

The Traditional Medicine of North Thailand

North Thailand Traditional Medicine is a living tradition with its roots stretching back many hundreds of years.

Its tradition is oral, with training passed from traditional healer to student-healer with no formal institutionalized training. The current Traditional medicine base is mainly rural and within the smaller villages that make up larger centers such as Greater Chiang Mai.

It is different from the more formalised Thai Traditional Medicine which is centred on Wat Po in Bangkok and which has, in more recent years, attracted new students and certainly has the larger share of any “official support”.

Paralleling the North Thai Traditional Medicine are the Traditional Healers from the Hilltribes. They are comprised of different tribal groups who have migrated to Thailand over the past few hundred years. The traditional medicine traditions of the Lisu, Lahu, Hmong, Karen and Akha Hilltribes are also oral. Whilst each Hilltribe has their own traditional medicine they all share some commonality with each other and the Lanna Thai of North Thailand.

Traditional Medicine Specialities

Mor Muang is the general term for “local doctor” and encompasses different traditional medicine specialties including Mor Ya (Herbalist), Mor Pao (Bone Blower), Mor Suang (Spiritual Healer). A predominantly male tradition outsiders have to be accepted by a “master” and then pass an initiation ceremony before being accepted into that specific traditional medicine discipline. Although an individual may be multi skilled most individual healers focus on one particular specialty.

The Mor Ya (herbalist) covers the whole disease spectrum and formulates scripts based upon herbs and other natural substances as a part of their traditional medicine.

The Mor Pao (Bone Blower) specializes in wounds or broken bones. He often manipulates the bones and applies splints or poultices to the area around the fracture or wound and applies, by blowing, incantations to the affected area.

The Mor Suang (Spiritual Healer) performs a series of ceremonies and incantations through calling on the spiritual essence of the client and connects with his spirit guides for assistance. Sometimes the healer may include specific referral to another traditional healer specialty and/or specific actions in order to alleviate the underlying cause of the ailment.

Other traditional Lanna Thai traditional medicine practitioners include:

Mor Nuad (Massage) whilst massage is an integral part of Thai traditional medicine home remedies, most often within the family, there are masseurs who have specialist styles and treatments. Both male and female can be Mor Nuad.

Mor Tam Yae (Midwives) are predominantly female and specialize in childbirth. The training is passed down through the family. In areas easily within the reach of western medicine this traditional medicine is rapidly disappearing.

Mor Cao Baan (Astrologers) are part of a mainly female healer tradition. They divine the causation of a particular ailment and may apply specific “rubbing” ceremonies to effect a cure or refer the client to another traditional medicine specialist once the cause has been divined.

Although the names for the specialists may vary The North Thai Hilltribes also feature many specialists similar to the Lanna Thai and in addition there is a central role amongst many of the Hilltribes for the village Shaman (Mor Pi) and Soul Retriever (Mor Kwan).

The Mor Pi (Shaman) is the village connection with the spirit world where ancestors and spirits dwell. They are predominantly chosen by the spirits themselves through some near death experience or divination by a group of village elders. Mostly they use trance in order to connect with their guiding ancestor spirits and the treatment is effected in the spirit world and/or specific ceremonies are recommended to the client.

Whilst similar to the Mor Pi the Mor Kwan (soul retriever), rescues the spirit of the client when it has been “stolen away” by a vengeful spirit causing an illness. Very specific curative rights and ceremonies are performed sometimes involving the whole family or village.

Concepts of Traditional Medicine Causality

The Traditional Healers have no tradition of surgery 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 and 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 said to be the cause of too much wind. Too little wind affects the mobility of limbs and is characterized by paralysis.

Blood (lyad) is recognized as the basic fluid of the body but as the healers have no tradition of surgery, the circulatory system is not well understood in a western sense. It may be normal, hot, cold, too much or too little and can be said to be the cause of many wind diseases.

Many diseases are affected by poison (Pid). This could be the direct poisoning from a venomous bite or ingestion of bad food but also the less tangible aspect of “poison spirits”. This poison also has an affect on the blood and wind. Treatments are concentrated on isolating the poison, restricting its

spread, and on herbal treatments for expelling it from the system. This may also involve a very prescribed diet. Diet restrictions are very integral to the whole curative process.

Hot and Cold, the two opposites are important in 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 the healers. A fever for example may turn out to be hot, cold or neither and the healer proceeds with treatments indicated by these symptoms. The general rule is hot diseases are treated with cold medicines and visa versa.

The opposites of left and right, male and female are also important in diagnosis as well as the presence of "mother". The "mother" is a physical entity that enters the body and must be located and "killed" before a cure could be affected. Most important is withholding the food that supports her and once again diet becomes very important.

Causality can be summarized as: Trauma, Ingestion of materials alien to the body, Exterior contact with materials alien to the body, Bad food or food inappropriate to the client's body, Noxious odors or fumes, Insect and animal bites, Intestinal worms, Diseases caused by spirits, Psychological factors, Black magic, Climate, Seasons, Age of client, Karma.

In North Thai Traditional Medicine the knowledge of disease has grown out of experience and the knowledge used in their diagnosis and treatment is mainly from a symptomatic base.

The Future

Traditional medicine was, in fact, outlawed as unscientific with the advent of western medicine in Thailand a century ago. As a result, the ancient knowledge was cast aside because practitioners were afraid of being arrested as charlatans. It was only recently that the ban was lifted and what had continued underground came slowly out into the open.

The tradition of knowledge is passed on by word of mouth with no centralized teaching. Herbal remedies are closely held secrets, even to the fact that when recipes are written down some of the most potent ingredients might be deliberately left out. Students learned from one "master", usually in a narrow degree of specialty, and then widened their studies by working with more "masters" as time went on and circumstances allowed.

Will North Thai Traditional Medicine survive? In some middle class and more educated circles traditional medicine has become "trendy" and has received some support whilst in most Government Circles the support is ambivalent at best. Some see traditional medicine as a way of extending medical coverage without the cost or investment whilst in some areas traditional clinics are growing up along side the western medical centers.

From the client's point of view, more is better. More choice! The trend points towards clients seeking treatment along the lines of first visiting a pharmacy, second a western style medical clinic and third a traditional healer. Anecdotal evidence shows clients using 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 struggling, North Thai Traditional Medicine has every chance of survival and strengthening. A great influence on its success will be the healers and whether they can change some of their traditional secretive practices in order to create a centralized healing knowledge base and training program. We, in the west, have gone through a similar process in our past and now alternative healing and traditional medicine is gaining popularity each year. There is every reason to hope for a similar response in North Thailand