



The Spiritual Healing of Traditional Thailand



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CHIANG MAI: CENTER OF TRADITIONAL THAI HEALING

Chiang Mai, nicknamed “The Rose of the North,” is the capital of Thailand’s northwestern region. This area was for centuries the nation-state of Lanna, a separate entity from the Siamese kingdoms of central Thailand. As the old name four Southeast Asia, Indochina, would suggest, this entire region historically has been at the crossroads between the two great cultures of the Indian subcontinent and imperial China, and nowhere is this more apparent than in Chiang Mai. Erected on the Mae Ping River in 1296, the city historically linked China’s Silk Road to Southeast Asia, and long served as a cultural and commercial hub between the Muslim community in southern China’s Yunnan region, the Indian kingdoms of Burma, the Khmers in Cambodia, and the Theravada Buddhist people of central Thailand.





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Chiang Mai is Thailand's second city, with a huge tourist population, and as such it is modernizing much more quickly than other areas of the country. But despite this inevitability, the city continues to display tangible reminders of its rich multi-cultural heritage. The blocks of teak houses that are quickly disappearing in other Thai cities still seem to be thriving here. Pedestrian alleys paved with brick connect these neighborhoods to community temples and markets, and even staying in a downtown guest house, you can easily imagine you are in a small village instead of a city of well over a quarter of a million people. Chiang Mai is actually a nice blend of both worlds: 700-year-old structures, ancient temples, and quiet neighborhoods coexist alongside modern malls, hospitals, and all of the amenities and conveniences of life in the 21st century – all on a much smaller and more pleasant scale than Bangkok.

One of the most interesting aspects of Chiang Mai is its proximity to the Hill-Tribe regions. Just north of the city, the Golden Triangle is formed by the border between Thailand, Burma and Laos. The area's virgin forested mountains are the first foothills of the vast ranges that culminate in the Tibetan Plateau, many hundreds of miles to the northwest. This area is still as undeveloped as ever. The region's tribal population of roughly 700,000 people includes about 1200 villages belonging to six distinct tribes: the Karen, Hmong, Lahu, Akha, Lisu, Yao, and Lawa, all of which are related to the Tibetan people of the Himalayan highlands. In addition, there are large numbers of Burmese living in the mountain settlements, refugees fleeing the oppressive military government of Myanmar.

Most of the tribal villages still retain their traditional culture and gain their livelihood by wet-rice cultivation. In addition, Hill-Tribe families raise pigs and practice subsistence vegetable farming, and supplement their income with whatever cash they receive from marketing their handicrafts and other wares in Chiang Mai. Hill-Tribe artwork can be seen everywhere on the streets of the city. Hill-Tribe merchants in the Night Bazaar, catering to Thais and tourists alike, offer embroidery, batiks, silver jewelry, teak carvings, lacquerware, woven baskets, and antiques for sale.



The Spiritual Healing of Traditional Thailand



The Chiang Mai area is home to Hill-Tribe people, many of whom continue to observe traditional customs of dress and arts, demonstrating their beautiful silversmithing and loom-work.



A peacock dancer poses during the annual Flower Festival, a celebration of traditional Lanna culture.



More scenes from the Chiang Mai Flower Festival.





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In addition to the indigenous Hill-Tribe culture, other forces are at play in this colorful city. A large Chinese minority inhabits Chiang Mai (as in most other Thai cities) and the influence of this affluent group stretches to all areas of life. Almost everywhere—from storefronts to menus to product labels—one can see Chinese characters side by side with the Thai script.

The section of Chiang Mai consisting of predominantly Chinese businesses (known of course as Chinatown) is a thriving commercial district. This area, complete with flashing neon signs, Chinese-speaking proprietors, and late-night noodle shops, could be any Chinatown in the world. Situated along the west bank of the Mae Ping River, this area is one of the most colorful parts of the city and a thriving center for medicinal herbs.

Outside of Chinatown's huge Warorot Market, traditional Thai pharmacies offer an assortment of aromatic powders, herbal compresses, dried herbs, and pickled insects, which are popular panaceas for a whole range of ailments.

The Shivagakomarpaj Traditional Medicine Hospital

Chiang Mai is a center for the study and practice of traditional medicine of all types. There are Ayurvedic doctors, Chinese medical schools, and more Thai massage clinics per square kilometer than anywhere else in the country. Among these, the Shivagakomarpaj Traditional Medicine Hospital ranks as the foremost.

This facility, commonly known by its nickname "Old Medicine Hospital," is one of the most prestigious traditional medicine centers in Thailand, and was the first in Chiang Mai to open its doors to Western tourists wishing to learn Thai massage. Their 10-day course continues to be the best introductory class in Thai massage around. For those who speak Thai fluently, the hospital offers formal training programs in traditional Thai medicine which result in national licensure.





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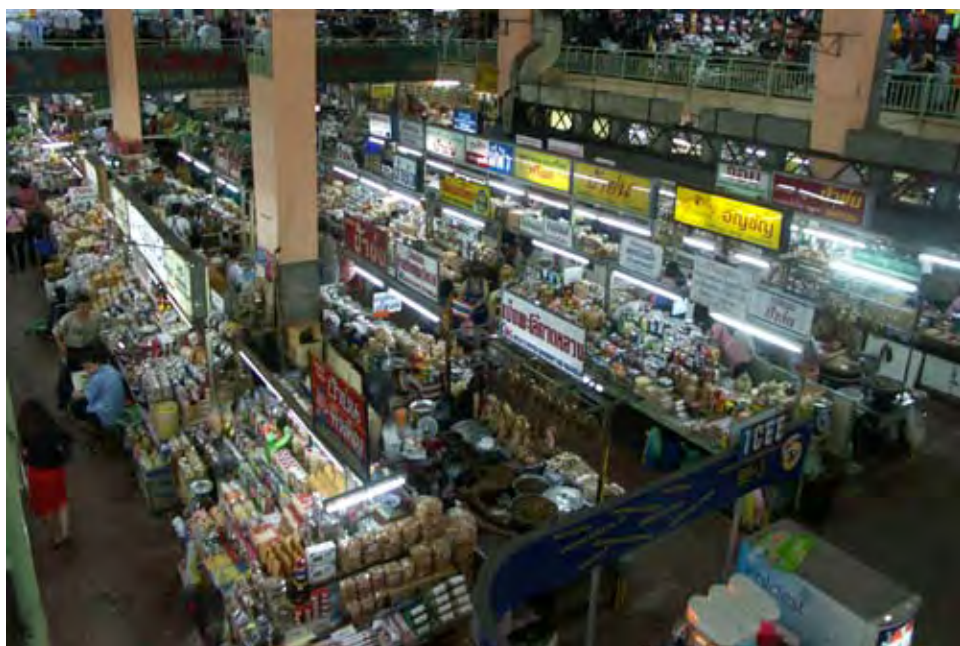
Exotic medicinal drinks are made with poisonous centipedes, snakes, and other insects preserved in alcohol. (Golden Triangle region.)



The Spiritual Healing of Traditional Thailand



A vendor of herbal medicine outside the Warorot market.



The huge center for herbs and foodstuffs inside Warorot.



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Making herbal compresses at a Chiang Mai herb shop. These women wear masks to avoid inhaling excessive camphor, which is medicinal in small doses but can cause headaches and nausea.

The institution is part of a non-profit charitable endeavor known as the Shivagakomarpaj Foundation, which provides free healthcare to neighboring villages around Chiang Mai on Buddhist holidays. Six times per year, the entire staff—including Western students—pile into vans and heads out into the countryside to treat the villagers with herbs and massage.

Shivagakomarpaj's main focus, however, is as traditional hospital. Patients are treated with massage, saunas, and traditional herbal remedies by *mo boran* (traditional doctors), and can receive the entire range of traditional Thai therapies under one roof. As mentioned in the introduction, the three branches of Thai medicine are represented in the very architecture of the hospital itself.



The Spiritual Healing of Traditional Thailand

The director of the Old Medicine Hospital was Ajahn Sintorn Chaichakan (Ajahn is an honorific title given to respected teachers, which could be translated as “Master”), who studied traditional Thai medicine at Wat Pho in the late 1950s. Upon completing the degree in 1958, he stayed on as a teacher for four more years. Before that time, Wat Pho did not teach Thai massage, and at the personal request of King Rama IX, Ajahn Sintorn was instrumental in starting the massage program to complement the herbal training Wat Pho had offered for many years.

In 1962, he returned to Chiang Mai and began to practice medicine at small dispensaries on the grounds of several city temples. At this time, the government of Thailand was only interested in supporting Western medicine, and Thai traditions were kept alive by their association with Buddhist institutions. Back in the north of Thailand,



Ajahn Sintorn Chaichakan, director and founder of the Shivagakomarpaj Traditional Medicine Hospital (1962-2005).



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The herbal medicine facility at the “Old Medicine Hospital.”

Ajahn Sintorn adapted his practice of massage and herbal medicine to incorporate aspects of northern culture. One important change he made to the Wat Pho massage routine was to slow it down, he says to suit the “laid-back style” of Chiang Mai natives. He also focused on local herbal knowledge, incorporating treatments that were not part of the Wat Pho tradition into his pharmacopoeia.

In 1973, Ajahn Sintorn purchased land just outside of Chiang Mai center and established the current hospital. With only a small grant from the government to start up, the facilities were quite small at that time, with only 10 hospital beds. From these humble beginnings, the hospital grew to the current size. In the 1990s, the program graduated an average of 60-70 Thai students per year in traditional medicine, and the Western students in short courses on Thai massage numbered well into the hundreds.





The Spiritual Healing of Traditional Thailand

However, in the last few years, the hospital has lost ground to both Western medical hospitals (several of which have opened up in the city, offering world-class services) and the dozens of less-qualified massage clinics and day spas that have sprung up around Chiang Mai to meet tourist demand. Many of these facilities are unlicensed and staffed by therapists and teachers with little training, and the visitor to Chiang Mai should thus be wary of taking courses or receiving massage outside of the well-known schools. Along with Wat Pho, the Old Medicine Hospital is part of both national and regional efforts to standardize and regulate the massage industry, to improve safety and authenticity of traditional healthcare in the years to come.

Ajahn Sintorn remained the director of the Old Medicine Hospital facility until his passing away on October 19th 2005 and the hospital's affairs are managed today by his sons, Suthat and Wasan. As the next generation assumes control of the hospital's affairs, some changes (such as a new website) have been made to help the hospital compete for students and clients in the modern marketplace. Nonetheless, the Chaichakan family has always prioritized tradition over financial success, and continues to adhere closely to the Thai model of healthcare. Those who are looking for a traditional experience of Thai medicine in a truly authentic environment – whether for study or for a short visit to the sauna – can do no better than the Old Medicine Hospital. Just remember on your way in to stop at the altar and give a wai to Jivaka!

Additional Resources

If you are interested in Chiang Mai, you may want to consult the following materials:

Hargreave, Oliver. Exploring Chiang Mai: City, Valley & Mountains. Chiang Mai: Within Books, 1998. – The most beautiful guidebook I've ever seen for Chiang Mai, as it is full of great photos. It covers the entire region surrounding the city, as well as topics like food and culture.





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The massage room at a Chiang Mai day spa. These types of facilities appeal to Westerners who are used to luxurious massage clinics back home.



A massage room at Shivagakomarpaj is not as fancy. In traditional Thailand, massage is a part of everyday life, and is usually practiced in a simple communal setting like this.

