

Traditional Medicine and Healing Practices of Northern Thailand

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Northern Thailand Traditional Medicine is a living tradition with roots stretching back many hundreds of years. Its tradition is oral, with training passed from teacher to student with no formal institutionalized training. The current traditional medicine base exists in rural areas and within the smaller villages that make up larger centers such as Greater Chiang Mai. The medicine practiced here is different than the more formalized Thai Traditional Medicine which is centered in Wat Po in Bangkok and which has, in more recent years, attracted new students and certainly has the larger share of any official governmental support. In addition to Traditional Medicine folk healers from the hilltribes, who migrated to Thailand over the past few hundred years, also continue their practice. The healing traditions of tribes such as the Lisu, Lahu, Hmong, Karen and Akha are also oral. While each hilltribe group has their own healing customs, they all share commonality with each other and with Lanna Thai culture.

Traditional Medicine Specialities

Mor Muang is the general term for local doctor and includes different specialists including *Mor Ya* (Herbalist), *Mor Pao* (Bone Blower), and *Mor Suang* (Spiritual Healer). These roles are dominated by males, and outsiders must first be accepted by a "master" and then must pass an initiation ceremony before being accepted into a specific medicine discipline. Although an individual may be multi-skilled, most healers focus on one particular specialty.

The *Mor Ya* (herbalist) covers the whole disease spectrum and formulates prescriptions for medicines based on herbs and other natural substances.

The *Mor Pao* (Bone Blower) specializes in wounds or broken bones. He often manipulates the bones and applies splints or poultices to the area and he applies incantations to the affected area by blowing with his breath. The *Mor Suang* (Spiritual Healer) performs a series of ceremonies and incantations by calling on the spiritual essence of his patient and connecting with his spirit guides for assistance. Sometimes the healer may refer the patient to another traditional healer or may prescribe specific actions to alleviate the underlying cause of the ailment.

Other traditional Lanna healers include *Mor Nuad* (Massage Healer). Thai massage is an integral part of traditional medicine, most often carried out within the family, but there are *mor nuad* who have special styles and offer unique treatments. *Mor Nuad* may be male or female. *Mor Tam Yae* (Midwives) are predominantly female and specialize in childbirth. Unfortunately, the regular use of midwives is decreasing in Thailand, especially in areas where western medicine is favored or most accessible. *Mor Cao Baan* (astrologers) are part of a mainly female healing tradition. They divine the cause of a particular ailment and may engage in "rubbing" ceremonies to effect a cure. They may also refer the client to another traditional medicine specialist once the cause has been divined.

The village Shaman (*Mor Pi*) and Soul Retriever (*Mor Kwan*) play essential roles in each village. The *Mor Pi* (Shaman) is a direct connection with the spirit world where ancestors and spirits dwell. The healers are believed to be chosen by the spirits themselves through a serious illness

or a near death experience or by divination among a group of village elders. Mostly, these healers use trance as a medium to connect with their ancestor spirits, and the treatment is either carried out in the spirit world or specific ceremonies are recommended to the client. The *Mor Kwan* (soul retriever), rescues the spirit of the client when it has been "stolen" by a vengeful spirit, thereby resulting in illness. Sometimes, very specific curative ceremonies are performed which may involve the extended family or the entire village.

Concepts of Traditional Medicine Causality

There is no tradition of surgery among traditional healers and therefore their concepts of causality of disease differ strongly from those in the western medical tradition. Wind and blood are two strong causative factors and are often closely connected. The wind (*lom*) surrounds us all and is easily affected. There may be too much wind or too little wind...or it may turn poisonous. Diseases that cause fainting, uncontrolled movement and heart pain are indicative of too much wind and are by far the most common. Certain foods and outside odors are often the cause of too much wind. Too little wind affects the mobility of limbs and is sometimes characterized by paralysis. Blood (*lyad*) is recognized as the basic fluid of the body but since healers have no tradition of surgery, the circulatory system is not well understood from a western sense. Blood may be considered to be normal, hot, cold, too much or too little and it can be the cause of many wind diseases.

Many diseases are affected by poison (*pid*). This could be poisoning from a venomous bite or ingestion of bad food but also the less tangible concept of "poison spirits". This poison also has an effect on blood and wind. Treatments involve isolating the poison, restricting its spread, and using herbal treatments to expel it from the system. This may also involve a prescribed diet. Diet restrictions are very integral to the whole curative process.

Hot and cold - the two opposites - are important in the classification of illness as well as the types of cures to apply. The client's perceptions of heat and cold are an important diagnostic tool for Thai healers. A fever, for example, may turn out to be hot, cold or neither of the two, and the healer proceeds with treatments indicated by these diagnoses. The general rule is that hot diseases are treated with cold medicines and vice-versa. The opposites of left/right and male/female are also important in diagnosis as well as the presence of "mother". The "mother" is an entity that enters the body and must be located and "killed" before a cure can be carried out. Most important is withholding the food that supports her and so diet becomes very important as part of the cure.

The Future

Traditional medicine was once outlawed with the advent of western medicine in Thailand a century ago. As a result, ancient knowledge was cast aside because practitioners were afraid of being arrested as charlatans. When the ban was lifted, what had continued underground came slowly out into the open. Knowledge continues to be passed on by word of mouth with no centralized teaching. Herbal remedies are closely held secrets, even to the extent that when certain recipes are written down, some of the most potent ingredients might be deliberately left out. Will North Thai Traditional Medicine survive? Among some middle class and educated Thais, traditional medicine has become trendy. But in many circles, the support is ambivalent at best. Some see traditional medicine as a way of extending medical coverage without much added cost or investment, yet in some areas traditional clinics are appearing alongside western medical clinics.

From the consumer's point of view, more is always better. The trend points toward most patients first seeking treatment by visiting a pharmacy, second by visiting a western style medical clinic, and third a traditional healer. Anecdotal evidence shows that some patients use all forms of medical help simultaneously. In the words of one healer, Phra Khru Uppakara Pattanakij, abbot of Nong Yah Nang Temple: "We want to offer ordinary people more choices in health care. And we can do this by respecting the wisdom of our ancestors and keeping it alive by practicing it."

Although it is struggling, North Thai Traditional Medicine has every chance of survival and new growth. One key to its success may be converting some of the traditional secretive practices into a centralized knowledge base, in addition to offering more training programs. The west has gone through a similar process in recent years and now alternative healing and traditional medicine are gaining popularity each year. There is every reason to hope for a similar pattern of growth in northern Thailand.