselves suitably. Nobody needed to arrange the order of this ritual ceremony. It is their *habitus* or embodied culture that regulates communication and practice according to a pattern familiar to them from childhood. Remarkably, *Ui Chan* did not strictly follow the cultural rules. She invented new ritual ceremonies, which were represented through her house arrangement, her body language, and especially through symbolic meanings related to the therapeutic fee. These are unconscious symbolic strategies that meet the demand of the modern Northern Thai.



Figure 3 *Ui Chan sat* (pub-piap) on a local reed mat (*sua*) giving sen treatment



Figure 4 *Ui Chan's descendant providing yiap kha phae treatment*

After the death of Ui Chan

The symbolic meanings related to Northern Thai bone healing are, like other symbolic meanings, not static. A sudden and significant change occurred due to the death of *Ui Chan*. Villagers and patients felt that her house now looked gloomy. It appeared no longer as a home-like therapeutic setting any more. Since nobody lived in *Ui Chan's* house and it was open only when her daughter and son provided treatment there, it seemed to be mere clinic, even if the style was Northern Thai. The scene around the house was rearranged to make clear that the new healers were *Ui Chan's* successors. The main teacher spirit tray (*khun khru luang*), which had always been in *Ui Chan's* bedroom, was now conspicuously suspended from the ceiling of the *toen*. It was the same ritual spirit tray as the one received by her son during the *phi thi khwam khun khru*, the ritual ceremony of separating *Ui Chan's* spirit from her teacher spirits, conducted before her dead body was carried away to be cremated in a community forest. It is believed that through this ritual ceremony *Ui Chan's* spirit is freed from her teacher spirits and her son's spirit is connected instead. This ceremony was led by a layperson who, for a long time, had been a Buddhist monk, so that he had sufficient power to control the spirits. *Ui nan Dang*, a 78-year-old ex-monk, who officiated this ritual ceremony said that while he informed the teacher spirits about the death of *Ui Chan* and conveyed the request of her son to receive her *khatha*, the grand ritual tray (*khan khru*) in *Ui Chan's* bedroom was overturned (*khwam*) and touched by her son. This meant that his spirit was accepted to become connected with his mother's teacher spirits.

On the table under the shelf of the Buddha images were two pictures of *Ui Chan* placed in front of the red offering-tray. In the first picture she was dressed in a white blouse and a brown *sin*, sitting in the *pub-piap* manner. A small microphone hung on the collar of her blouse. It was a picture that was taken when she was interviewed by staff members of the National Institute for Thai Traditional Medicine. The second pic-

ture portrayed *Ui* Chan sitting in front of a large money tree. She was in a meditation dress, a white blouse and a white *sin*, while holding a traditional red tray with flowers and candles. Sometimes these pictures were decorated with jasmine garlands by her daughter and son. The whiteboard with the information about the therapeutic fee was now covered with a sheet of paper announcing the new fee. The price for spot-pressing or *sen* treatment had increased from 150 to 160 baht. The set for *mak* and *miang* (areca nut and fermented tea leaves) had disappeared from the *toen*. Other new information was the home telephone number of *Ui* Chan's daughter and the number of her son's mobile phone.

Since *Ui* Chan's daughter was usually busy with her domestic work, and because the son worked outside the village, they preferred patients to make an appointment by calling them. This new way of contacting the healers, the new meaning of the house and the increase of the treatment fee without a clear cultural meaning suggested that treatment was seen as a career rather than as treatment to help sufferers. The new healers still followed their mother's techniques by providing spot-massage and bone treatment. However, they could not match their mother's reputation as Northern Thai bone healer. Besides the changes in the therapeutic context, their appearance, dress, and bodily movements represented a modern Northern Thai middle-aged healer. Both of them wore Western-style apparel – T-shirts and pants or shorts. Like other Northern Thai nowadays, the daughter could no longer maintain the *pub-piap* sitting position.

On the other hand, once *Ui* Chan's successors gave treatment at the patients' houses they started to create new symbols. The first symbol was *Ui* Chan's leather handbag, filled with many of her belongings for treatment and usually was carried by her son. For him, this bag symbolized that his mother was present and supported him as he performed treatment. In the eyes of the patients however, the handbag represented the transmission of *Ui* Chan's knowledge to him. Another powerful symbol, unconsciously created by *Ui* Chan's successors to demarcate the ritual healing area from the remaining space of a patient's house, was the local reed mat or *suea*. It should be pointed that *suea* is commonly used in daily life by local people. When I observed and interviewed the local people about the meaning of *suea* in everyday life, I found that its meaning depends on the context. If the local people prepare a *suea* for a guest, the space on the *suea* becomes a special area for this person. Usually, people sit elsewhere or at the edge of the *suea*. But if the local people use it in their daily life, such as for chatting, sleeping or eating, the *suea* becomes a relaxing space where all sit or lie down to enjoy themselves.

While the healing scene at *Ui* Chan's house was full of intense symbolic power, as described above, the simply organized ritual space of a *suea* spread on the floor suggested the combination of modest power of a healer and a sense of a family-like treatment. No matter if a patient's house was of Western design, as soon as the healers spread the *suea* over the floor to start their treatment, the atmosphere became dominated by the character of Northern Thai ritual healing. Everyone participating in the treatment automatically positioned himself such that the healers were in the center or superior position. Only patients and healers sat on the *suea*, while the others sat elsewhere. This is not an explicit rule, but it is embodied in Northern Thai everyday prac-



Figure 5 Daughter and son of *Ui Chan* providing treatment on the *suea* spread over the floor of a western style house

tice. Surprisingly, the healing performance taking place on the *suea* and the way people organized themselves looked similar to how things were on the raised floor of *Ui Chan*'s house. The healers and patients seemed to act as performers, and the others attending the ceremony became the audience.

Conclusion

Bone healing treatment is one element of Northern Thai culture. Although it seems at first to be a mechanical treatment, cultural aspects appear to be embedded in every component of it. The crucial point is that culture is not expressed explicitly, but it is subtly communicated in a powerful form that the Northern Thai normally do not explicitly acknowledge, but take for granted. This study shows that the power of Northern Thai bone healing is the result of an actual healing practice which has been able to encapsulate and integrate the fragmented knowledge of Northern Thai physical and cultural bodies. Moreover, it is able to communicate this meaningful knowledge to the patients explicitly and implicitly during treatment. The ritual healing context, combined with the symbolic bodily movements of a healer, makes for a crucial environment where this practical knowledge is condensed and transmitted in a way that patients can touch, feel and perceive through their bodies and memories.

The nationalization and commercialization of the Central Thai healing knowledge do, in turn, evoke a feeling of nostalgia for Northern Thai healing with some Northern Thai who feel alienated in the rapid change of society and culture. The power of this knowledge is increased when healers represent themselves and their knowledge as authentic Northern Thai. The magical-religious belief that is practiced by both healer and patient during treatment confirms to the healer that his or her skill will be supported by supernatural powers. For the patient, it affirms a healer's morality. To practice bone healing, then, is to practice Northern Thai culture. However, the practice of this culture is not a simple repetition of what has been transmitted; it is continuously reconstructed to fulfill the requirements of both patient and healer. This constructed healing practice is culturally accepted by those who are involved because they share some basic cultural meanings. The paper shows that familiar symbols practiced in everyday life can be important cultural capital for a healer when mobilizing and reconstructing Northern Thai healing.

Note

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