

A Tribute to Mama Nit Chaimongkol

By Anne Marie Golla

Thailand lost one of the legends of Northern Thai massage when “Mama Nit” Chaimongkol passed away on August 24, 2015 at the age of 83. She had suffered a stroke a few months before her death, which left her in the hospital.

Mama Nit loved teaching her art. Even after she stopped holding regular classes due to old age and weakening health, she continued to welcome visitors, and sometimes even gave impromptu classes in her home in Nong Hoy. During the last two years of her life, a group of people had been paying respect and visiting her regularly, including many from Russia who studied with one of her students in Moscow. She would usually be sitting in her chair by the porch, a tiny woman with her hair cropped in a short pixie cut. Her face would light up when visitors came. She insisted that we call her *yaay* – grandmother. Her friend and caregiver, Pa Noi, was usually with her, and would offer food or tea to the visitors. Mama Nit’s hands were always moving, seeking out the arms of guests to instinctively massage them. Her hands were surprisingly small and delicate – birdlike is an apt description – for someone with a reputation for doing very strong *jap sen* thumbing work. They remained strong, and they carried a surprising energy. As her sight and hearing became weaker, her hands became her main way for “seeing.” When she started working, she would take off her glasses and a peaceful expression would settle on her face. Pa Noi said that Mama Nit even massaged her doctor when she went to the hospital for her dialysis treatments.



Nit Chaimongkol, known as Mama Nit, was born around 1932 in Sukhotai. She had an early interest in traditional healing. As a girl, her grandfather would ask her to walk on his back and massage his arms. No one taught her what to do, she just did what she thought would be good and discovered she had a feel for it. She said this intuitive approach is the basis of her technique. The grandfather was a traditional Chinese doctor and acupuncturist and sometimes would direct her to press specific points to help him. Thus, although she never formally studied acupuncture, she learned the traditional Chinese meridians and pressure points, which later became an element in her training in addition to the Thai *sen* lines. Her mother was a traditional midwife, and Mama Nit remembered accompanying her as she made her visits.

When Nit was young, it wasn’t considered appropriate for a young woman to enter massage as a profession, as it might put her in contact with bad energy or bad intentions from male clients. Only older women could respectfully do massage outside the family. Nit pursued formal training in Thai Massage in Bangkok at Wat Chettuwan Temple and at Wat Po in Bangkok, and at the Northern Region Herbal Institute. However, her husband didn’t want her to do massage professionally. Because of that, she made food at home and sold it at Suan Dok hospital. Pa Noi insists she was the best cook of traditional Thai sweets in town. She still did some bodywork with women; giving herbal compress treatments to women after birth. Traditionally, women in Thailand entered *yoo fai*, a period of rest after childbirth during which they lay on a bamboo bed with a pan of coals underneath to produce heat, and also pots of boiling water with healing herbs such as lemongrass, *plai*, and turmeric so that the steam would rise and warm the woman’s body. She used the compresses as part of this healing process.

When Nit was in her late 30's or early 40's, her husband passed away. She was left with six children to care for on her own. It was then that she decided to focus on massage. She did both general Thai massage, which is intended to relax the entire body, as well as *jap sen*, or plucking the *sen*, which was focused on specific areas of injury and intended to drive pain out of the body. She uses her whole hand when she does *jap sen*, plucking the *sen* lines with the thumb while pressing in with the fingers. She became known for very energetic, strong work which used the entire body, working along the energy lines and working the wind gates. She also did strong visceral work. Male students from the old days recall that she also did *karzai* (genital massage) which are remembered as "intense." Nit taught both traditional Thai massage and *jap sen* work as well as acupressure points. She has a fluid approach that emphasizes good sensation and energy, and very precise palpation of tendons and muscles.

Mama Nit used both Chinese and Thai herbs for healing. Herbs are good for the stomach, and also help the muscles relax. Once when she showed me an herbal remedy for inflamed skin consisting of pink chalk and turmeric root, she recalled how when she was a girl this kind of medicine was the only kind people had – there were no "Western" doctors. People had to know how to help themselves with what they could find in nature. She always kept a bag of dried aromatic herbs at hand, including lemongrass, *plai*, turmeric root (*khameen*), and camphor. The herbs can be boiled in water and the steam inhaled. She took a variety of Chinese herbs for her own care. She would often invite visitor to sample her stock, tapping a bit of the powder into their palm and gesturing to eat it. This was usually accompanied by a lively commentary on which preparations were most tasty and which smelled good or bad. Pa Noi would prepare a dark blackish paste into hot water to make a strong invigorating drink, tasting of turmeric, dried chili, and camphor.

Shortly before her stroke, we asked Mama Nit how she had been able to do Thai massage for so long. She said it was important to have good technique and good body positioning, so that the therapist isn't putting strain on her own body. The movement should always be easy, and not held for too long to keep the energy from getting stuck. One shouldn't work with muscular tension or a lot of effort. More than once when I came in she told me "Relax your shoulders! You won't last 30 minutes like that!" To protect against energy from clients, she recommended washing the hands in water after a massage. She also felt that respect for teachers was important to protect against bad energy. In addition to Shivago Kormarpaj or Mor Shiwok as he is known, she also honored Pha Si Suriyothai (Somdet Phra Sri Suriyothai), a historic queen of Ayutthaya who died defending her husband the King in battle against the Burmese in 1548. Nit's image of Pha Si Suriyothai Thai showed a beautiful woman in historic garb brandishing a sword and standing in front of an elephant.



In the last two years before her death, a small group, mostly Russians, had been regularly visiting and checking in on Mama Nit when they were in Chiang Mai. Most had never studied with her; some had earlier studied with one of her students. This group kept in touch via Facebook about how she was doing for those out of the country, when someone left, they tried to find someone else to go out. After she was in the hospital, some people continued to visit her almost daily when they were able. Visiting Mama Nit was an opportunity for us to learn from her energy and presence, to practice *metta*, and to pay respect and give back to teachers. Last year, a fund drive was organized to help her with some of her medical and living costs, as she no longer had income from teaching. She was very touched by this effort and that her students and even non-students from all over the world remembered her and wanted to help her, and enjoyed looking at the photos and messages people sent. She always used to say, “a little bit from a lot of people.” She didn’t want to be a burden, and it made her happy that the money came not from one person, but from a collaborative effort of many. Many thanks to all who helped her with their visits, with contributions, and with good intentions.

NOTE: Thanks to Tick Jitkuekul, a graduate student at Chiang Mai University, who helped by visiting Mama Nit with us and translating a conversation with her in the first half of 2015. Most of the details mentioned in this article came from that conversation.