

Herbal culture

Ya dom

Whether it's an over-the-counter form of Ya dom (medicinal inhaler), such as Poi Sian, or a rurally-produced version, Thais just can't seem to get enough of this form of samun phrai (traditional herbal medicine)

James Vernon

A first-time visitor to the kingdom may encounter the phenomenon during a taxi ride from the airport to a downtown hotel. Maybe they'll see it again the very next morning while eating breakfast at a local restaurant or food stall.

No, it isn't a case of the whole population suffering from nasal congestion, nor are people participating in some strange kind of a mass drug high. What you are seeing is a popular form of *samun phrai*, or traditional herbal medicine, known as *ya dom*, which literally means medicinal inhaler. You can find these for sale next to cash registers in pharmacies and convenience stores nationwide.

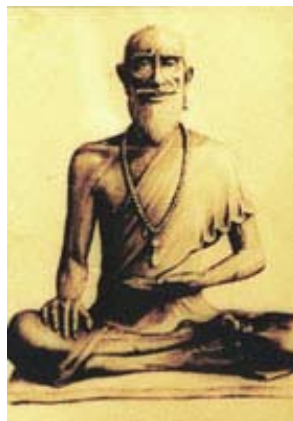
Deep historical roots

The inhalers come in various shapes and sizes, from more commercial brands, such as Poy Sian, to more traditional versions featuring actual herbs. The latter were once more prominent in the provinces, but are now becoming increasingly popular in Bangkok.

The roots of *ya dom*, like traditional Thai medicine, can be traced back to 2,500 years ago to the time of Gotama the Buddha.

Known as the "father" doctor of Thai medicine, Shivago Komaraphat (or Jivaka Kumar Bhaccha in Sanskrit), was the physician for the original Buddhist order of monks and nuns.

Since then, Chinese and Khmer methods, as well as remedies produced by hill tribes, have influenced traditional Thai herbal medicine. In this sense, the exact origins remain somewhat obscured.



Doctor Jivaka Kumar Bhaccha

Herbal tradition turned pop culture

Traditional Thai medicine is made up of two distinct camps - Royal Thai and rural.

The Royal Thai branch is a mixture of Ayurvedic and Western concepts and delivers a formal theory with regard to diseases, symptoms, and treatments.

Whereas both forms overlap when it comes to the use of herbs and the terminology used, the rural (and hilltribe) traditions tend to be more informal, relying to a greater extent on the “healing” powers of individuals and the passing on of such knowledge verbally.

Traditional ya dom inhalant mixtures under the Royal Thai branch are taught at the temple of Wat Pho in Bangkok, while literally thousands of other forms, in addition to commercial brands, can be found throughout the country. There are probably as many versions as there are practitioners of herbal medicine and healers.

We quizzed a few local pharmacists to try and establish just why various forms of ya dom are popular throughout the country.

“Ya dom has been in use here for ages. If you visit the Royal Palace, you’ll even see people there using more traditional inhalers. It’s always been used here,” said Somchai Panthaveekiat, 66, the owner of a small Bangkok pharmacy.

“You see many types [of inhalers] at drugstores, but the all-natural, herbal types are the best,” he says. He said he had been familiar with the inhaler, “for as long I can remember”.



Morakot Sang-aram, 25, a pharmacist at a branch of Boots in Bangkok, says that she has also been familiar with the inhaler since being a child, although she doesn’t use them herself.

“No one in particular introduced me to ya dom. You just grow up seeing people around you using it.”

She says the increasing popularity of “health-conscious” products has led to all-natural herbal inhalers becoming particularly popular.

“You see people here using inhalers everywhere. I never saw anyone using them in Germany or New Zealand. It’s a kind of ‘fashion’ thing ... the more natural, herbal types are becoming increasingly popular, since they boast more natural ingredients.”

It’s also likely that several environmental factors contribute to its popularity among city dwellers.

“The streets of Bangkok are filled with many foul smells. People use ya dom as a way of masking those smells,” Somchai said. “Pollution makes people feel dizzy and often makes it difficult to breathe, so many people also use it to help.”

Broadly speaking, there are chemical-based or herbal forms of commercial ya dom available on the market. The Poy Sian brand is a popular form of chemical-based ya dom, featuring a mix of the oils of broneol, camphor, eucalyptus, and menthol.

Of the commercial herbal inhalers, Jarungjit is a popular brand, featuring pommelo and several other herbs, which are ground together.

The most popular ingredients in homemade mixtures or those produced in rural areas, are various chopped herbs. A common form includes a base of black pepper, camphor oil, citrus peel/pommelo, cloves, and mace. These are commonly packaged in a small jar or glass bottle.



Two types of herbal ya dom containing chopped herbs soaked in camphor oil.



From left to right: Jarungjit brand herbal inhaler containing ground herbs; Samun Phrai Mai Hom brand herbal inhaler containing chopped herbs; Poy Sian “chemical” brand inhaler; homemade herbal inhaler containing chopped herbs.

A 'societal addiction'?

Wit Sukhsamran, 30, a student and practitioner of traditional Thai medicine, has been studying with a Buddhist monk at Wat Suan Dok in Chiang Mai since he was a young boy. He says there aren't any addictive ingredients in the inhalers, although there are some specific physiological effects which could lead to addiction.

"The combination of camphor and menthol can have an effervescent effect, which can lead to an addiction among some users. Since the membrane between the nasal passage and brain is thin, it allows for quick absorption and nourishment of the brain. So, it's a more immediate effect. It is also this phenomenon that results in [unwholesome] acts, such as sniffing glue, becoming so addictive among users."



How does it provide relief?

According to Wit, ya dom works by stimulating nerve endings, which allows improved blood flow, which subsequently counters conditions of fatigue, nasal congestion, nausea, and vertigo.

The use of ya dom can have a similar effect, he says.

"Ya dom can act similarly, and it is supposed to. Basically, any substance that is inhaled through the nose can become addictive, including modern nasal sprays."

It should be pointed out that in comparison to popular global brands, Thai inhalers compare favorably (and are commonly used in different manners than in the West). Foreign brands (such as Vick's) contain the stimulant hormone Phenylephrine, while Thai inhalers don't.

So while at first glance it could easily be assumed that the widespread use of ya dom is a kind of society-wide addiction, it might be more accurate to conclude that its popularity is due to a combination of factors: a long-held cultural tradition (traditional Thai medicine); a counter to rapid industrialization (its use for countering foul urban smells, such as those generated by pollution); along with a fashionable consumer-driven trend towards "health consciousness".

Natural options in the city

It's possible to get your hands on some traditional, homemade, all natural herbal inhalers in small markets across Bangkok. YIA is one small company that distributes them, and you can find out more about their unique products by calling them at Tel: +66 (0)2 704 8202, or +66 (0)81 859 1803 (mobile).

Special thanks to C. Pierce Salguero and Wit Sukhsamran for their contribution to this article.

For those interested in further information about traditional Thai medicine, C. Pierce Salguero runs a resource site for teachers, students, practitioners, and academic researchers of Thai massage and traditional Thai medicine at taomountain.org.

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