Fractured Bone, Fractured Knowledge

The transmission of northern Thai bone healing in the time of *khwm thansamai*

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Abstract

This research was conducted from the end of May to the first week of June in 2005 in Ban Mae Guang, a village near the city of Chiang Mai in the northern part of Thailand. The aims of this study are to understand the transmission of bone healing knowledge, the medical practices of the descendants of a female bone healer, and the ongoing phenomena that occur when the holistic and complicated symbolic healing of a female bone healer is separately transmitted to her descendants. The crucial question of this thesis is how these descendants create their knowledge to fulfill the need of their patients and to legitimize themselves as healers in the context of northern Thai modernity or khwam thansamai.

An informal conversation, a combination of intensive observation and in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions were conducted to gain insight the perspective of the bone healer’s descendants, their patients and the villagers.

I have concluded that the bone healing knowledge is embodied in the descendants of a female bone healer through their active participation in actual healing and ritual practices. Becoming a bone healer requires according to the northern Thai perspective not only treatment skills, but also the ability to communicate with the supernatural powers and being a person who contributes to his or her community. Becoming a healer is therefore a socio-cultural construction that requires knowledgeable skills under moral and social control. Since some degree of the knowledge about the interrelated system of bone, muscles and sen – the invisible lines that pass across the body and link muscles and bones – and that of the spiritual belief are embodied in everyday life activities of northern Thai, apprenticeship is therefore the experiencing and reproducing the existence of northern Thai reality.

This shared culture is also communicated explicitly and implicitly between healers and patients during treatment. The bone healing is extremely powerful when it is situated in the context in which the familiar and meaningful symbols in the northern Thai daily life is condensed and encapsulated, such as the mixture and hierarchy of Buddhism and spirit beliefs in the house of a female bone healer and the local mat created by the new healers as a ritual stage of healing in the house of the patient. Although after the death of a female bone
healer the knowledge has been separated among her daughters and son, this knowledge can be reintegrated and reinvented in relation to the context of *khwam thansamai*. Besides providing treatment of bone fracture at the house of a patient on a local mat as already mentioned, the marvelous stories of the powerful spirit of the female bone healer who has still supported them during treatment is another creation. It should be noted that the politics of becoming an authentic successor of a female bone healer is implicitly communicated and negotiated by referring to the spiritual belief. According to this study, it can be concluded that the familiar symbols in daily life are the crucial cultural capital that the northern Thai, including the bone healers, mobilize and recreate to deal with the complicated life in the period of *khwam thansamai*. 
Preface

As a northern Thai woman who grew up during a period of rapid change in the village and who has been relatively more exposed to modern education than other villagers, the experience of studying bone healing treatment has allowed me to understand more about myself and my culture. Many times in discussion my advisors, Dr. Ria Reis and Dr. Han ten Brummelhuis, asked questions which also made me reflect about myself: ‘Who is confused in modernity, the researcher or the villagers? Do you think that western theory can explain your culture?’ These are the crucial questions that induced me to think deeply about myself and certainly about my study.

Although I had collected data for almost one year before studying in AMMA, six weeks of fieldwork study and six weeks of thesis writing are the crucial period to force me to concentrate and attempt to understand northern Thai culture in the change of modernity or khwam thansamai. The more I attempt to interpret and understand my data the more I realize the richness and power of northern Thai culture that are embodied in everyday life activities and the potential of the local people to mobilize and improvise that cultural capital to cope with the complications of modern life.

I would like to thank the female bone healer, her children and niece, their patients and the villagers in Ban Mae Guang for their assistance and kindness. Without all of them, I could not have had such a valuable experience and knowledge. I wish to express my gratitude to my parents who, for almost one year, had to stay alone during working days without receiving any care from me. Dr. M.R. Akin Rabibhadana, Dr. Chayan Vaddhanaphuti and Dr. Uthaiwan Khanchanakamol always gave me suggestions and support during my study for almost more than ten years. I thank Emily Rosenberg who kindly corrected my English.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

This thesis is an ethnographic study of the transmission of northern Thai healing knowledge from a female bone healer to her descendants in the specific context of northern Thai modernity or khwam thansamai. Although the study focuses on the practice of traditional medical knowledge in everyday life, the broad Northern Thai historical and cultural context should also be considered. Therefore the first part of this chapter provides a general background of northern Thai history and culture, which relates to the cultural concept of health and illness and the knowledge of bone healing. The second part consists of a literature review related to modernity and its influences in general, and khwam thansamai in Thailand and northern Thailand specifically, and a theoretical review about symbolic healing and ritual performance in everyday life practice.

The history of the Northern Thai

Northern Thai or yuan are an ethnic Tai group who inhabit the lowland of northern Thailand, mostly in the provinces of Chiang Rai, Chiang Mai, Lamphun, Lampang, Phayao, Phrae, and Nan. They call themselves khon muang (muang people), which comes from the word for their traditional territorial political entities called muang. They thus differentiate themselves from the hill tribes who occupy the forested area of the mountains and from other Tai groups including the central Thai (Rhum 1987: 1-2). In the period lasting from the late thirteenth to the mid-sixteenth century, most of the major polities of northern Thailand were organized into a single kingdom called Lanna, of which Chiang Mai was the central city. Lanna had its own king and was independent until it came under the influence of Burma in 1558, and remained in that position for two centuries (ibid.: 4-7).

The history of conflicts with the Burmese and other kingdoms brought also some cultural exchanges, and the long-term influence of Theravada Buddhism, Hinduism, and Brahmanism has left to the northern Thai a heritage of cultural, spiritual and religious eclecticism. Moreover, a relatively close historical relationship between the people of northern Thailand and the Shan in Burma and Yunnan (China), and considerable migration between provinces have added to the
cultural variety of northern Thailand (ibid.: 7). It should be noted that the culture of the northern Thai in general is quite different from cultures of other parts of Thailand. This can be seen, for example, from the typical spoken language (kham muang), written language (tau muang), music and dance that more closely resemble other Tai ethnic groups in Burma, China, Laos and Vietnam. In addition, northern Thai art and architecture such as the Buddhist statues and house construction show some influences from Burma. It is therefore no surprise that northern Thai traditional culture, as well as northern Thai medicine, are mixtures of multiple cultural beliefs and are based on dynamic and eclectic magic-religious beliefs. This dynamic history makes northern Thai culture and medical ideas and practices quite different from those of the central Thai.

Health and illness in northern Thai belief

Medical ideas and practices of the northern Thai or khon muang are based on an idea of the position of a person in khon muang cosmology. This basic (khon muang) notion of personhood is characterized by the body-khwan dichotomy. It forms a double pair of oppositions with the moral inside’-‘powerful outside’ dichotomy, which is the counter-balancing power of the individual and the social body. Both oppositions are crucial schemas for the explanation of health and illness. The dynamic equilibrium between body and khwan, and between moral inside and external power brings about a healthy life of khon muang.

Body-khwan dichotomy

The dichotomy of body and khwan (a life essence or soul) in northern Thai belief is quite different from the body-mind dichotomy in western culture. The body in northern Thai theory is composed of four elements (that): earth, water, wind, and fire; and thirty-two physical components (akhan) – hair, body-hair, nails, teeth, skin, muscles, tendons, bones, bone epitheliums, kidneys, liver, fascias, spleen, lungs, colon, intestine, stomach, stool, bile, phlegm, blood, sweat, solid fat, tears, liquid fat, saliva, mucus, synovial fluid, urine and brain. Each physical component has its essential element called khwan. Therefore, a body in the northern Thai concept has thirty-two khwan. In a normal state the four elements rest in balance (Brun and Schumacher 1994: 12) and the thirty-two khwan are connected to the body. However, the specific
nature of *khwan* is determined by fluidity, its ease of going out of the body, and vulnerability to external power. *Khwan* is always deeply connected to beloved things, places and persons. For example if people lose their beloved persons such as a wife, husband, child or parent, or if they lose their loved properties such as a ring or necklace that has been continually worn for a long time, they will also lose their *khwan*. *Khwan* easily escapes from the body in critical moments such as in fright, pain, misfortune, anxiety, affliction, and illness (Tanabe 2002: 44-45). It could be caught and hurt by external powers such as bad spirits and black magic. People believe that some physical components such as hair, nails or even used clothes that have been in touch with a person’s skin can be used for doing black magic.

When people get sick, feel uncomfortable or suffer from unpredictable conditions, ritual ceremonies for bringing *khwan* back to the body will be organized. It can be a simple ritual ceremony that people practice in everyday life such as only a light touching of a persons’ body and saying in ordinary words that ‘*khwan* comes back’ when the children sleep, or having a magic spell-blown thread tied around a person’s wrist by the parents or grandparents, if the problems are not very serious, such as falling from a ladder or having bad dreams. On the other hand, if people are faced with critical problems such as car accidents or chronic illness, large and complicated ritual ceremonies that need traditional healers’ knowledge will be organized. There are also ritual ceremonies to empower people when they are concerned about facing an uncertain situation, such as leaving home to find a job in the big city. These ritual ceremonies are organized to call all *khwan* that may have escaped back and tie them to the body, so that the person will have a strong inner power to face the dangerous outside world.

**THE MORAL INSIDE VERSUS THE POWERFUL OUTSIDE**

As mentioned above, *khwan* tends to be connected to beloved persons, places and properties, thus the body-*khwan* dichotomy cannot be separated from a person’s social relations. In northern Thai culture, social relations are complemented and strongly influenced by spiritual beliefs (Tanabe 2002). It means that a person in *khon muang* belief is not an individual but a social person. He or she has been linked to the matrifocal ancestor spirit (*phi pu ya*) of the matrilineal kin group, and locally tied to his village spirits and his community spirits (*phi ban* and *phi muang*). Important ceremonies are routinely practiced to create a harmonious equilibrium between a person, the
complex web of family, kin and community relations, and unpredictable external powers. These ritual ceremonies are the worship of phi pu ya, phi ban and phi muang. The different layers of spiritual ties can be seen as moral controls of khon muang’s behavior. If these spiritual ties are disturbed, illnesses or disasters may occur to persons, kin, or other people in those villages or cities.

For traditional Thai belief the cultural web linking families, groups and community is perceived as an unstably balanced safe place, whereas the world outside their community is potentially dangerous and difficult to handle (Mulder 1985: 45-46). The belief in the safety inside the family, kin and community does not deny disturbance and unbalance, but it is accepted that all kinds of threatening powers can be controlled and that a temporarily stable home and community can be created. The concept of stability or balance in northern Thai also represents a dynamic, ever-changing balance between a person and the powerful dangerous outside world (Tanabe 2002: 44-45). Since potential outside danger is accepted, when people want to work or journey away from home, they can protect themselves by magic power. For example besides calling for khwan ritual ceremonies before leaving the community, they have to ask for protection from phi pu ya, phi siao ban, and, phi muang, learn some magic spells or carry magic amulets. This kind of practice mentioned by Niels Mulder, who explains about the Thai in general that they do not have a conception of a clear center of stability in the outside world, but find their stable center clearly in their own group, tribe, or community; and this center creates the respect for its traditions as the moral way of life (Mulder 1985: 46).

However, according to the influence of Brahmanic belief upon khon muang culture, a diversity of spirits that are organized in a balanced hierarchical order has been added to khon muang spiritual belief. Buddhist karma (kam), astrologically defined destiny (chata), misfortune (khro), and violation of customary practices (khut) are other sources of knowledge that can be used to interpret illness. Thus a person’s moral inside that is temporarily in balance within external powers can not only be obtained by behaving according to the traditional spiritual beliefs, but also by doing good deeds (good karma), avoiding violations of customary practice etc. It should be noted that traditional healers or mo muang base their healing on this eclectic local knowledge (Tanabe 2002: 44-45, Mulder 1985: 45-47).
The northern Thai bone healer

The northern Thai bone healer is one type of traditional healer who normally treats people who suffer from dislocated or fractured bones. The common treatments provided by bone healers are to reset the dislocated bones into their original positions and set the broken bone by fixing the area around the fracture with sticks that are tied together (wooden cast). Bone healers use specific charms to blow directly over the dislocated or fractured areas. It is explained that charms can stop bleeding, fix dislocated joints and induce fractured parts of bone to stick together. These charms are also blown over water that is offered to patients for drinking during their recovering process. In reality, however, it is quite difficult to distinguish bone healers from other traditional healers. This is because local knowledge is dynamic; each healer always mixes and creates his or her own set of treatment activities by integrating their knowledge with other types of knowledge.

Some bone healers, especially male bone healers also use herbal medicine and provide magical healing to expel bad spirits, while some female bone healers do not use herbal medicine, but always combine bone setting with massage therapy. The male bone healers therefore focus more on the power of charms while the female bone healers concern about the system of the bone and its related systems. Some healers, such as the female bone healer and her children in my research, combine three elements of treatment: bone relocation, spot-pressing massage to rearrange sen.

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1. There are no studies and documents that focus deeply on bone healing. Some documents such as a book from the National Institute for Thai Traditional Medicine (NITTM) only record different techniques of bone setting without mentioning magical and symbolic healing. Another book, ‘Traditional herbal medicine in northern Thailand’ written by Viggo Brun and Trond Schumacher in 1994, the only book that systematically records the disease and healing taxonomy of the northern Thai, classified a bone healer as ‘the blower’ who uses magical words and special local techniques to fix dislocated or fractured bones (Brun and Schumacher 1994: 35).

2. It is normally believed that all healing treatments involving magic are limited to the male area. This is because the bodies of women are polluted and can destroy the magical power, and most charms were written in northern Thai manuscripts which most of the women cannot read (Brun and Schumacher 1994: 37). However if a woman was born under a strong astrological constellation, she can get across this taboo. (Interview with lung Som, and aui Gong, Praya Meng Rai district, Chiang Rai on 1 December 2003, and ui nhan Khwai, Chiang Mai, on 26 May 2005)

3. Sen is the invisible lines that pass across the body and link muscles and bones.
and egg-rubbing to remove toxic substances (*pid*) congested in painful areas. The egg-rubbing treatment has also been provided in Burma and Vietnam and among some ethnic groups in southern China. They also combine their treatment with some biomedical techniques, such as using special elastic bandages (an elastic banding in the form of the figure eight) to fix fractured clavicle bones. In sum, northern Thai bone healers provide integrated physical, magical and, sometimes herbal treatments.

Although northern Thai bone healers provide bone setting treatment like biomedical doctors, it is rather different from the biomedical knowledge I mentioned before. Regarding the structure of bones and related elements, their knowledge is a kind of imaginative knowledge of the human anatomy that bone healers and ordinary northern Thai share collectively. This knowledge is not recorded in northern Thai manuscripts as is the case with herbal and magical knowledge. Although bone healers generally explain the human skeleton similarly to biomedical doctors, the process of gaining that knowledge is totally different. While biomedical doctors gain knowledge from anatomical dissections, charts of the skeleton or X-ray photographs, bone healers imaginatively construct this knowledge from touching and exploring peoples’ bodies with their hands. Thus, it is not surprising that northern Thai bone healers have more imaginative explanations of the physical body. The body is not only composed of bones, muscles and ligaments, but also of *sen*, invisible lines that pass through muscles and are attached to joints. A balanced physical body, according to this perspective, is an integrated balance of bones, muscles, ligaments and *sen*. Moreover, *sen* play the crucial role of balancing the physical body in northern Thai bone healing. Different degrees and duration of stiffness of *sen* cause an imbalance of the skeletal system in certain areas, which consequently causes pain and malfunction of bones and muscles to different degrees. The treatment provided to these patients is re-arrangement of the bone system in those areas and spot- massage by bone healers. It is important to note that lay northern Thai also learn this kind of human anatomy from everyday life practices while massaging their parents or the elderly. Thus, when they undergo treatment from traditional healers they can, more or less, understand the treatment procedure from their past memories.

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4 In an egg-rubbing treatment, the white part of a boiled egg is squeezed; a silver coin is put in the middle and wrapped with a handkerchief. After that, it is blown with charms (*khaitha*), and rubbed softly over the painful area. The silver coin turns black or green, which indicates the type of toxic substance in the patient’s body.
Although the basic concept of bone healing is to restore the balance of the physical body, this kind of treatment is also based on the northern Thai understanding that the health of a person is the dynamic balance between body – *khwan* and moral inside – external power outside. Bodily pain, bone fracture or dislocation can be diagnosed as a result of wrong behavior or an unbalanced relationship of those persons with other persons or spirits. In these cases, besides having physical treatments, people have to do certain ritual ceremonies to ask for spirits’ forgiveness and to restore the balance of personhood. These kinds of ceremonies might be suggested by bone healers or special healers such as spirit mediums, or chosen by patients themselves and their families. In a simple illness such as a simple fracture of an arm due to falling down from a ladder, the family can offer food to the spirits by themselves, but in a serious illness, such as a bone fracture from a car accident, a special healer is needed to do a ritual ceremony to offer special things to spirits and bringing *khwan* back to the patients’ bodies.

Therefore, northern Thai bone healers deal with patients’ problems not only in relation to their physical bodies, but also with regard to their social relations with other people and the spirit world. In a similar sense, Helman mentioned that in traditional systems of healing, practitioners are working not only with a concept of balance but also with their models of the body’s structure and function. These models usually link the individual body to the greater forces in the universe (Helman 2000: 20).

**Northern Thai modernity and the ambiguous notion of the person**

Generally, modernity is described by referring to two crucial events, the linkage to the global economy and the domination of scientific rational thinking. These two phenomena have highly affected people and cultures all over the world. There is a long tradition of philosophical writing in the 20th century which links modernity to a decline in certainty and a loss of meaningfulness (Bracken 2001:738). This is because in modernity people tend to be under the control of rational scientific knowledge or technological disciplines. When technology and scientific knowledge progress further however, the wide spread of rational systems of regulation and control which are invented under the deep belief in the power of scientific knowledge can no longer guarantee individual liberties and human welfare (Foucault 1984a, 1984b, Hetherington 1998). Moreover,
the rational ordering of space and time, which breaks the continuing traditional time and
traditional order of space, make people feel alienated. Anthony Giddens (1991) pointed to the
fundamental changes that are involved in the rapid disintegration of traditional society in late
modernity— the change from traditional time and space to clock-time or linear time and to the
complicated spaces in modern life, and the dis-embedding (from peoples’ belief and lifestyle) of
traditional social institutions. He also focused on self-reflexivity, which is the result of these two
fundamental changes. It is because people lose their meaning of self in modernity that they strive
to understand who they are in this complicated and ever-changing world.

However, one has to admit that the process of modernization and the way people give meaning to
modernity vary in different countries and cultures (see Rofel 1997). Even in the same culture but
different contexts, the meaning of modernity is altered. Here I would like to review how northern
Thailand has been involved in modernity, and what the consequences are for the northern Thai
notion of personhood. Although my main objective is to understand how local people give
meaning to, and live with modernity in daily life, it is also important to review the socio-cultural
and political changes at a macro level since such changes have influenced local belief and
everyday life practice of the northern Thai. The two important socio-political transformations
during modernization that have tremendously changed northern Thai traditional belief are the
establishment of the Thai nation-state during the twentieth century and the rapid change of Thai
culture and society in the globalization era beginning in the 1980s (Tanabe 1999: 95).

The first factor that influenced northern Thai beliefs is the construction of the Thai modern state.
In the long period of development of the Thai nation-state, many policies and interventions were
introduced by the state in order to unite Thai national society, and, at the same time, change the
whole country to be in line with the so-called modernity and development. Scientific discourse
and modernity discourses of khwam thansamai (modernity) and kaan patthana (development)
have been transmitted and applied all over the country. Rationalistic systems, such as
administrative, educational and health care systems, were set up to replace traditional beliefs and
practices that were considered obstacles to development. The traditional belief in body—khwan
and spirits has been confronted with a dominant rationality-based knowledge.
Biomedicine or modern medicine is one of the effective state apparatuses used to unify the country and transform local culture to modernity. The governmental health care system is organized hierarchically at several levels under the administration of the Ministry of Public Health. At the local level, sub-district health stations provide primary health care programs to all villages with the cooperation of village health volunteers. The scientific discourse of health and illness has been practiced through this structure, such as in family planning programs, maternal and child health care programs, immunization and vaccination programs, etc. Moreover, through legislation, the Thai nation-state has legally accepted biomedicine as a monopoly and strictly controls traditional medical practice. In 1923, a Medical Practices Control Act made registration of traditional healers compulsory, and the bureaucratic interference and harassment led many traditional healers to cease practicing. The development of traditional healing was discouraged through legislative acts as Controlling the Practice of Art of Healing in 1934, Medical Practice Act in 1967 and Drug Act in 1978 (Le Grand and Luechai 1989:14 cited in Whittaker 2000:59).

Not only biomedical discourse actively intervenes in northern Thai traditional beliefs, the standard non-magical ‘Thai’ traditional medicine constructed by elite central Thai in the 1980s has also been distributed to northern Thailand (Irvine 1982, Golomb 1985). At present, this intervention has been heavily promoted by the National Institute for Thai Traditional Medicine (NITTM). This institute supports activities and provides a lot of funds to encourage lay people, NGOs, local health care centers and hospitals to practice so-called ‘Thai’ traditional medicine. Therefore, at the practical level of therapeutics, there is an inescapable contest between two alternative medical systems – northern Thai or khon muang and ‘Thai’ traditional medical knowledge.

Besides the effect of the modern Thai nation-state establishment, the rapid growth of Thailand’s economy since the mid 1980s is another prominent factor that should be considered simultaneously in order to understand the complicated context with which the khon muang belief and medical knowledge have been confronted. An economic boom as well as the domination of the Thai nation state have not only affected Thai society at the macro level, but also in everyday life. The inflow of foreign investments and cash earning, spurring industries and business conglomerates, profoundly affected urban, sub-urban and rural areas. The dismantling of peasant
society can be seen clearly from the fact that most of the paddy fields in suburban area became real estate. People who earn a living from agricultural sectors move to work as wage laborers in industrial sectors temporarily or permanently. Within three years after the economic boom began, the large expenditure on consumer products like houses, cars, cell phone, televisions and luxuries caused a secondary boom in the domestic economy (Pasuk and Baker 1995: 162-164). In northern Thailand the drastic change in economic development took place around Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai and other big cities. Although in the second half of 1997 the bubble economic collapse affected many people in all economical classes (see Bello, et al. 1998), in 2001 Thai economic growth was revived again. Such fluctuated and unpredictable changes in life bring about feelings of insecurity and dependency on something powerful outside, which Thai people have almost no power to control. In this situation people tend to seek more or new power to give them hope and confidence.

Giddens (1991: 16-34, 2000: 54-68) explained in detail the effect of modernity in people’s lives. He acknowledged that modernity brings people out of their space and time of traditional cosmology. The circular and seasonal agricultural time is dominated by the linear time of the workplace. High technological media such as television, cell phone and internet provide people access to many places at the same moment. It creates a new meaning of place that never existed before. The more people are involved in modern rational systems such as factories or other modern organizations, the more their lives are controlled by a strict clock time. Comparing the modern younger generation to the elderly or those who spend most of their lifetime in agricultural society, the latter have more relaxing traditional time that is still linked to the traditional cosmology. However, there are differences in the pattern and degree of detachment to the traditional beliefs and cosmology among family and community members. For example, those who permanently migrate to other cities or foreign countries may not believe in the protection of local spirits any more, or some of them may still believe but cannot practice routine ritual ceremonies by themselves. Those who are only temporarily leaving the community to find a job, may still do ritual practices to ask for protection from the local spirits.

Most of the young generation, who do not physically move out of their communities but have been exposed to rational education systems and high technologies since they were children, may
not really feel attached to the *khon muang* traditional beliefs. These phenomena mean that the unity of family and community that once was linked to the same traditional beliefs has been threatened. However, people attempt to find their own ways to cope with new threats of life. Many groups or sub-groups of people who shared the same belief and lifestyle have intentionally and unintentionally formed new relationships. The elderly contribute small informal support in the form of group talks, complaints or traditional ritual ceremonies, while others groups who are more exposed to modernity try to find alternative explanations of their positions and their experiences in this modern world.

*Reinvented northern Thai traditions in modern life*

Giddens (1991) mentioned that all over the world, nostalgia for past happiness is a consequence of feeling ambiguity of the self in modernity. In northern Thailand there are also many invented social phenomena that attempt to link the alienated person to some collective meanings in the past. These phenomena can be related to the fact that, for some groups of people the old traditional beliefs could not fully function in solving their complicated lives. In order to find meaning for themselves, traditions and new cults have therefore been invented or reinvented by individual people, groups and organizations. The evocation of ‘authentic’ *khon muang*, in terms of revival of *khon muang* cultural heritage, is reinvented and proliferated by the local government organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and local villagers. Numerous activities are welcomed by almost all *khon muang*, such as dressing in *khon muang* style, using *khon muang* spoken language (*kham muang*) in everyday life, and teaching *khon muang* written language (*tau muang*). The so-called traditional *khon muang* art and performance are ubiquitous. For example, many houses and roofs of buildings are on the top of the gable decorated with a *kalae*, two long pieces of carved wood stuck together in an X- shape, which is generally seen as a symbol of *khon muang* architecture. The symbol of *khon muang*-ness is also commoditized to fulfill the consumption demands of alienated people who are seeking the past. Generally, these invented traditions have the common characteristic of providing imaginative *khon muang* cultural roots which are relevant used to cope with the uncertainties of modern life.

Not only tangible things have been reinvented to represent *khon muang* traditions, the elite groups constructed also a so-called authentic northern Thai or *khon muang* tradition, which they
not only distinguished from western but also from central Thai tradition. They invented the northern Thai calendrical rites, The Lanna Twelve Month Traditions as a guideline of traditional practice. Moreover, the municipality and the formal institutes of central government routinely practice the annual rite of ‘renewal of the good fortune of the city’ (seup chata muang) which once was organized by local people. At the same time the spirit mediums, who have increased by several hundreds of percentages in the past two or three decades, practice the annual ‘spirit praise ceremony’ (prapheni yok khru) (Morris 2002:69-70). The massive involvement of people in these new ritual ceremonies and spirit cults confirms that the alienated khon muang are earnestly seeking explanation of their lived experiences in a context of modernity.

Even though there are a few studies focusing on symbolic meanings of khon muang ritual practice in the changes of modernity, spirit medium cults seem to be the most attractive area of study (see Tanabe 1999, 2002, Morris 2002, Thawat 2003). The study that most interestingly reveals the reinvented tradition of the northern Thai in the time of modernity is that of Shigeharu Tanabe (1999). He mentioned five groups of tutelary spirits that possess spirit mediums. They are: (1) deities in khon muang mythologies and folktales such as Chao Luang Kham Dang, Chao Kho Mu Lek, Chao Khun Suk; (2) historical northern Thai personages who were believed to be persons who unite the Northern Thai state such as King Mangrai, Princess Chamadeve; (3) the Bangkok-based (central Thai) deities or Hindu gods such as Siva, Narai, Pra Phrom (Chao Pho Erawan); (4) historical figures that successfully changed Siam (the old name of Thailand) to a modern Thai nation state such as King Naresuan, King Chulalongkorn, Krom Luang Chumpon Khet Udomsak; and (5) other groups that are not confined to the mythology and the nation state but reflect diverse social experiences and globalized relations; these include spirits of hill dwelling minority groups such as the Yao and Lisu, or the spirit of Kwan-im (Guan-yin). (Tanabe 1999:56-57).

Tanabe also pointed to the wide range of services of spirit mediums, which not only provide traditional services such as divination and healing, but also provide flexible services to respond to the desires of clients and patients such as business consultation, love magic, lost properties etc. It is noticeable, however, that the studies of Tanabe (1999, 2002) and other studies such as Morris

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5 Lan-na is another term for northern Thai. Literally ‘lan’ means million and ‘na’ means paddy field. Therefore the word lanna translates literally as the region that has a large amount of fertile land.
(2002) and Thawat (2003) concentrate on explicit ritual (healing) practices of spirit mediums, which are relatively well organized and exotic, whereas symbolic healing that has been practiced by most traditional healers is based on tacit, and taken-for granted knowledge. The study of the *khon muang* medical knowledge in this tacit form of everyday life practice has suffered in the past from a lack of interest and will be the topic of this study.

In summary, the literature reviewed above aims to provide a broader understanding of how modernity has been involved in the everyday life of the northern Thai and it gives also an overview of various studies of northern Thai modernity. It should be clarified that this study does not focus on the macro level debate of northern Thai modernity, but on everyday life at the micro level, which reflects meanings of modernity given by a certain group of northern Thai. The specific group on which the study focuses is a group of patients of matrilineal descendants of a female bone healer, *ui* Chan. The main point of the study is to look at how this specific group, which consists of the son, daughter and niece and of *ui* Chan, and their patients, struggles with modern life (*khwam thansamai*), and how each descendant practices his or her symbolic healing in different contexts of *khwam thansamai*. However instead of strictly using the concept of modernity with its many (western) connotations, I will focus on the local concept, *khwam thansamai*.

According to Thongchai Winichakul (1994: 19) the term ‘modern’ (*samai mai*) usually implies a state of advancement, betterment, progress, even goodness or virtue. It also, in some sense, claims superiority over its counterpart – the premodern and traditional. However, when modernity has been replaced with the Thai term ‘*khwam thansamai*’, which literately means ‘going well with the changing period of time’, the term modernity has been brought into and was dominated by a Thai (northern Thai) perspective. Like in most languages, the meaning of ‘modern’ (*khwam thansamai*) has changed through time. When it was promoted by the government to raise up the Thai livelihood standard after the name change of the country from Siam to Thailand, *khwam thansamai* completely meant ‘going well with the western standards’. However, at the present time, people tend to question the western standards and the meaning of *khwam thansamai* in the sense of ‘going well with the changing period of time’, has been changed and adapted. Thai as well as northern Thai attempt to find a space between traditional
(boran) and modern (samai mai), which frequently has been called Thai (northern Thai) modernity (khwam thansamai baep khon Thai / khon muang). This implies an attempt of the Northern Thai to articulate the gray area between the dichotomy of traditional and modern (boran and samai mai). It is in this context, which can only be understood in the practice of local people, that my study is situated.

Symbolic healing and ritual performance

It is generally accepted that all illness and suffering involve people’s emotions and feelings. Therefore, every healing tradition, even biomedicine, is imbued with symbolic power (Kleinman 1980, 1988, Young 1987, Moerman and Jonas 2000, Helman 2000). Moerman (1985) focused on the powerful overlapping of symbolic meaning and human biology. He gave an example of the placebo effect in heart surgery, which seems to be a very mechanical treatment of western medicine, to convince us that no medical treatment is free from symbolic healing. He used the term ‘placebo effect’, which he defined as the ‘meaning response’, and pointed out that what we think, say, and know about the world can have a dramatic influence on our biology (Moerman, 2002:5). One of his arguments was that non-white Chinese Americans die significantly earlier than normal if they have a combination of a disease and a birth year that Chinese astrology and medicine consider ill-fated (Moerman and Jonas 2002). Symbolic power can be communicated even in the way the health care providers decorate their bodies. The white coat of a western doctor or the starched cap of the nurse do not only have a practical reason such as cleanliness and the prevention of infection, but also a social function, indicating their membership in a prestigious, powerful occupational group, with its own specific rights and privileges (Helman 2000: 12). Moreover, the health care providers’ manner (enthusiastic or not), their style (therapeutic or experimental) and language are all meaningful, and can be shown to affect the outcome of the treatment (Moerman and Jonas 2002).

The studies of Moerman and Helman mostly focus on symbolic aspects of western medicine that are expressed in medical settings, figures and manners of medical personnel, medical technologies, and especially in patient-healer communication. This micro and practical level approach is rarely used in the study of traditional healing. The studies of symbolic healing in
South East Asia, as well as in Thailand, mostly emphasized exotic ritual ceremonies. For example the study of Kapferer (1983) in Sri Lanka, which focused on the meaning of ritual performance in the Sinhalese Buddhist working class, describes and analyzes in detail how ritual performance provided symbolic meanings to patients, their kin groups, and other people in the community. The study pointed out that in this kind of ceremony, all steps of ritual healing had to be strictly prepared. The ceremonial area was set in every detail with meticulous attention. The exotic element was that the people who practiced the ceremony were dressed in costumes with demon-like masks. All of them were in trance and danced while special music was playing. The study of Spiro (1996[1978]) in Burma also focused on spirit possession and the healing of exorcists that looked exotic. People who were possessed by spirits behaved differently from their normal situation, for example, their voices changed. The attraction of exotic ritual healing leads to a neglect of the study of tacit symbolic healing that is usually performed in everyday life. The core issue of this tacit symbolism is the powerful embodiment of culture in everyday life, in which people’s behavior is taken-for-granted (Young 1987).

The power of symbols, or the power of peoples’ imagination in practice, is studied by many scholars who tried to understand how people react to modernity, such as by Foucault (1984a, 1984b) Hetherington (1998), Bourdieu (1977), Connerton (1989) and Young (1987). Foucault used the term ‘heterotopia’ to indicate intentionally and unintentionally constructed mythical space. He pointed out two important points. First, the mythical or sacred space is not something that is a totally new innovation, but was formerly constructed in history (Foucault 1984a: 22). Therefore, people who are members of or join a certain space share the same culture and history. Second, ‘heterotopias’ are constituted in practice and representation. Thus one can understand these spaces – heterotopias – by interpretation or ‘reading’ the system of representation and the ordering of such real sites (ibid.: 24).

Bourdieu is another scholar who focused on cultural power in practice. He revealed how culture is embodied and regulates people, and, in turn, how people actually practice cultural rules. According to his theory, an individual is not totally a free agent, but he or she practices under his
or her habitus— a shared cultural structure that is embodied in a person and in a certain group he or she is a member of. A person, however, has some ability to creatively represent him or herself to ‘improvise’ under the shared cultural rules (Bourdieu 1977: 78). These shared cultural rules were explained by Bourdieu as follows: it is a ‘structure embedded in the agents’ bodies in the form of mental disposition schemes of perception and thought (ibid.: 15). This common cultural rule is represented unconsciously in practice.

Connerton (1989) explained more about the imaginative aspect of human being on a practical level by focusing on the bodily practice in daily life as a strategy to convey the imagined and social memory of the past. Connerton’s main point is that social memory, which works continuously and effectively, is communicated by symbols or rituals embodied in everyday life, especially in bodily practices or habits such as postures and movement. He used the term habit-memory. Habit, in his concept, is not a sign, but it is an embodied experience. Bodily practice expressed as habit, a habitual pattern of life, is not something obvious. It is a certain performance – an expression of a complicated link of a certain kind of cultural practice that has been influenced by previous activities that are cultivated into a person’s body (Connerton 1989: 22,94-95) The body, in this perspective, is not only the physical body, but the space in which social, political and cultural memories have been continuously embedded. Therefore, the commemorative ceremonies, which are performed through habits or bodily automatics, such as gestures or dressing, are the effective means to bring recollection to people. The one who practices is not aware of his or her abilities. It is the sort of unnoticed skill of embodiment which has been automatically repeated.

While Connerton explained ritual performance in everyday life in general, Young (1987:382) pointed to the specific area of medicine. He focused on the traditional healing practices that are profoundly composed of the tacit, taken-for granted symbols that are practiced in everyday life. According to Young the non-scientific lay systems, which are fragmentary, incomplete, and contradictory, are valuable to study because they give the opportunity to healers and patients to

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6. Habitus is a system of durable transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary to attain them (Bourdieu 1990: 53).
create their own meanings (Young 1987:380). In order to understand this knowledge, it needs to be viewed in terms of the processes by which it is produced rather than in terms of its structure. Therefore, understanding the embodiment of culture and the way people practice their meaningful culture in the taken-for-granted way is, for Young, the crucial point. It has been suggested that in this approach it is important to concentrate on the symbolic practices at a micro level, especially on the process of patient-healer interaction and communication. These are, for example, the context of therapeutic settings, the symbolic and imaginative way of understanding a person’s body, the charisma of the healers that conforms to the patients’ expectations, the idioms and rhetoric of communication, the metaphor of maternal nurturance of female healers, and the symbolic meaning of the caring touch (see Kleinman 1988, McClain 1989, Wedenoja 1989, Bates 1995, Pratt 1981).

In this study, I will borrow the broader concept of culture in practice mentioned by Foucault, Bourdieu and Connerton, as a guideline to understand the transmission of the bone healing knowledge, the medical practices of the descendants of a female bone healer, and what will happen when the holistic and complicated symbolic healing of a female bone healer is separately transmitted to her descendants. The crucial question of this thesis will therefore be how these descendants create their knowledge to fulfill their patients’ needs and to legitimize themselves as healers in the context of *khwam thansamai*. 
Chapter 2

Methodology

As mentioned in the first chapter, my general interest is in practices of symbolic healing which are implicit in everyday life processes. In this chapter I would like to present the methodological approaches used to understand the following three related themes: the meaning of khwam thansamai or modernity from the perspective of local people, the process of becoming a healer in the northern Thai context and symbolic healing as practiced in the treatment of bone fractures and in a spot-pressing therapy.

This study being an ethnographic study and I myself being a northern Thai, I am aware of the advantages and disadvantages of doing anthropological fieldwork in my own culture. How I benefit from the advantages and attempt to overcome the disadvantages will be sketched in this chapter. Further, during my fieldwork a crucial development took place in which ui Chan’s descendants were struggling for being accepted as new healers. It was inevitable that my study and my position as a lecturer of Chiang Mai University studying abroad, was used by ui Chan’s descendants to legitimize themselves as good healers. These political aspects will also be mentioned in this chapter.

Research Participants

The participants of this research consist in particular of ui Chan’s descendants, her niece Pin who claims that she received her knowledge from ui Chan, their patients and families, and the villagers in Ban Mae Guang.

Some of the villagers acted as key informants and provided an understanding of the changes in the village during the sixty years of khwam thansamai. The meanings of khwam thansamai, how people deal with their life conditions in the context of khwam thansamai, and the meanings and expectations of a healer in these changing life conditions will be the main focus. First I decided to intensively study the three daughters, son and niece of ui Chan as research participants in order to get a complete understanding of the transmission of her knowledge. But about one month before I
started the collection of data. Chan’s elder daughter stopped providing treatment because she had become sick with colon cancer and diabetes. There are only four people left who still claim themselves to be her successor as healers: her two daughters, Sii and Suay, her son noi Duan, and her niece Pin. I found that almost all villagers considered Suay and noi Duan as healers. Therefore I chose them as my main key informants. Because of time limitations, I finally focused on the healing treatment of Suay more than on that of noi Duan, because I had less opportunity to interview and observe noi Duan during his treatments. He spent almost all the time working outside the village, whereas Suay, being a housewife, had more time to provide treatment at her mother’s house.

I attempted to establish good rapport with all the patients I met in this period of study and decided to include three previous patients who had had treatment for bone fracture or bone dislocation. Sixteen patients were finally my key informants; six of them got both bone healing treatment and spot-pressing massage (treatment of sen) from Suay and noi Duan, whereas ten patients only received spot-pressing massage from Suay. The detailed characteristics of all key informants are as follows:
The type of treatment and characteristics of patients

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of treatment</th>
<th>Characteristics of patients</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spot-pressing treatment or treatment of <em>sen</em></td>
<td>2 villagers from Ban Tha Khwai (<em>ui</em> Chan’s cousins)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(10 persons)</td>
<td>- Chantra, 55 year old woman, farmer (northern Thai)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Porn, 52 years old woman, housewife (northern Thai)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8 persons outside the village</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Kham, 28 year old man, laborer in a factory (Shan ethnicity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Miow, 28 year old woman, dressmaker (northern Thai)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Dam, 30 year old woman, worker in a department store (central Thai)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Kamol, 35 year old man, worker in a company (northern Thai)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Thim, 35 year old woman, owner of a small flower shop (northern Thai)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Chai, 47 year old man, owner of a big flower shop (central Thai)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Tai, 70 year old man, Thim’s father (Central Thai)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Somsak, 68 year old man, business man in the city of Chiang Mai</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combination of bone and <em>sen</em> treatment</td>
<td>5 villagers from the adjacent villages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(6 persons)</td>
<td>- Peth, 42 year old man (northern Thai)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Kiow, 50 year old woman (northern Thai)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Ma, 62 year old man (northern Thai)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Ta, 79 year old woman (northern Thai)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Dee, 95 year old woman (northern Thai)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>One highly educated man from this district</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Pong, 56 year old man, former government officer (northern Thai)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Position of the researcher

Doing ethnographic research at home one runs the risk of taking small but important issues for granted. Data in the field is highly influenced by the way a researcher positions his or herself and the way he or she is seen by key informants. Moreover, the background and life experiences of a researcher influence also how he or she grasps or interprets symbolic meanings. Therefore, before focusing on data collection in practice, my position in the field should be clarified.

I am a northern Thai from a village about two kilometers from Ban Mae Guang, the village of my study. The middle-aged groups and the older persons from my village used to have close relationships with those in Ban Mae Guang. This is due in part to the fact that in the past many marriages have taken place between persons from both villages, and people from these two villages and from other adjacent villages participated in almost all village ceremonies.

I began collecting data in June 2003 and stopped my first period of fieldwork in August 2004. At that time I decided to be completely open towards ui Chan, her children and niece about my own position of being a lecturer in the Faculty of Dentistry, a Ph.D. student in Chiang Mai University, and the daughter of a mother who lived in an adjacent village. They usually called me achan or lecturer and only sometimes they addressed me as mo or doctor. Suay and Pin introduced me to their patients as an achan and mo who was interested in their mother’s treatment practice. Since villagers in Ban Mae Guang are closely connected, within three months of my first research period almost half of the village knew me. When I visited and talked to them, I found that the middle-aged groups and the older persons in the village considered me as a member of their family. They always talked about the history of our village relationships, and asked me about my parents, my cousins, and other villagers in my home village. The long tradition of socio-cultural relations between the two villages and the long period of contact during my first period of research had already created a feeling of familiarity with ui Chan’s children and some villagers of Ban Mae Guang as soon as I started this six-week period of data collection.

After the death of ui Chan a kind of competition arose among her children and niece about the question who was to become her successor as a healer. Everyone attempted to convince me that
he or she was better than the others. Suay, noi Duan and his wife helped me a lot to collect data. They worried that when I could not observe and interview their patients I would be in trouble. They always asked me if I had enough information to write my thesis. Since I had to share my time to interview their patients at home and collect data from other villagers, I gave them my mobile phone number and they called me as soon as patients visited them. Sometimes I called them and asked whether they had any appointments with their patients, in order to make a good plan for data collection. Although noi Duan was very busy with his new work, the last day before I left the village he stopped his work for half a day to let me interview him, whereas I had told him that I only needed half an hour. I realized that by making an appointment I might lose an opportunity for the observation of the real context and actual treatment so that I sometimes preferred to visit them spontaneously.

Since being a local person may lead easily to ignore some familiar issues, I attempted to develop my sensitivity in the interpretation of symbols within a traditional healing treatment by visiting two other therapeutic settings: a central Thai massage center near Ban Mae Guang, which was often mentioned by the patients, and a spot-pressing massage therapy given by a famous male healer in another district. By observing and comparing the similarities and differences of the characteristics of healers, ritual practices and patient-healer relationships in these healing settings, I found that I could much better understand the treatment practiced by ui Chan and her descendants. Furthermore, when I myself had a problem with my leg, I used the chance to have spot-pressing massage from Suay and a male bone healer, which allowed me to find new topics for observing and interviewing Suay and her patients.

Doing a research in my own culture also brings many benefits. I was able to understand the deeper meanings of the local language and gained access to feelings that are only shared by people within the same culture, like the metaphor of money involved in the therapeutic fee (see Chapter 4), and the traditional meaning that is hidden in the lying position of a patient when Suay practices spot-pressing massage with her feet (see Chapter 5)
Data collection techniques

The data was gathered through informal conversation, focus group discussion, participant observation and in-depth interviews. The six-week-period of my data collection coincided with a short break of the local people in their work at the paddy fields. They were waiting for the rice harvest and preparing the young chilies they grow after the rice harvest. People were always gathered in some houses while talking together, which offered me a good opportunity to conduct informal conversations. The topic of the conversations, jumping from daily events to gossip of other people, including the son, daughters and niece of ui Chan, allowed me to understand local politics, daily interactions, and the villagers’ expectations and perceptions of ui Chan’s descendants. I also had conducted informal conversations with ui Chan’s children and their patients when we had lunch or ate mangoes together.

To understand more systematically how people of different generations perceived the changes of their village and the meanings of khwam thansamai, I combined the informal conversations with focus group discussions. From the informal conversations I got a general idea of the changes of Ban Mae Guang in the time of khwam thansamai and of the meanings of khwam thansamai. From this I prepared the outline for a conversation and then two informal focus group discussions were conducted, one with three older women and the other one with two men and one older man, under the rice granary of an old woman whom I usually visited. After that two other, more formal focus group discussions were conducted with five housewives, and with four boys and five girls at the house of a village head. The participants in the focus group discussion were selected based on who was available at that time.

Since the meaning of khwam thansamai is rather abstract, I began the conversation with daily life events and brought the discussion to more abstract issues. In a group of people we talked, for example, about the variety of housing styles in Ban Mae Guang and I asked to compare them and to describe which house was considered as samai mai (modern). We then continued to talk about khon thansamai (modern man) and other issues about khwam thansamai. In a male group, I began with asking about a meeting the night before and went through their daily lives and their concerns about life in this thansamai period.
To understand the meanings of healing in a ritual performance of new healers or symbolic communication between healers and patients, participant observation is a crucial method. The main themes of my observation were the explicit and implicit symbolic meanings in the patient-practitioner communication during the treatments of ui Chan’s daughter and her son. Since I had had an opportunity to observe the healing treatment of ui Chan and her daughter two years ago when ui Chan was still alive, I could notice the changes in context and ritual practice in comparison with the present time. I was aware that the ritual practices and symbolic communications conducted by healers as well as the contexts in which they take place, are never fixed. I therefore tried to observe the differences in detail and to identify the conditions that influenced those changes. Furthermore, these changes were brought in for further discussion as topics of the in-depth interviews.

Being a northern Thai I realized that I sometimes became aware of implicit or deep meanings that are shared within our culture. I attempted to explore these deep meanings by observation and in-depth interview of other villagers. When Suay, for example, spread her mat (sua) over the floor of her western style house, all people immediately arranged themselves to be ready for spot-pressing treatment. Only Suay, noi Duan and a patient were on the mat, the patient’s mother who was seventy-eight years old sat outside the mat, his wife who was older than me sat on the first step and I sat on the floor. I remember that it was the same arrangement that occurred in the healing setting at ui Chan’s house. I was fascinated by this unintentional arrangement. It represents many cultural embodiments, like the hierarchical system of Thai society and the acceptance of the power of healers, which I will discuss in Chapter 7. I tried to verify my feeling and interpretation by observing peoples’ behavior, in particular when, where and how they used a mat. I also conducted in-depth interviews to find out the implicit meanings of a mat in everyday life that could help to understand better Suay’s healing practices.

In-depth interviews were conducted with all four descendants of ui Chan and most of their patients. Since I finally focused on Suay, I spent more time to interview her. In order to understand the implicit symbolic ritual practices, I concentrated my interviews on themes that had appeared to be main topics in my observations. I interviewed all patients after they had
received treatment at *ui* Chan’s house. However, some of them were too busy to interview them immediately. I then chose seven from sixteen patients for an in-depth interview at their house. Five of them had received treatment from *ui* Chan’s daughter and son, both treatment of bone fracture and *sen* treatment, and two only *sen* treatment.

I mostly used a tape recorder and took some pictures after permission from the interviewee. I also wrote down relevant and interesting data and remarks, especially regarding the setting and the gestures of healers and patients. One of the patients had however undergone surgery at his epiglottis because of cancer and could not talk clearly. He answered my questions by writing down his responses on a piece of paper and his wife, who took care of him, also participated in the interview. After every interview I transcribed the data myself from the tape recorder. When I found interesting or unclear points I brought these issues up in the next in-depth interview.

*Ethical considerations and limitations of study*

Before data collection, I informed the participants about the objectives of my research, and asked their permission to observe and interview them. Tape recorder and camera were only used in cases in which they had allowed me to use them. In order to keep the confidentiality of all participants the names of participants are replaced with pseudonyms, and certain details that could identify them are altered or omitted.

Limited time is the main reason that I was forced to choose Suay as the main focus of my study and was not able to spend enough time to observe and interview the three other descendants of *ui* Chan. Consequently, I became involved into the politics among *ui* Chan’s daughters and her niece. Since I decided to spend my time on observing and interviewing Suay, the other daughters and niece of *ui* Chan thought that I was only interested in Suay’s treatment. They tried to convince me to spend more time with interviewing them, while Suay did not want me to talk with them because she always criticized them. Moreover, Suay attempted to convince me that she was the best healer. I tried to find out what exactly happened between her and her patients when I was not present by interviewing her patients at home. As mentioned above, sometimes I went to *ui* Chan’s house to observe her treatment without making any appointment before. However, it
has to be noted that the patients whom I observed and interviewed were patients who got spot-pressing treatment from Suay. I only observed and interviewed some patients with fractured bones after the fractured parts had already been fixed. I collected data when they received *khata* blowing and bone re-arrangement. With only two of them I had a retrospective in-depth interview and an opportunity to talk to the family members who had participated during the treatment.
Ban Mae Guang or Mae Guang village is a small village about fifteen kilometers from the city of Chiang Mai and two kilometers from Mae Guang College, the first and most famous agricultural college in the northern region of Thailand. The village is located near Mae Guang river, which is a small branch of Mae Ping river. Before the development of an agricultural irrigation system in Chiang Mai in the 1970s, villagers’ paddy fields were often flooded so that villagers could not control water sufficiently to cultivate rice, and therefore rice crops were rather poor. After that development, this area became fertile land for growing rice. The land was intensively used after the rice harvest, such as for growing flowers, sowing vegetables, and especially for growing tobacco. More than half of the villagers earned their living from the tobacco industry. Especially women from this and adjacent villages worked in a local tobacco factory near their houses. There were also some villagers who worked as workers in the Irrigation Institute at Mae Guang College in the daytime. However, in the evening and on weekends they still helped their family members in doing agricultural work. Generally, almost all villagers worked in agriculture and could earn their living in the village without long-term migration.

During the 1980s, a super-highway was built near the paddy fields. This brought a big change to the villagers. The price of their land has increased continuously. Some villagers sold part of their paddy fields, and bought new land in the forest near the village. Many new brick houses were built and replaced the old wooden houses. However, almost all people still have their own land and work at least partly in agriculture. The improved communication allowed people to find new jobs in the city and have more choices of schools for their children. They got more opportunities

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7 The Thai word for river is ‘mae nam’. The specific name of a river is mentioned following the word ‘mae’. So is the Ping River called Mae Ping or Mae Nam Ping. In the old time people usually settled their houses near a river and called their villages or Ban according to the name of those rivers. Therefore, Ban Mae Guang is a village that has been settled near the Guang River.

8 According to the data recorded by the head of the village, the population of this village is 526 persons or 314 households. (Interview on 24 June 2005)
to develop new social networks with other people living far away, such as through marriage with
people from different places or through new social contacts at their workplaces.

*Ui* Chan’s family was one of the families that were exposed to this rapid change. Her home
village was in Ban Ta Khwai which is at the northeast of Ban Mae Guang – her husband’s home
village. During that time the typical pattern was to marry people who lived in the same village or
in a nearby village. *Ui* Chan’s husband and her husband’s cousins were farmers and also had an
extra job of repairing carts. They had to quit this work in the 1980s when the new roads came and
people started to use machines for ploughing their paddy fields and transporting agricultural
products instead of using cows or buffalos and carts. Her three daughters, Seng, Sii, and Suay,
and her son, Duan, like other people in the village, got used to working in the agricultural sector
growing rice, tobacco, beans, cabbages, and chilies. At that time *ui* Chan worked very hard to
earn money and take care of her children simultaneously. After the rice harvest she sometimes
worked as a wage laborer for her neighbors who grew flowers. *Ui* Chan told that although she
had already learned about bone healing and massage from her uncle, she did not have time to
practice routinely. When her children were still young, she had to ask her husband to take care of
their children so that she could give treatment to patients.

Life became more difficult when her husband died around 1980. She sold some land, even the
piece near her house which people usually keep for their children. Her daughters as well as other
villagers’ children finished only *prathom* 4 (grade four), which is the lowest level of formal
education. After finishing school all of her daughters helped her to work in the paddy field until
they were approximately seventeen years old and got married. Her son, the youngest child, was
ordained after he had finished school so that he could maintain his study until he finished
*matthayom suk sa* 5 before leaving monkhood. He is called *noi* Duan, which means that he has
knowledge of the Buddhist texts written in *kham muang* or northern Thai language. 10 *Ui* Chan’s
nephew and nieces, the younger generation, have higher education than their parents. Almost all

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9 Interview with *ui* Chan on 25 May 2003.
10 *Noi* is a traditional northern Thai word used as a prefix of the name of men who have already been ordained as
Buddhist novices. In the old time people believed that men who were already ordained for a period of time were men
who were trained to be good persons. It is a metaphor that expresses that they are already cooked or ripe, not raw
men (*khon suk* not *khon dip*).
of them have a bachelor’s degree. Only Duan’s daughters study in high school and at Chiang Mai University. Having money from selling land and having a high education brought big changes to ui Chan’s nieces and nephews. Some of them work in offices in the city. One of them has a rather big shop near the village to sell motorcycles, television, electric fans and other electric house appliances. They have cars and live in big modern style houses. While ui Chan’s daughters and son grew up in an agricultural environment and have close relationships with their fellow villagers, her nieces and nephews have a new lifestyle that is more or less different from most people in the villages. Their lives are more related to people outside than inside the village.

It is certain that not only ui Chan’s family faced these socio-cultural changes. All families in this village encounter the same changes, but how these changes affected their daily life, how they understood and coped with such changes may be different. People called this change samai, samai mai or khwam thansamai, whose meanings are related to modernity. Sometimes they use the terms khwam charoen or kan patthana which means ‘progress’ or ‘development’.

The dynamics of the concepts samai, samai mai and khwam thansamai

When the term modernity as a western concept was introduced in Thai society, it was replaced with many (northern) Thai terms – samai, samai mai and khwam thansamai. It means that the term modernity has been brought in and dominated by a Thai perspective. People in Ban Mae Guang and the patients of ui Chan’s descendants also referred to these three interrelated terms when I interviewed them about the so-called modernity. This chapter will focus on the meanings of khwam thansamai and other related terms given by people in different generations and socio-economic backgrounds and how they cope with this rapid change. It is expected that the understanding of the meanings and the context of khwam thansamai in Ban Mae Guang will provide a deeper understanding of the position of ui Chan’s descendants in this rapid change and of the transmission of ui Chan’s knowledge.

The term samai does not mean only a ‘period of time’ as is its literal definition tells, but it implies dynamic meanings which different groups of people give to their daily life condition. Samai mai or ‘new’ samai is a particular period of time in which people perceive a rapid change
of their lives, family and community. However these three terms are sometimes used in the same meaning. I found that people do not have a clear idea of the forces that have caused this condition of samai mai. It is something that is not understandable for the elderly, not easy to understand for housewives and inescapable for men. For khwam thansamai, there are two meanings. The first meaning is the same as samai or samai mai. Another meaning is the ability of people to understand and cope with that change.\(^{11}\) The middle-aged group, who explained the latter meaning, told that there are only a few people who can be considered as khon thansamai.

**A condition people cannot refuse**

In the first meaning khwam thansamai, samai, samai mai are included in the same meaning. Khwam thansamai is the whole of changing socio-cultural conditions that directly and indirectly affect people’s daily lives and that they cannot escape. Khwam thansamai has no fixed meaning but it is comparative and competitive. People in different age groups understand khwam thansamai by comparing their present life to their life experiences in the past (samai ba kaw or old samai) and/or comparing it to lifestyles of their friends and relatives in different age groups. For example the elderly perceive that their lives at present are more thansamai (samai mai or new samai) than in the past, some elderly are more thansamai than other elderly, and teenagers are more thansamai than housewives. Teenagers feel that they are more thansamai in the village but less thansamai comparing to other teenagers in the city.

**Comfort and easiness (sa-duak sa-bai, ngai) but money dependency**

People feel that life in khwam thansamai is not easy. On one hand khwam thansamai provides the condition of comfort and easiness, but on the other hand they have to work harder than before and depend on money. People give a definition of khwam thansamai as the ever-changing condition that brings more comfort, easiness, individualism, but also money dependency. Even the daily life ritual ceremonies that can be prepared by local people are shifting to a kind of small business that serves people’s comfort:

\(^{11}\) Than means ‘know’ or ‘understand’. Therefore, thansamai means understanding social change, which implies the ability to manage and control that change.
Life in the past was so hard (thuk) that you cannot imagine. We lived in an old bamboo house with a roof made of leaves. Now our house is more comfortable. It can protect us from the rain. We can use water easily without carrying it from a well far away, just open taps. My house is more samai mai than this house. Each family member has his or her own room. (Interview with ui Dwaung, a 83 year old woman, on 7 June 2005)

But life in this samai needs money. In the past even when we were so poor, we could survive without money. Just went to the forest to pick vegetables, bamboo shoots, and mushrooms or catch fishes in the paddy field. Sometimes we stopped going to the market for almost one month because we had no money to buy things. We still survived in that way. At this samai, how can we survive without money? Even when staying in the house we have to pay for water and electricity etc. […] for ritual ceremony of the new house, many people in this samai buy a big set of 108 ritual elements (108 areca nuts, fermented tea, cigarettes, etc) from Sri Khaow, a wife of our ritual leader. It is beautiful, easy and comfortable. Just drive a car to her house and spend three thousand Baht, so that you can have the complete set for your ritual ceremony. In old samai we were satisfied with only 9, it might not be beautiful because the elderly prepared it together [and we were not artistic], but it is not an important issue for life. (Interview with ui Dang, a 78 year old woman, on 7 June 2005)

No guarantee of goodness and success

People also feel reluctant to conclude that khwam thansamai leads to happiness or success. Khwam thansamai in their opinion may not really make life happier than the previous time. It is people’s dilemma that they have to work very hard in order to gain a comfortable house or other possessions. The so-called ‘modern (samai mai) medicine’ and ‘modern’ education systems do not guarantee success:

My daughter and son-in- law have to work hard in the paddy field to earn money… never stop… just only when they have to join our neighbors’ ritual ceremonies like a cremation, marriage or inauguration of a new house. I often feel very pity for them. They have a comfortable house but nearly never enjoy life in this house. They just come back to sleep at night, wake up in the early morning and go to the paddy field. (Interview with ui Dwaung, a 83 year old woman, on 7 June 2005)

The old northern Thai house has only two rooms. One room is for the principle of the house such as grandparents and another room is for other family members.
Although *samai mai* is more comfortable, quick and easy, it has a negative aspect. Everything has both positive and negative sides. The more it provides positive aspects, the more it gives negative aspects. For example, modern medicine (*samai mai* medicine) such as painkillers, on one hand kills the pain, but on another hand it can harm our stomach. (Interview with Lamoon, a 67 year old woman, on 3 June 2005)

Children in this *samai* have more education than us, but cannot read. When we were at their age we knew many things. We finished only *prathom* 4 (grade four) but we can read and write better than children in this *samai* who finish *prathom* 6 (grade six). Moreover they cannot work even when they finish school, just travel here and there to enjoy themselves. (Interview with *ui* Dang, a 76 year old woman, on 7 June 2005)

**Changes of family, villager relationships and morality**

People also mentioned the change of social relationship as a side effect of *khwam thansamai*. The more people are involved in *khwam thansamai* or *samai mai*, the less importance they give to family and local community. It seems to imply that family ties, traditional beliefs and socio-cultural control are weakened when people adopt *khwam thansamai*. The younger generation is the main group that is pointed out as the outcome of life in *khwam thansamai*. Their parents have to work very hard, whereas they do not share any family responsibilities and do not belief in traditional morality:

Our teenagers are now crazy of western culture. Although they live in the village, they do not know about our religious days but are crazy of Valentine’s Day […] giving red roses to their boyfriends or girlfriends. They cannot separate between sex and love. That is why I am very worried about my daughter. (Interview with Rath, a 47 year old man, on 3 July 2005)

[…] in the old *samai*, sons and daughters worked and took care of their parents. It is ridiculous that in the new *samai*, almost all parents have to take care of their children. They never grow up. (Interview with *ui* Dang, a 76 year old woman, 7 June 2005)

You see, those young couple, the *samai mai* teenagers! They have lived together like husband and wife without any ability to earn a living. Their parents still pay for them to go to school. This is what I call *samai*. A boy’s parent sent a girl back home, but she still came back to stay with the boy. I cannot understand how this kind of relationship has happened. When I was young, men could not touch a women’s body, otherwise we did wrong to our kin spirit (*phi pu ya*). This *samai*, there is no spirit. *Khon samai mai* (modern man/woman) can do whatever they want. They only think about themselves. They do not concern
about their parents. (Interview with ui Dwaung, a 83 year old woman, on 7 June 2005. While we were talking, two teenagers rode a motorcycle past her house)

Not only family relationships have obviously changed. People in the village who once had a nearly equal socio-economic status are also changing into hierarchical relationships. However, most of them try to maintain their previous social relationships by participation in every important ritual ceremony. Whether and how people participate in the ritual ceremony became the index of the samai persons. If they do not help other people to cook food, wash dishes, but only sit on the chairs like guests; they are considered as samai persons. Such persons will be socially excluded by the villagers. According to peoples’ point of view, these persons intend to change their relationship with local people, since they have a sense of accomplishment in the context of khwam thansamai. They or their children may be richer or have higher education compared to other villagers and behave like an elite. They include Suay, ui Chan’s daughter, and her family for example:

Once, she was a farmer like us, but now she is phu di [elite]. How we dare to be her patient! We are only chao ban [villager] or luk thung [literally this means son or daughter of the paddy field]. She usually criticizes other people that they just waste money to send their children to that kind of school. It is impossible for them to find a job. Although she never said explicitly that other people are stupid, the way she talked or criticized seems to be in that sense. Her two daughters are clever and succeed in this samai. One is an engineer and got married with a Singaporean and another one is an architect. Her son-in-law built a big samai mai house for her family. She did not allow people to have a look inside her house [I heard this story many times. It is a big gossip in the village]. Her daughters have no relationship with villagers. She [Suay] is far different from her mother. If one wants to be a healer he or she must help all patients according to the same standard. She is also different from noi Duan, her younger brother. He is chao ban. (Informal conversation with Tae and Mun, 11 June 2005)

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13 In northern Thai culture, persons outside the village who participate in any villager’s ritual ceremonies will be invited to sit on special areas, for example the prepared chairs at the courtyard or the local mats (sua) spread over the first floor of the house. They are expected only to participate in the Buddhist ritual ceremony such as listening to a Buddhist chant. The local people however are expected to take care of the guests. The teenagers should serve drinking water for the guests. Housewives prepare food or wash dishes, whereas men take care of other facilities such as finding a place to park the car.
More technological consumption and loss of local knowledge

People linked *khwam thansamai* to life that is attached to technology. The middle-aged group felt that the younger generation tends to overconsume technology and shows no interest in their parents’ knowledge. They did not conclude easily that it is a personal error, but they saw it as related to the national economic and political level:

You should observe our younger generation after the school in our village has finished. You will see the pupils who study only *prathom* 5 or 6 (grade five or six) using mobile phones. I could not understand how their parents allowed them to have those cell phones. It is also the fault of our government. They only think of the economy, do not really concern about social impacts. […] the more people spend their time studying in the school, the more they leave their parents’ knowledge. In the past the compulsory education was only *prathom* 4 (grade four) and teachers did not force us to learn too much. We still had time to help our parents working in the paddy fields. To work in the paddy field needs practical learning. Only how to bring the buffalo back home is not easy, but we practiced everyday so that we knew. Now the government forces people to spend nine years in the school […] studying a lot but not related to their parents’ knowledge. After coming back from the school, they have to do a lot of homework, writing the so-called reports. More than that, the teachers do not receive hand-written reports, only the printed ones from computers. You can see that nearly all families with students learning in the secondary school have to buy computers. (Informal focus group discussion with Rath, Kul, Morn and Ta on 3 July 2005)

[...] working in agriculture also needs technology. If we still use buffalo, we cannot survive. All farmers use technologies in every process of doing agriculture. All of us have to make a good plan so that we can ask people who have machines for ploughing and harvesting to come to our village. We have to pay a lot for the whole process. In fact the total product gained by using animals and human labour is almost the same as that by using machines. But we have no choices, we have to be quick and prepare for growing another crop. Now men less than 40 years old have no knowledge about using a buffalo to plough in the paddy field. (Informal focus group discussion with Rath, Kul, Morn and Ta on 3 July 2005)

While people questioned the *samai mai* knowledge, the middle-aged men who were struggling with life and, certainly, with money also questioned the old *samai* (samai kaw) knowledge and doubted whether it could really help them to survive in this period. Traditional knowledge that can survive must serve life in *khwam thansamai*. The characteristics that are most valued in *khwam thansamai* are cost-effectiveness and time-efficiency:
Life in *khwam thansamai* needs whatever that is quick and effective, we have to manage the time. [while we are talking, a woman with a plastic basket full of various kinds of herbs packed by a local factory in Lampang came to sell her products. Rath asked me if these products indicated that we could return to *samai kaw*. I gave no answer but asked his opinion] I think it does not mean that we can return to use the old *samai* knowledge. How can these traditional medicines survive? Only the elderly buy them. Most of these medicines are more expensive than *samai mai* medicine. We just promote them and attempt to let them survive, not because of their actual qualities [he meant out of a sense of nostalgia]. (Focus group discussion with Rath, Kul, Morn and Ta on 3 July 2005)

**Becoming a victim of ‘khwam thansamai’**

All Northern Thai have the experience that life in *khwam thansamai* is complicated and risky, especially for those who work in the agricultural sector. Almost everything is out of their control. It is impossible to completely understand (*than*) this complicated condition so that everybody easily can become a victim of *khwam thansamai*.

Believe me that being a farmer is a very hard and risky life. I grew almost all kinds of vegetables. We paid a lot not only for chemical substances such as fertilizer, insecticide, hormones for plants etc, but also for all steps of growing. For example if we grew chilies, we had to pay nearly two thousand baht for one can of seeds. We had strictly to follow the company’s advices to be sure that we would get good products. So the process of planting was very complicated and cost a lot of money. According to the company’s advice, we had to buy a ready-prepared soil suitable for nourishment of young chili plants. Moreover, we had to pay for long plastic sheaths to cover the soil, made big holds over those plastic sheaths and grew chili plants through those holds one by one. Since chili plants are not strong, they are very easily broken when it is rather windy. So, we had to tie them to pieces of bamboo. And of course we had to pay for these pieces of bamboo. But when we had our products, we were under the control of merchants. Once I grew chilies, the first two days when we picked chilies the price was very high, ten baht per kilogram. On the third day, they [merchants] forced us to sell for only eight baht. They told that the price at the markets in Bangkok had decreased. They all said the same, but I know from Pin, my cousin, whose children have worked in *talad* Thai [Thai market in Bangkok] that it had the same price. Pin was better than us. She sent her products directly to her children so that she got a good price. (Interview with Suay on 2 June 2005)

You can see how attractive the advertisements on the TV programme are. They always say that today we offer you a new model, but tomorrow they present another one as a new model again. It is vagueness between telling the truth and cheating. We have to be alert and aware of every piece of information in the
new samai. If we just want new things all the time we are easily to fall into the trap of khwam thansamai.
(Rath’s opinion, focus group discussion with Rath, Kul, Morn and Ta on 3 July 2005)

I think no one can escape from being cheated in the thansamai period. Did you remember what happened to Nang? She sells lottery tickets in our village for a long time, but she still bought a fake lottery ticket from a woman who sold herbs like that woman [a woman who came when we were talking together and just left].
(Kul’s opinion, focus group discussion with Rath, Kul, Morn and Ta on 3 July 2005)

Do not just follow but understand the ever-changing ‘samai’

Khwam thansamai, in another sense indicates the state of understanding the ever-changing society. It is rather difficult for ordinary people to be in the condition of khwam thansamai. The villagers told that an academic might be the example of the real khon thansamai (modern person). For local people ui Chan might be such a person. Although she was khon samai ba kaw (traditional person), she was a local intellectual, who was accepted by academics and still kept contact to villagers. When I asked them to judge themselves according to their definition, the elderly considered themselves as khon samai ba kaw. The middle-aged males and housewives who had been involved in local politics and had an opportunity to travel far away, positioned themselves as persons in between the old and new samai:

We still respect and understand the traditional beliefs, and are able to understand some new things that affect our daily life. Just only enough to survive in this new samai. (Interview with Terng, a 56 year old woman, 11 June 2005)

If you considered us by the material we possess you may think that we are new samai persons, but according to our ideas and our knowledge, we still are in an old samai. We use the new samai technologies under traditional knowledge. We think more than the real new samai persons who just follow every new thing. In this sense we are in the middle (klang samai). (Interview with Rath, a 47 year old man, on 3 July 2005)

Living in the period of khwam thansamai

Since life in khwam thansamai is risky and uncertain, all generations in the village feel nostalgia. The elderly felt happy when seeing the pictures of Ban Mae Guang in the old days and the
paintings of the twelve months traditional ceremonies painted on the walls of a new building in the village temple. The housewives dreamt of the past when they could enjoy life in the paddy fields. Teenagers wished to go back to the time when they were very young, playing with their friends and never being lonely. However, this is only nostalgia, they do not actually want to live in that old samai, they still want to be part of khwam thansamai, a comfortable condition (khwam sa-duak sa-bai), and attempt to find clever ways to live in this uncertain period.

The middle-aged group tries to work harder and encourage their children to have higher education. From their opinion, when the children have no modern education, they are in trouble because they are no longer traditional. They have to find jobs in a modern and competitive society. However, when life conditions are too complicated for local people to handle by themselves, they often seek support from supernatural powers to cope with such situations. When the Mae Guang College for example dismissed the employees, some villagers who had been employed by the college practiced a ritual ceremony called sa do khro to driving away bad destiny. When children took entrance examinations to famous high schools or universities, some of their parents asked ui nhan Nuan, another ritual healer in Ban Mae Guang, to make thian chok for bringing good fortune. Even teenagers who were judged by other groups as the most thansamai group in the village still recently consulted spirit mediums. These spirit mediums were two teenagers from this village, and the spirit that possessed both of them is the village-protecting spirit (phi siao ban).

14 When the workplace of Nai’s husband had decided to dismiss some employees, she and her husband asked a ritual healer in Ban Tha Khwai to offer them the magical candles for expelling bad destiny, and then lit those candles at night. She told that finally her husband was not dismissed. (Informal conversation with Nai, a thirty-two year old woman on 20 May 2003.
15 Candles blown over with khatha for bringing the good fortune. These candles were lit on the night before and every night during the entrance examinations. (Interview with ui nhan Nuan on 15 January 2004)
16 In April 2005, two teenagers of the village, a boy and a girl, were possessed by the village-protecting spirits (phi siao ban). Most villagers, who are persons of middle and old age, did not believe this. Some of them thought that it was only a trick of the two teenagers to create a new position for themselves since they had failed their education and once were excluded from the village because of drug addiction. When I conducted the focus group discussion with eight teenagers on 26 June 2005, they said that although their parents did not believe it, they did. They consulted the spirits about their love and life problems. Since there were few adults participating, they felt comfortable to go there.
The pattern of change of Ban Mae Guang in the direction of khwm thansamai is quite different from many villages in northern Thailand. Whereas the local people in some villages temporarily or permanently migrate to find jobs in other places far away, almost all people in Ban Mae Guang have continuously lived in the village. They still have their own land and most of the middle-aged groups still work in the agricultural sector. In this particular context, the local people defined khwm thansamai according to the socio-cultural changes that affected their daily life. According to the various terms given to those rapid changes – khwm thansamai, samai or samai mai—, it means that, what is called modernity in the local peoples’ perspective, is not fixed. It can be interpreted in a flexible way. Khwm thansamai or samai, which is a rather subjective notion, is considered by comparing the changes of the life conditions of local people, such as the new samai (samai mai), the old samai (samai kaw), or the time (samai) in-between. People also compare their life conditions with other peoples’ life conditions (who are more or less thansamai). The criteria used to compare are physical facilities, moral and traditional beliefs. Although local people consider life in khwm thansamai as faster and more comfortable in terms of material facilities, they feel ambivalent about whether it provides goodness and happiness. Whereas they feel that they cannot escape from khwm thansamai, they do not totally accept whatever happens in the thansamai period.

There is also some resistance to khwm thansamai especially to the change of sexual relationships, family ties and community ties. People for example gossip about the younger generation who adopts new forms of sexual behavior. They gossip about Suay, ui Chan’s daughter, who does not participate in the local peoples’ activities. Moreover, the emergence of the two spirit mediums, a boy and a girl, who were possessed by the village protecting spirit (phi siao ban) can be seen as the articulation of traditional belief with khwm thansamai (the old samai and the new samai). It is noteworthy that the spirit who possessed them does not come far away from their daily life, such as one of the powerful deities in northern Thai folktales, or the northern Thai personages as mentioned by Tanabe (Tanabe 2002: 57), but it is the village-protecting spirit who is part of everyday life. This spirit is still worshipped yearly by the whole community.
It is further remarkable that according to the traditional belief, the family-protecting spirit (*phi pu ya*) controls the relationship between males and females, whereas the village-protective spirit (*phi siao ban*) protects people against external powers outside the village. We can interpret that in this *thansamai* period, the village-protecting spirit becomes an active guardian to protect the teenagers against an external power. Shifting from the protection of the family-protecting spirit to that of the village-protecting spirit seems to be a clever way for the teenagers to reconcile with other generations in the village. It can be concluded that although the family and community ties in Ban Mae Guang do not function as strongly as in the past, they are not totally lost. The local people attempt to find many ways to keep and reconnect the local ties. Besides social sanctions and gossip, people in Ban Mae Guang made use of spiritual belief to reconnect themselves to the local conditions. It is indicated that the fluidity of northern Thai spiritual belief is very crucial for providing alternative spaces for local people to reinterpret and create new ways to cope with life in *khwam thansamai*. This fluidity of belief, which will be presented in the next chapter, is also employed by *ui* Chan’s children to gain legitimacy as new healers and to solve conflicts within their relationships. In addition, the way *ui* Chan and her children adapted their treatment to meet people’s requirements in the *khwam thansamai* period, such as the need for comfort and time-effectiveness, will also be described in the next chapter.
Chapter 4

Becoming a healer: a socio cultural construction

Although *ui* Chan, the famous female bone healer, had passed away on 2 October 2003, her children still provide treatment. This chapter and the next two chapters present a full picture of the transmission of northern Thai bone healing knowledge and the changes in this transmitted knowledge from the period when *ui* Chan was involved in her learning process to her descendants’ period. This transmitted knowledge however cannot be considered outside the changing context of their lives in *khwam thansamae*. The important finding of this chapter will be that the process of becoming a healer is not totally invented by people who want to be healers, but involves fundamentally socio-cultural beliefs.

Among the four children of *aui* Chan – three daughters, Seng, Sii, Suay, and one son, *noi* Duan – only Suay and *noi* Duan have been accepted as healers by the villagers and patients. The others are only seen as persons who have some knowledge of the *sen*, the imagined lines that pass across the body and link muscles and bones. Although Suay claimed that both she and *noi* Duan had received all charms (*khatha*) of bone healing and poison removal from *ui* Chan, people did not believe that. They thought that *noi* Duan was the only person who had received all charms from *ui* Chan, including a strong charm called *khwauk sui* 18, whereas Suay had received only the charm that is used with egg-rubbing treatment for the removal of poison from the body and the technical knowledge for the correction of *sen*. 19

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17 Interview with Suay on 10 June 2005

18 *Khwauk sui* is a strong *khatha* or charm. Sometimes it is called a hot *khatha* in the sense that people who receive this *khatha* must have the special power to control it. Such persons are men who have already been ordained as a Buddhist novice (*noi*) or Buddhist monk (*nhan*) or special persons who were born under a strong astrological constellation. The difference between *noi* and *nhan* is that, *noi* is a person who has been ordained as a Buddhist novice, and *nhan* is the one who continues monkhood until he is twenty-five years old. At this period he has been ordained again to be a Buddhist monk. In the old time northern Thai novice and monk must learn northern Thai language (*kham muang*) and all of them learned *khatha*. It is believed that *nhan* has stronger *khatha* than *noi* since he spends more time in monkhood and that he has opportunity to learn more *khatha*. (Interview with lung Som, and aui Gong, Praya Meng Rai district, Chiang Rai on 1 December 2003, and *ui* nhan Khwai, Chiang Mai, on 26 May 2005)

19 Interview with *ui* nhan Khwai on 26 May 2005, Pong on 29 May 2005, Tae on 11 June 2005 and Khiow on 17 June 2005
Socio-cultural construction of a healer

According to the perspective of local people, the power of healers is deeply rooted in local socio-cultural beliefs. However, since social relationships and cultural beliefs change through time, the power of healers accepted by local people is also dynamic. Regarding the moral value of healers, people in the past or older people strongly believed that if healers cannot strictly practice according to the five Buddhist precepts, their (magical) power would deteriorate. 20 In the period of khwam thansamai, in which people do not have close relationships, the actual daily practices of healers are not easy to know. Furthermore, some people believe that it is difficult for the young healers, who are struggling in khwam thansamai, to absolutely follow the five Buddhist precepts. These people, thus, are not strictly concerned about these criteria. They can, for example, accept healers who drink occasionally but not a drunken healer. It is noteworthy that in northern Thai belief the power of a healer is not totally gained by the person himself. Not only technical skills allow some people to be considered as healers, but they also need power and support from teacher spirits. How healers convince people that they are special people who gain magical power, is thus very crucial in legitimizing themselves. Besides that, another crucial point is how healers contribute to or position themselves within their communities. Becoming a healer therefore requires both a special connection to the teacher spirits and approval from villagers and patients. It can be concluded that becoming a healer is a socio-cultural construction.

The processes of becoming a healer for ui Chan and her descendants, Suay and Duan, differ interestingly. Ui Chan began to become a healer in the 1940s, in the time that all villagers in her village and the adjacent villages were peasants and deeply believed in the power of the spirits. She actively participated in a long period of learning since she was young. 21 Her children however did not in the same degree grow up in an environment of such strong spiritual beliefs and could not have a long period of apprenticeship. They all had to struggle to earn a living in the

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20 The five precepts are the basic precepts that every Buddhists should practice in order to elevate him or herself morally and spiritually. It is believed that practicing of these precepts help to cultivate compassion, generosity, contentment, truthfulness and mindfulness. These are as follow; 1) refrain from killing, 2) refrain from stealing, 3) refrain from lying, slandering, gossiping and spreading rumours, 4) refrain from sexual misconduct, and 5) refrain from taking intoxicants.

21 Interview with ui Chan on 25 May 2003
time of khwam thansamai so that their process of becoming a healer differed much from that of their mother.

In this part I like to compare the socio-cultural construction of a healer in the case of ui Chan and that of her descendents. I will mainly focus on the two children of ui Chan who have been accepted by the villagers as healers, Suay and noi Duan, and will provide some information about two other persons who also give some treatment to patients. However, I will first present the process of becoming a great healer of ui Chan, in order to emphasize the differences in context and process of becoming a healer of these new healers.

**Ui Chan**

Before the 1940s, Ban Mae Guang and adjacent villages such as Ban Tha Khwai, Ban Khoom were located in a very remote area. All people were farmers who worked in a small-scale and intensive form of agriculture. They used cows and buffalos for ploughing and carts for transporting agricultural products. When people got sick they normally used herbs, charms, or got both physical treatment and ritual practices from healers or mo muang. However, if people who had a serious sickness had enough money, they were sent to Suan Dok hospital, the university hospital of northern Thailand, or Mc Cormic Hospital, the first missionary hospital in Chiang Mai, both located very far from the village.  

**Accepted as a healer**

*Ui nhan* Chak, an uncle of *ui* Chan along the matrilineal line, was one of the famous northern Thai traditional healers or mo muang, living in Ban Tha Khwai. He was famous in prevention and healing of various kinds of illnesses with herbs and especially with charms or khatha. When *ui* Chan was approximately fourteen years old, she was the only one among the many nieces and nephews who was accepted by *ui nhan* Chak as an apprentice to become a healer. When she and

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22 Interview with *ui* Chan on 25 May 2003.
23 Interview with *ui nhan* Nuan on 15 January 2004. It is noteworthy that this knowledge belongs to a certain family so that it is transmitted within the matrilineal kin group.
other people were in the process of learning, her uncle, who was also a famous northern Thai prophet, told everyone that she according to her fate (chata) was the only person who could receive an effective khwauk sui, a strong charm for healing bone fractures. Since she already had learned northern Thai language from her uncle when she was young, she was encouraged to learn and memorize all khatha related to bone healing.\textsuperscript{24} Ui Chan began learning to correct sen and fix dislocated and fractured bones. It was a kind of apprenticeship that began with practicing as her uncle’s assistant, providing treatment under her uncle’s supervision and finally providing treatment herself. She received her uncle’s main ritual tray, a symbol of receiving the teacher spirits and becoming a real mo muang, only a few hours before his death. Her uncle’s cousin asked one nhan, an old man with strong magical spells, to do the ritual ceremony to ask for forgiveness from the teacher spirits and give these spirits to ui Chan.

\textit{High moral and social position}

\textit{Ui Chan} told that her uncle told her during the period of apprenticeship; ‘Chan! You ought to receive this khatha. It is like \textit{nam seum bo sai}’ [it will provide you some money, although it is not much money, it is enough to survive].\textsuperscript{25} When her uncle died, people who suffered from dislocated sen, dislocated joints and fractured bones came to ui Chan for help. At that time she was already married and had young children. She became a famous healer since 1981 when her daughters and son had got married and her husband, who was usually drunk, died.\textsuperscript{26} People explained differently why she became famous after the death of her husband. Her children justified that after their drunken father had passed away their mother had nothing to worry about

\textsuperscript{24} Her uncle was a nhan, who had already been ordained as a monk. In the 1930s it meant that he was a knowledgeable man who could write and read northern Thai texts and khatha or charms.

\textsuperscript{25} This refers to a meaningful proverb that is a metaphor for earning a sufficient living: satisfy basic needs of life, and not being greedy. According to ui Chan, her uncle said that ‘Chan! You ought to receive this khatha. It likes \textit{nam seum bo sai}. \textit{Nam seum} means ‘seeping water’, and \textit{bo sai} is a ‘well dug into the sandy ground’. Therefore, having khatha likes \textit{nam seum bo sai} means that becoming \textit{mo muang} is like having a well that was dug into the sandy ground (bo sai), from which water outside the well seeps inside it bit by bit (\textit{nam seum}). People will never have full water from this kind of well. It implies that \textit{mo muang} will never be rich or poor, but just have enough money to survive.

\textsuperscript{26} People in Ban Mae Guang still remember ui Chan’s husband who was often drunken. According to noi Duan and Suay, her mother felt uncomfortable and could not concentrate when their drunken father walked inside the house while she was giving treatment. Sometimes he drank rice liquor offered to the teacher spirits, which consequently made the treatment ineffective. (Interview with noi Duan and Suay on 24 June 2005)
(sabai chai) so that she had more concentration (samati) while providing treatment, whereas other people believed that she had more freedom to gain merit according to the Buddhist belief:

After the death of her husband, ui Chan usually went to the temple and practiced meditation during the nights of every Buddhist day (wan phra). She had nothing to worry about so that she could maintain her moral purity. She never gossiped or talked to people with bad words and never killed any kind of animal. She offered a lot of the money she received from her patients to the temple and the elderly. She was the kind of older person who thought and did only good things. She was a rare common person [not an elite person] who was able to offer a chaw pha, the highest part of a temple’s roof. [which people consider as providing much merit or bun barami ] She did many good deeds so that the older she became, the more she looked charismatic and respectful. (Interview with Su, a 55 year old woman, on 10 September 2003)

Ui Chan’s khatha was very strong. I deeply believe. If she said that it would recover, it really happened. Her words were very powerful (sak-sit). Nearly all my family members were her patients. […] As a ‘female’ bone healer, she never drunk alcoholic beverage [whereas a male bone healer often does]. She was very kind and polite, never talked to people with bad words. As a widow whose daughter and sons had already grown up, she had a great opportunity to practice herself the life of a devout Buddhist. This is why she still had charisma. Her house looked nice and she warmly welcomed guests, whereas other [male] healers who had received such a kind of strong khatha have an opposite personality and had only a few possessions. (Interview with Lamoon, a 67 years old woman, on 23 May 2004)

The two opinions mentioned above confirm that all khatha, including khwauk sui, according to northern Thai belief, are not effective in itself. Their power strongly depends on the merit or bun barami of persons who receive those khatha. The bun barami of a healer will support the power of the teacher spirits and control the negative sides of the strong khatha.

The position of ui Chan in Ban Mae Guang was quite fascinating. When she moved from her village to live in her husband’s village, Ban Mae Guang, people considered her as a very kind and good woman. Her family was not an ideal family. It was an ordinary family that was faced with economic and family problems. People told that, although her husband was usually heavily drunken and her children sometimes had terrible quarrels, she remained still calm and could control her temper in any situation. She had a strong mind. Even when her husband and one of her sons died, she did not cry and could participate in their death ceremonies at the village
Cemetery. Whatever happened in her life, she continued doing good deeds to accumulate merit by giving treatment to her patients and offering money to the temple. According to many people it might be this kind of personality that enabled her to fix broken bones that looked awful.

In northern Thai belief, a woman will gain much merit if her son is ordained as a Buddhist monk. In the case of ui Chan, people believed that she had extremely much merit because it was not only her son but also her nephew who were ordained as Buddhist monks through her support. Moreover, she supported money to any family that ordained its sons. Her position in the village increased when her nephew became the abbot of the village temple. Since the 1990s her position was that of stepmother of the abbot. When this abbot actively participated in the northern Thai Buddhist monks’ network that had the aim to reserve northern Thai traditions and ritual ceremonies, ui Chan participated in some activities such as joining the merit-tour to visit famous temples in Thailand, offering money to construct temples or places for doing meditation and practicing ritual ceremonies according to the local belief of Buddhism. Not only did she provide a large amount of money to the village temple, ui Chan also distributed her money to other older people in the village. When she was still alive, I often saw ui Chan giving some fruits and local snacks, presented to her by her patients, to other people, including me.

Although she was famous in the last years of her life, she was still a kind elderly person (mettha). She never asked for money before giving treatment. As a consequence, sometimes she felt sick because her patients did not follow the ritual. This ritual included providing flowers, candles, a bottle of liquor and some money to the teacher spirits before treatment and offering another set, except a bottle of liquor, after recovery. Her son, Duan, solved this problem by preparing flowers and candles in her ritual tray so that everything was ready to be practiced in the correct way. All

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27 Interview with Su, who was her neighbor and whose house is near ui Chan’s house, on 10 September 2003. Normally, it is forbidden for a wife or mother to join a death ceremony in the pa cha, a public area of land where dead people are burnt.

fees and the explanations why patients had to provide money before having treatment were also
written in detail on the white board.\footnote{This was a new way of management for both the treatment fee and the ritual ceremony for treatment that was invented by noi Duan. It was a clever way that brought only few criticisms. Only a few elderly persons such as ui nhan Khwai, who is ui Chan’s cousin, criticized this as a wrong way. Mo muang should give treatment to all sufferers even if they had no money. In such cases, mo have to provide their money to the teacher spirit instead of asking for the patient’s money (interview with ui nhan Khwai on 18 May 2003). Noi Duan felt that to do this was not fair to his mother who was very old. She got so little money and some of her patients disappeared when they were recovered, just leaving her mother behind with headache because of doing wrong to the teacher spirits. Generally, people understood why noi Duan did this for his mother. He told people informally about his reasons. From my point of view, people were also prepared to understand because ui Chan distributed the money back to her community as mentioned above. Moreover, this rule was not practiced strictly, especially in the case of local people. If the illness was not serious, such as a suffering from mal-alignment of sen, ui Chan only re-arranged the sen free of charge. In these non-serious cases she used only her knowledge and did not ask the teacher spirits to help her (Interview with ui Chan on 25 May 2003).}

For local people ui Chan was not only a person who had the knowledge for treatment of bone and sen, but she was also an authentic healer who had strong khatha and could control that khatha in an environment of high merit. She was a model of a common woman who could go beyond family problems to become a great Buddhist in a way that people dreamed of. Moreover, she was so clever that people outside the village and especially those who were rich or had a high education, believed in her treatment

**Suay**

Suay was the third daughter of ui Chan. She was born in 1954 and has two daughters who are thirty and twenty-seven years old. Her husband is about ten years older than she. Her first daughter, who finished from the Engineering Faculty in Chiang Mai University, got married with a Singaporean engineer and stays abroad with her six-month-son and her husband. Her second daughter works as an architect for a big land and house business company in Chiang Mai. This daughter provided an opportunity to Suay’s husband to work as a construction foreman in the company. Last year, her first daughter and son-in-law gave her money to build a big western style house. They also paid all her debts. She has the impression that her life has changed a lot during these last two years.
Suay, as well as the other daughters of ui Chan’s, finished only prathom 4 (grade four) from a school in the village. When she was nineteen years old, she studied at a famous dressmaker school in the city of Chiang Mai. She had however no opportunity to practice this knowledge because she got married and became pregnant. After delivering the baby, she became a housewife and took care of her first daughter. Around 1985, her husband built their own house near ui Chan’s house. At that time she always stayed alone with her daughters at her house because her husband worked as a construction foreman in many provinces in the upper northern part of Thailand. For almost ten years she lived temporarily separated from her husband, until he finally stopped that job and went to work in agriculture in Ban Mae Guang.

To work in the agricultural sector is very risky. Farmers cannot control the price of their products. It is highly dependent on merchants who behave like brokers – buying agricultural products from the paddy fields at a low price and selling at big markets or processing plants at a much higher price. Suay’s family had the same destiny as other farmers. She and her husband faced a very big economic problem when their paddy fields full of chili plants were flooded in 1999. They lost almost one hundred thousand bath. It meant that they had a new debt. After this disaster, ui Chan asked Suay to be her assistant, and gave her three hundred bath per day.

*Informal assistant*

Before Suay faced this agricultural failure, she only took care of her mother as a daughter, such as preparing lunch for her, but mainly she went to the paddy field. Only when her mother was too busy, she helped her to remove poison from a patient’s body. She began to help her providing treatment continuously in 2000. It was a period of approximately three years that she assisted her mother and learned from her. In 2000 ui Chan was at the peak of her fame as healer. She could no longer give treatment alone, but needed someone to help. It was not only Suay who helped ui Chan at that time. Two other persons who helped ui Chan were ui Dwuang, another healer in Ban Mae Guang from whom ui Chan had learned egg-rubbing, and Pin who is ui Chan’s niece. Although Suay helped ui Chan longer than the others, she was unconsciously represented by ui Chan as her assistant whom she always supervised step by step in giving sen and egg-rubbing treatment. This is quite different from the case of noi Duan whom will be discussed later.
Furthermore, if there were few patients Suay usually left ui Chan and Pin treat the patients alone. She preferred doing domestic work– cleaning her house, preparing food for her husband and children. However, after the death of ui Chan, all people still believed that she knew about the treatment of sen more than the others.

More prominent outside the village

The position of Suay as a healer differs from her mother’s. According to my observations and interviews, her patients consist of two groups; her cousins and close friends from Ban Tha Khwai, and people who live outside the village. People who suffer from sen in the village prefer to have treatment from Pin, Sii or ui Duang.

Suay paid more attention to her family but less to people in the village. She rarely joined her daily life with other people except with Pin. She also ended the relationship with her two sisters after they had a big quarrel when her mother was still alive. Sometimes she participated in the ritual ceremonies in the village, but rarely helped other housewives cooking food or washing dishes. As I have mentioned in the last chapter, the local people criticized her and judged that she wanted to be phu di (elite). Suay knew that people were not satisfied with her. She once told me that she had suggested to her husband that both donate their bodies to the medical school, so that their daughters would not be in trouble for conducting ritual ceremonies without any help from the villagers when they died:

Chao ban [villagers] are very narrow-minded. If we do not help them during their ritual ceremonies, they will sanction us in return. If we organize our ritual ceremonies they will join as guests – only sitting, talking to each other and waiting for our services. Last week I participated in a death ritual ceremony of the mother of two government officers. Her children [the children of a passed away woman] worked outside the village and never participated in the local peoples’ ceremonies. The villagers, thus, joined with the guests, nobody helped them to provide water for other guests. The government officers ordered food from the city for all participants because there were no housewives who wanted to help them to cook. It reminded me that my daughters would face the same situation if my husband or I pass away. (Interview with Suay on 10 June 2005)
Not only the relationship between Suay and local people is quite different from that of *ui* Chan. As a healer, Suay often used strong words to force patients with a fractured bone or dislocated joint to continue the treatment. She frequently told them that if they moved to other healers or removed the wooden casts themselves, she would totally stop providing treatment. Once I asked her about the difference between her and *ui* Chan’s treatment. She insisted that she treated patients with the same techniques as her mother. I suggested that her approach and *ui* Chan’s approach to the patients were different. *Ui* Chan never used strong words to patients. Suay laughed and told me that she agreed with my comment; ‘I have to do so, to force them to follow my suggestions’. Perhaps, this personality is the reason that when some villagers were in need of both fractured bone and *sen* treatment, they first visited *noi* Duan and then *noi* Duan asked Suay to help him to provide complete treatment. *Noi* Duan, thus, acts as a mediator between Suay and the patients.

While *ui* Chan positioned herself as a kind elderly person who distributed her money to the temple and other older people, Suay has been more exposed to the money economy in *thansamai* period than her mother and positions herself differently. She is more focused on her family and wants to keep the money that she has received from giving treatment for an unpredictable future. She did however offer her first treatment fee completely to the temple (*tham bun*), which traditionally means that she has begun a new career as a healer.30

Life is uncertain and we don’t know if we will be in need of money. Almost all of my life, I have never been free of debts. It is only this year that I can keep money. Although my son-in-law paid for all my previous debts and gives me some money every month, I feel that it is not my money. I donated the first treatment fee I got from providing my own treatment [not the treatment under *ui* Chan’s supervision] to the temple. I kept the rest in a box….never count….now it may be almost two thousand baht. Next time I will open this box and we can count together. (Informal conversation with Suay on 10 June 2005)

It can be said that Suay is more individualistic than her mother. She tends to perceive the money involved in her treatments more as a service fee. The teacher spirit fee is not strictly managed as in the past; only when she feels uncomfortable she provides some food as offerings to the teacher

30 It is a northern Thai belief that offering the money one gains for the first time in life, such as the first salary, to the parents or the temple will consequently bring progress in that occupation.
spirits. When I spontaneously visited Suay at \textit{ui} Chan’s house while her patient was leaving, I also noticed that the patient put money in her hand. It was only that time that I could observe this. After that Suay asked all patients to put money in the teacher spirit tray, as it was normally practiced when \textit{ui} Chan was still alive.

The change of the relationship between Suay and the villagers, and the change of the meaning of money in Suay’s healing treatment are not a main concern for patients outside the village. The patients who live outside the village are only concerned about the effectiveness of her treatment. Most of the new patients never had any treatment from \textit{ui} Chan, they can therefore not distinguish the differences between the two healers.

\textbf{Noi Duan}

\textit{Noi} Duan was the youngest child of \textit{ui} Chan and was born in 1959. His two daughters are still studying, one in Chiang Mai University and another at a famous public high school in the city of Chiang Mai. Since \textit{noi} Duan and his wife work mainly in the agricultural sector, they have to work very hard to earn money for their children. Although he became a healer, he still spends most of the time working outside the village. It is therefore not easy for the patients to receive his treatment compared with that by Suay or \textit{ui} Chan.

\textit{Noi} Duan has higher education than the other children of \textit{ui} Chan. When he finished \textit{prathom} 7 (grade seven) he was ordained as a Buddhist novice at a temple in Lampoon province. Becoming a Buddhist novice, offered \textit{noi} Duan, as well as other boys from relatively poor families, an opportunity to continue studying. After finishing \textit{mattayom seuksa} 5 in 1977, he left monkhood and started to work as a waiter in a famous restaurant near the city of Chiang Mai. After he got married with a woman who worked in a commercial bank, he quit his work. \textit{Noi} Duan and his wife agreed to work in agriculture. His father-in-law bought him paddy fields that lie approximately half a kilometer from \textit{ui} Chan’s house. \textit{Noi} Duan and his wife built a small single-

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31 According to \textit{ui} Chan’s practice, the teacher spirit fee, which is the symbol that connects the supernatural power with the healer who is treating patients, will be kept in the ritual tray until patients are recovered and part of this fee has to be distributed to the temple or to other people.
storey house near their paddy fields. Since both of them never worked in the paddy fields before, they had to start learning how to work as farmers from other children of ui Chan and from their neighbors. People were surprised that with little knowledge of agriculture, they managed to continue to work as farmers until present. Noi Duan, as well as other farmers, has been involved in an intensive form of agriculture. After rice is harvested he and his wife plant chilies and corn.

Noi Duan also learned how to build a house from construction laborers in the village, which then provided him an extra job of building and repairing houses of local people. He is considered a diligent man who has various kinds of knowledge to earn a living. Between 2002-2003 he had a small plant for the removal of the seeds from longans and litchis. The workers were people from Ban Mae Guang and the adjacent villages. It was only short-term work. Since longans and litchis get easily spoiled, people had to work almost all day and night. Noi Duan borrowed some money from an agricultural bank and certainly also from his mother. He invested a lot of money but gained only little profit, so he decided to stop his plant in 2003.

He then turned to grow chilies again and began to feed two cows. This year he assists his elder sister’s daughter to sell motorcycles and other electric house appliances, and lets his wife take care of the cows. He works hard everyday, for example transporting motorcycles and appliances from a big shop in the city to his niece’s shop and bringing them from this shop to the clients’ houses. Sometimes he had to go to the clients’ house to ask for their installment payments. He was so busy that he often returned home at night. Life without any degrees was very hard and he did not want his children to follow in his footsteps. He encouraged them to study hard and felt proud of their success in studying:

I always tell my daughters that I had no opportunity for higher education. You are my representatives. Please study as hard as you can to gain the highest education. I will do my best to provide money for you.

(Interview with noi Duan on 9 July 2005)

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32 Chiang Mai is rich of longans and litchis. The excess fresh products that are of rather low quality are finally sent to big factories to produce canned fruit. These factories however accept only the peeled longans and litchis without seeds. The local plants are temporarily set up by some local people, including noi Duan, for preparing such products. These plants need many workers to peel the skins and remove the seeds of longans and litchis. The owners of the plants buy these fresh fruits from orchard owners. After the preparation process in the plant, the products are delivered to the big factories in the city.
Learning and practicing ‘khatha’

It seemed that ui Chan wanted to give noi Duan all khatha, especially khwauk sui. When he was a novice and could write and read northern Thai language (kham muang) fluently, ui Chan taught him her khatha. During his monkhood, he only memorized but did not practice those khatha. When he left monkhood, he did not actually help ui Chan but only provided some facilities during her treatment, for example cutting plaster casts fixed by hospitals or preparing many ready-made wooden casts. After receiving khwauk sui, noi Duan behaves like other villagers. He does not follow the Buddhist religious precepts strictly. He sometimes drinks liquor or kills animals for food. According to his interpretation, khwauk sui is not as strong as the khatha used during wars or battles to protect persons from injuries. Only a person who received the later khatha has to behave strictly under a special rule to keep its effectiveness. Since he only receives khwauk sui, the rules are more flexible. This is quite different from ui Chan’s daily practices. She strictly followed the Buddhist religious precepts to maintain the power of her khatha. She also avoided her daily habits that may decrease the power of khatha according to the traditional belief, such as not to stand under banana trees or walk under the ground floor of a house.

Noi Duan proudly told of his mother’s reputation. She helped thousands of patients. Between 1995-2000 a large pile of plaster casts from patients with fractured bones lay at ui Chan’s gate and a big pile of patients’ walking sticks was gathered at the ground floor of her house. Noi Duan considered ui Chan as a great mother, who never relied on her children. She gained money by herself and always supported her children with some money. She also supported other elderly persons and temples. With this way of life, people considered that ui Chan was a great Buddhist. When some older persons reached the end of their life, their cousins asked her to alleviate them by tying their wrists with magical thread (sai sin). They believed that ui Chan’s merit (bun

33 There is a great difference of spelling between central Thai and northern Thai language. Northern Thai spoken language cannot be transcribed completely into central Thai alphabet. It is believed that the northern Thai khatha will be less effective or ineffective if they are spoken incorrectly. Therefore, it is important for northern Thai healers (mo muang) to learn the northern Thai alphabet. (Interview with ui nhan Dang on 9 January 2004 and noi Duan on 9 July 2005)

34 Interview with noi Duan on 10 July 2005
barami) could, more or less, bring those older persons to a good world after their death.\(^{35}\) It is noteworthy that this image of ui Chan was repeatedly presented by noi Duan to legitimize himself as the beloved son of a great healer, about which I will discuss later.

Not only a ready-made wooden cast was an innovation of noi Duan, he also made the aforementioned rules, that created some criticism. When he felt that his mother worked too hard and received little money, he decided to make known a rule which explained the teacher spirits’ fee and the treatment fee on a white board:

I considered that my mother worked too hard. Moreover, some patients did not pay a fee for the teacher spirits, which gave her headache and dizziness for doing wrong to the teacher spirits. I increased the teacher spirits fee for treatment of fractured bones from thirty-two baht to one hundred and eight baht. This fee had to be put in the teacher spirits tray before starting treatment. For spot-pressing massage, it became one hundred and fifty baht. I also formulated a new rule that she no longer would give treatment at a patients’ house since she was too old. All information was written on a white board and put near the teacher spirit tray under a shelf of the Buddha statues. (Interview with noi Duan on 10 January 2004)

Confirmed as a healer

It should be noted that ui Chan is an important person who was able to convince people. There are two important events which let people believe that ui Chan approved the effectiveness of her son’s khatha. Firstly, she asked noi Duan to treat her when she had an accident in 1982, and secondly, noi Duan gave her the same treatment at the terminal state of her life:

In 1982, when my mother and our neighbors visited Sri So Dha temple, they had a car accident. All of them were sent to a university hospital. When I arrived at the hospital I saw blood draining from her face. It was terrible that we had to wait for doctors without any help. My mother helped herself by murmuring her khatha to stop bleeding. Finally we moved her to a private hospital. She had some injuries at her forehead and a small fracture at one leg. She received treatment at her forehead, but decided to treat the fractured bone by herself. She asked me to help fixing her fractured bone with a wooden cast and to blow with khatha.

\(^{35}\) Interview with noi Duan on 10 January 2004
About two weeks before my mother passed away, she felt pain and could not lift her left arm. There was something like an unfixed mass under her skin. She asked me to blow khatha and rub that mass with her cotton bundle blown with khatha. In the first three days of treatment, nothing improved. She wondered whether I had memorized the khatha correctly and she asked me to recite the khatha. It was correct. I asked her to make offerings to the teacher spirits. This means that my mother, as a patient, has to provide money and offerings to the teacher spirits, while I am in the role of a healer. We, then, continued our treatment and she felt better. (Interview with noi Duan on 10 January 2004)

During the two last critical weeks of ui Chan’s life, patients and neighbors who visited ui Chan often saw noi Duan blew khatha for his mother. Sometimes they found him treating patients under ui Chan’s supervision. It was a crucial period for noi Duan to be implicitly declared as ui Chan’s successor. It is notable that Suay, who had regularly helped ui Chan more during those three years, has been considered by the villagers as only an assistant, whereas noi Duan, who continuously helped his mother less than two weeks, was considered a healer.

During the terminal state of ui Chan’s life, she felt severe pain at her left arm. She asked noi Duan to visit her everyday to blow the khatha and to assist her giving treatment to patients. She sat in a reclining position on her bed and taught noi Duan how to give treatment. My son who had a broken arm was also treated by noi Duan under ui Chan’s supervision. Surprisingly, many patients with various kinds of sickness came to her house, so that noi Duan could learn different cases within a short time. I lived in Ban Tha Khwai [the village which ui Chan stayed when she was young]. My family believes that ui nhan Chak’s khatha have been transmitted to ui Chan and currently to noi Duan. (Interview with To on 18 May, 2004)

The most crucial ritual ceremony for noi Duan in becoming a healer was the phi thi khwam khun khru, the ritual ceremony of cutting ui Chan’s spirit from her teacher spirits by overturning the grand ritual tray in her bedroom. According to this ritual ceremony he became the only descendant to be stated as a healer, and he had to touch the overturned ritual tray, which meant that his spirit was accepted to become connected to his mother’s teacher spirits.36

36 Interview with ui nhan Dang who did this ritual ceremony on 9 January 2003.
Good image in the village

People considered Noi Duan to be a diligent and humorous man. As a farmer, he lives under the same destiny as other local people, like having debts or facing uncertain prices of agricultural products. He and his wife participate in all village activities. He has various experiences in working together with people both inside and outside the village, which resulted in good relationships. He used to be one of the members of a village committee that worked with the local government, and recently he has become the head of a farmer’s group in the village. His image of a good father and husband, who succeeds in taking care of his children, is another characteristic that people admire in him:

Noi Duan is a kind person, like ui Chan. He loves his mother. He is a funny man who can make us happy. His wife is also kind. She works hard and never gossips about people. His daughters are good too. They are very good in learning, have no boyfriends and help their parents to do domestic work. (Interview with ui Dwuang on 7 June 2004)

Becoming a bone healer requires according to the northern Thai perspective not only treatment skills, but also the ability to communicate with the supernatural powers and being a person who contributes to his or her community. It means that becoming a healer requires knowledgeable skills under moral and social control. These three criteria are very crucial to approve somebody as a healer. They are also interrelated. Besides a long-term practice, local people believe that the dedicated tactile sensations of a bone healer cannot become deeply internalized if a healer does not have a high concentration. According to northern Thai belief, high concentration occurs when a healer practices meditation or recites his or her khatha. Reciting the khatha gives also more power from the teacher spirits. Moreover, the reception of strong khatha for complicated bone treatment, requires relatively strict moral behaviour of the healer. The healer’s morality is a cultural belief that is an effective means to control the healer’s and in some degree also the patient’s behaviour. As mentioned by Hinderling (1973), such a belief controls a healer’s practice not primarily for financial reasons but for social reasons, out of sympathy or perhaps to achieve bun (merit) (Hinderling 1973: 174, cited in Roncarati 2003: 215). The teacher spirits induce the healer to ask for the patient’s responsibility to follow the cultural rules. But these moral and cultural rules are not totally fixed; they can in some degree be reinterpreted. The healer can
furthermore only be controlled when he still actually participates in the daily life activities of the villagers. It can be concluded that from a northern Thai perspective it is not a person him or herself who claims to become a healer, but this is constructed by the villagers and patients.
Chapter 5

Becoming a healer: situated learning and cultural practice

As mentioned in the first chapter, northern Thai bone healers provide integrated physical, magical and sometimes herbal treatments. The knowledge of northern Thai bone healing moreover is not recorded in northern Thai manuscripts as is the case with herbal and magical knowledge. Each healer always mixes and creates his or her own set of treatment activities by integrating his or her knowledge with other types of knowledge. The treatment of ui Chan differed from other bone healers through the combination of three elements of treatment: bone relocation, spot-pressing massage, and egg-rubbing treatment. According to this knowledge, there are three main elements which can cause pain and suffering of bones and muscles: a defect of the bone itself, the mal-arrangement of the sen that line across the human body, and the toxic substances (pid) congested in painful areas.

This perspective assumes that a balanced physical body is an integrated balance of bones, muscles, and sen. It is based on an imaginative knowledge of the structure of bones and related elements, which can only be learned through practice, such as touching and exploring bodies by hand and listening to the clicking sound of a fractured bone. However, the effectiveness of this treatment comes not only from technical knowledge but also from the magical power of khatha. People who want to become a healer have to learn both types of knowledge. As mentioned in Chapter 4, there is a great difference between the learning process ui Chan went through and that of her children. This chapter will mainly focus on the transmission of knowledge from ui Chan to her children within a changing socio-cultural context.

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37 The egg-rubbing treatment has never been provided by ui Chan’s uncle. It was combined with bone and sen treatments by ui Chan. She learned this treatment from ui Duang, another healer in Ban Mae Guang.
38 This treatment does certainly not focus only on the physical body. The supernatural causes that can threaten a patient are also included in the diagnosis and treatment. If that supernatural power was more powerful than the power of ui Chan’s teacher spirits, the patients would be suggested to have additional treatments from other healers.
Situated learning through apprenticeship

Ui Chan was trained to become a bone healer by ui nhan Chak when she was only fourteen years old. Since she had already learned northern Thai language from her uncle when she was young, she was encouraged to learn and memorize all khatha related to bone healing. To become an effective bone healer she had to learn the system of sen by offering him assistance whenever he had patients. It is obvious that everything she had to learn during his practice was rooted in cultural beliefs. For example how to behave correctly to maintain the effectiveness of the received khatha, when and how to prepare things for paying respect to teacher spirits, how to ask for forgiveness from teacher spirits if something wrong happened etc. It should be noted that this kind of learning is a form of practical learning. It is only active participation in actual healing and ritual practices that gives people access to embodied understanding. Therefore, learning to be a healer is based on cultural practice.

To get technical expertise, ui Chan began learning by helping her uncle to correct sen, fix dislocated and fractured bones, until finally doing everything herself. She also practiced this kind of knowledge in her daily activities. Since she also had to work in the paddy field to earn a living like other people, her neighbors usually asked her to correct their sen when they took a rest after planting or harvesting rice. At that time she was still young. It gave her confidence when people told her that she had a talent in correcting sen. She strongly believed in her uncle’s knowledge. She often told the story of a man who was seriously injured by a buffalo and was healed by her uncle. His fingers, hands, arms and legs were broken in a complicated way. Ui Chan’s uncle cured him completely and he could work again in the paddy field. At that time she assisted her uncle in treating him. She finally received her uncle’s ritual tray to connect her spirit with the teacher spirit. Ui Chan practiced healing all her life. She always integrated new treatments or new techniques with her healing treatment, such as the aforementioned egg-rubbing treatment and an elastic banding in the form of the figure eight used in the hospital.

39 Her uncle was a nhan, who had already been ordained as a monk. In those days it meant that he was a knowledgeable man who could write and read northern Thai texts and khatha or charms.
Suay started to help her mother regularly to give treatment when she was forty-six years old. Her aim to participate in the bone and sen treatment was different from that of ui Chan herself. Whereas ui Chan had the strong desire to follow her uncle’s footstep to become a great healer, Suay wanted only to share ui Chan’s burden of healing treatment. Her explanation was that she felt that her mother worked too hard while nobody wanted to stay home and help her. The other children of ui Chan’s wanted to work as farmers, which though risky provided more money. She said that ui Chan often complained of her lack of dedication and forced her to learn and practice all treatments.

People perceived however that Suay knew more than the other daughters. Pin, ui Chan’s niece, who also helped ui Chan, might know the same as Suay or slightly less. Although people believed that noi Duan had received all khatha (charms), they did not believe that he could give treatment of sen and remove poison. We can conclude from this that to become a healer learning through practice is required. The two forms of practical knowledge that those who want to become a healer have to learn simultaneously, are technical knowledge and ritual practice.

Practicing and learning bone and ‘sen’ systems

I can bet that only through observation or looking at pictures [which were taken by the Thai Traditional Medicine Institute] one cannot practice. It is only through learning in actual practice under supervision of a healer that one knows how to give treatment. (Interview with Suay on 2 June 2005)

Suay learned from her mother through the process of apprenticeship. She and Pin began with egg-rubbing, a relatively simple treatment. Since this kind of treatment needs a specific khatha, ui Chan blew the khatha over the boiled eggs and they only rubbed over a patient’s body. After that they had to learn, memorize and recite this khatha correctly so that they could give the whole treatment by themselves. Suay received khatha from ui Chan on 15 of April 1998, two years before Pin. Whereas other people outside the kin group who wanted to receive khatha had to

40 It is a traditional belief that 15 April, which is called wan pha ya wan (the greatest day), is the best day for any kind of good activities, including receiving khatha.
provide a ritual tray with a fee for the teacher spirits, all of ui Chan’s children and nieces only simply received them from ui Chan: ‘because we have the same blood, the knowledge and khatha are ready for us. Just only our mother who was a healer allowed us to learn and we could spell that khatha correctly. It was enough to become healers’. In the case of spot-pressing massage (chab sen) they learned first how to use their feet to press on certain spots at the legs of patients. This is what most northern Thai, who are over thirty-five years old, get used to practice with their parents and grandparents:

After learning egg-rubbing treatment, we learned spot-pressing technique by using our feet (yeap kha phae). A patient lies on one side and crosses his legs – one leg in a straight position and the other outside leg is crossed over in an angled position. We stood on the straight leg and pressed our inclined foot at certain spots. At first, my mother held our foot and put it on the correct spots. She told us to check from a patient’s sensations whether it was the correct spot. For example, if a typical sen at the base of our leg is pressed, a patient will feel hotness in that leg as soon as a healer stops pressing. The hot feeling will progress from the upper to the lower parts of the leg. (Interview with Suay on 2 June 2005)

It is noteworthy that they learned how to practice through the senses of the body. When I visited them, I always saw Suay and Pin yeap kha phae each other, which let them perceive certain sensations through their bodies. Suay claimed that she had opportunity to learn spot-pressing technique more than Pin during the nighttime. She always took care of ui Chan at night, while her mother asked her to press her sen and taught her to do this correctly. Suay also practiced this for me when I interviewed her on 24 June 2005.

Learning about the sen in the upper part of the body was more difficult. In the beginning Suay and Pin learned through ui Chan’s body. Through her body sensations, ui Chan knew whether they pressed the correct spots or not. She told them to press crucial spots in the upper part of her body such as two spots near the clavicle bones for treatment of shoulder-ache, and told them how to check if they practiced correctly. It is the same logic of yeap kha phae that pressing a certain spot on the body will give a typical sensation of prickle at a certain point. After that, ui Chan let

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41 Ui Chan also did this ritual ceremony when she received this khatha from ui Duang.
42 Interview with Suay, Pin and noi Duan on 24 June 2005
them give spot-pressing massage to her patients. In this practice they learned more complicated treatments, corresponding to the patients’ symptoms and the characteristics of their bodies. By touching patients with the tips of their fingers they felt the abnormality of sen, such as the sen’s toughness or wrong arrangement of two adjacent sen. Ui Chan showed them how to press the nexus of sen at the abdomen, which is the center of all sen in the body, and how to know if it was the correct spot. They had to identify the position of the ovary, stomach and intestine to avoid any damage of those organs during treatment.

In order to gain deep knowledge of sen, they had to know the local knowledge of the bone system and the relationship between bones, sen and muscles. Sometimes pain or muscle strain is a result of an improper relationship of those three components, for example if the sen is hidden behind a bone, the movement of this bone will cause pain. A minor motion of bone and joint out of the original position or socket also causes pain. How to give differentiate diagnosis from touching, observing, and listening when patients change their positions or move their bodies is very delicate and complicated and they needed a long period of time to gain a deeply internalized understanding.

The supreme form of bone healing is to fix dislocated joints or fractured bones, which is usually combined with correcting sen after they have been completely fixed. Almost all local people believed that it is not only technical knowledge that can treat these symptoms. The healer has to receive a strong khatha called khwauk sui. All ui Chan’s children received this khatha. However, only noi Duan is believed to ‘have’ khwauk sui, because he is noi, and he is the only one who was mentioned as a healer descendant in phi thi kwam khun khru, as already mentioned in Chapter 4. It is very remarkable that although Suay is a person who arranged fractured bones or supervised noi Duan to give treatment according to what she knew from ui Chan, most of the patients believed that without noi Duan’s khatha, their fractured bone might not have been healed.

Suay learned how to diagnose and rearrange fractured bones and how to fix dislocated joints by being her mother’s assistant:

My mother examined by touching a suspected area. If that area was broken, we heard a crackling sound and a patient always cried louder, she let me do the same. After that she arranged the fractured bone and fixed it
tightly with a bamboo cast or an elastic bandage. For example, Toi, my cousin at Ban Tha Khwai, had her left patella broken into many small pieces. Her husband carried her to my mother’s house, the broken patella was arranged and fixed with a semi-flexible metal, blown over with khwaik sui and hit softly with a bundle of cotton [which was specially prepared by blowing khwaik sui], then, wrapped tightly with elastic bandage. I helped her all the process so that when we had a new patient [after the death of ui Chan] I could tell noi Duan how to do it. [...] For dislocated joints, Pin and I helped her to pull that bone and fix it into the original position. I noticed that a healer like my mother must be a firm person. Although patients cried loudly and asked to stop, as bone healers we have to continue our treatment, otherwise we cannot fix those joints. (Interview with Suay on 2 June 2005)

Learning ritual and cultural practices

The cultural dimension of healing is not transmitted as explicit technical knowledge. It is quite natural that the belief in good spirits, bad spirits and the belief in powerful khatha or merit that can control bad spirits, were internalized by Suay, Pin, other children of ui Chan, and almost all villagers. Since they were young children, they have practiced ritual ceremonies for their family-protecting spirit (phi phu ya) and the village-protecting spirit (phi siao ban). When they had serious life or health problems they still consulted spirit mediums and did special ritual ceremonies. However, as ui Chan’s assistants, Suay and Pin were more involved in a spiritual world than the other children of ui Chan. They saw what happened to ui Chan when her patients forgot to follow the treatment rules, especially when they did not provide offerings to the teacher spirits before having treatment:

If patients disobeyed the rules such as not to provide offerings and a treatment fee to the teacher spirits or if they removed bamboo casts that fixed their broken bone by themselves, my mother would be in trouble. She would have a headache or dizziness. When achan Narong, a teacher in the Chiang Mai Technology University visited ui Chan, he saw my mother bending her head sitting quietly. She could not even raise up her head. He called me at my house [when I interviewed achan Narong on 20 February 2003, he told me the same story]. I had to prepare a ritual tray that consisted of fried chicken, flowers, and candles to ask for forgiveness from the teacher spirits. After that she felt better. (Interview with Suay on 14 May 2003)

This happened not only to her mother, Suay had the same experience:
[…] the spirit is something that should not be offended. It happened to me as well. When we had a lot of patients, I felt exhausted while my mother was still in a normal condition. Sometimes I brought some money from her ritual tray, and I felt pain over my whole body. I usually told my mother that she should ask her teacher spirits to give me permission to be her assistant, and to allow me to spend some money. (Interview with Suay on 14 May 2003 and 24 June 2004)

When Suay practiced healing by herself after the death of *ui* Chan, I noticed how she reinterpreted the meaning of this ritual ceremony. On Wednesday, 9 June 2005 Suay offered fried chicken, sticky rice, fruits, flowers and candles to the teacher spirits. She told me that she felt fatigue and considered that she got a lot of money from providing treatment after the death of her mother. She should offer food to the teacher spirits. The way she prepared offerings implied that she did something wrong and that she asked for forgiveness. However, the issue of doing something wrong was in her case related to money. It is noteworthy that whereas all ritual ceremonies that are involved in bone healing are not taught explicitly, they had crucial influence on the credit of a new healer. The practical knowledge of ritual ceremonies was employed by new healers to claim themselves as the authentic successor of *ui* Chan, which topic will be discussed in the next chapter.

Since *noi* Duan has spent almost all his time to earn a living, he had no chance to participate in a long period of practical training from his mother like Suay. However he knew northern Thai language and learned *khatha* when he was still young so that he met an important requirement of northern Thai belief for a person who could receive, and control *khwauk sui*, the powerful *khatha*.

*Noi* Duan had little experience in learning bone healing from *ui* Chan. Only about two weeks before the death of *ui* Chan he had concentrated on learning fractured bone healing. He had therefore to work with Suay, who had more practical knowledge in the treatment of fractured bones. His confidence in providing treatment was influenced by his deep belief in the *khatha* and his experiences of its effectiveness. Moreover, his patients and most villagers believe that also.

Although he had less opportunity to learn fractured bone treatment from other people’s illness, he had a direct experience of being a patient of *ui* Chan when he had motorcycle accident. At that time he was about twenty-two years old. His left shoulder joint was dislocated and his left arm
was fractured. His mother fixed the fractured bone with a wooden cast and by blowing with *khatha*. After removal of the wooden cast on the third day of treatment, she fixed the dislocated joint with an elastic banding in the form of the figure eight that normally is used in the hospital and by blowing over it with *khatha*. However, I noticed that when *noi* Duan told me the story, he did not focus on the technique of healing he learned from *ui* Chan but on the power of the ritual ceremony related to *khatha*:

At first, we [*noi* Duan and *ui* Chan] did not provide any offerings to the teacher spirits so that my fractured bone was not fixed. My mother misunderstood that we were mother and son, therefore the teacher spirits should help us without any offerings. After I had given money and offerings to the teacher spirits, the fractured bone was finally recovered. (Interview with *Noi* Duan on 9 January 2004)

Before *ui* Chan became seriously sick, she did not succeed in encouraging *noi* Duan to learn the whole process of fractured bone treatment. He still struggled to earn money. *Ui* Chan could only find some opportunities to make him familiar with her treatment. She asked him for example to cut the plaster casts or help her occasionally to fix fractured bones. Sometimes she asked him to visit a patient who lived near her house and to blow *khatha* over his fractured bone:

Around 1990, my mother asked me to blow *khatha* for *ui* Tui whose house is opposite my mother’s house. I opened his wooden cast, rubbed the fractured area with olive oil and blew with *khatha*. I blew over that area with *khatha* before wrapping it again with a wooden cast. I gave him this treatment until he completely recovered. He thought that I was ready to become a healer and told me to stop my work in order to help my mother to treat patients. (Interview with *noi* Duan on 10 January 2004)

*Noi* Duan had another opportunity to practice his *khatha* at his small plant. When workers who used knives to remove the seeds of longans and litchis got injuries, he blew his *khatha* to stop bleeding. People believed that his *khatha* was effective. All the stories he and other villagers told indicated that his image was attached to the effectiveness of *khatha*.

It is remarkable that Suay spent more time on practicing physical bone healing while *noi* Duan had more experiences in magical bone healing. According to the local belief, the effectiveness of

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43 Interview with Chin, a sixty-one year old woman who used to work in *noi* Duan’s plant, on 2 February 2004.
this knowledge however is a combination between the two aspects of treatment. It is a skillful physical treatment under the powerful khatha, which once was integrated in the treatment of ui Chan. The separation of the two aspects of knowledge forced Suay and noi Duan to work together, and at the same time led to a hidden competition between them. There were also the politics between ui Chan’s daughter and niece who knew about sen treatment. The politics and competition between all of them will be presented in the next chapter.

In Northern Thai thinking the body is a cultural body. To become a bone healer, an apprentice cannot limit himself to learn the bone system separately as in the western medicine. He or she has to understand the whole body system and the cultural beliefs about health and illness. Since normally an apprentice is a member of the healer’s family or at least he or she shares the same culture with a bone healer, the concept of northern Thai health and illness, and of human anatomy is more or less embodied in everyday life activities. This means that learning through practice with a healer is systemizing and reproducing that local knowledge. It is certain that the everyday life of healers in different generations or even within the same generation is not the same; therefore the knowledge that is interpreted, constructed and internalized by each healer can be different. In the northern Thai belief a person is however linked to supernatural powers. To become a healer, an apprentice has to understand his or her position in relation to those supernatural powers. This kind of knowledge can be learned only through assisting a healer during his or her ritual practices, both in everyday life practices, such as preparing offerings before and after healing treatment, and in the yearly ritual ceremonies. Moreover, also the moral behavior of being a healer is learned in practice.

In sum, during apprenticeship, an apprentice experiences and reproduces the existence of northern Thai reality. Besides learning the local concept of a person’s body, the apprentice learn about the abilities and limitations of a person who becomes a healer, about the supernatural powers that support a healer and at the same time control his morality, and he learns about the ritual ceremonies that connect a healer to the teacher spirits. Therefore learning to become a bone healer is cultural practice.
Chapter 6

Politics of becoming a healer

The knowledge of *ui* Chan has been scattered; her daughters, and niece can do only spot-massage and egg-rubbing treatments, her son who received the teacher spirit can treat only dislocated and fractured bones. None of them feels that he or she has a complete knowledge of bone healing and nobody has sufficient self-confidence to provide complicated treatments alone. This situation forces them to work together to provide a complete set of bone treatment. There is however some competition among all of them, especially among those who can give the *sen* treatment. It is an implicit competition for legitimacy that takes the form of gossiping, claiming better skills and references to supernatural powers. The degree of competition depends on the type of treatment and their previous relationships. Between Suay and her sisters, for example, exists a very strong competition since they had a big quarrel before.

The egg-rubbing treatment has no special technique but needs only *khatha*, all of *ui* Chan’s daughters, *noi* Duan’s wife and her niece can practice this treatment. It is therefore less competitive. Moreover, *ui* Duang, a person who has practiced this treatment before *ui* Chan, still provides egg-rubbing treatment against a low teacher spirits fee. Villagers have therefore many alternative choices for treatment.

Since Seng, the eldest daughter of *ui* Chan, has stopped giving treatment because of her colon cancer and diabetes, there are only three women – Suay, Pin and Sii – who are in competition of becoming an effective healer of *sen* treatment. Suay referred to two reasons why she was a more knowledgeable healer than the others. She is *ui* Chan’s daughter who has been trained two years longer than Pin, and she is the only person who knows the correct ritual ceremony to connect the teacher spirits. Sii, who occasionally helped her mother, claimed the existence of a special talent in the blood of all children of *ui* Chan, so that she can give better treatment than Pin (*ui* Chan’s niece). Pin insisted that she knows more than Sii because she spent more time learning through practice from *ui* Chan. The competition is, however, mainly expressed in an indirect way. Suay gossiped, for example, about Sii in front of other people (a patient from Ban Tha Khwai, Pin and myself) and seemed to discredit her sister:
Khaow’s children invited noi Duan and me to see their father. He had already had orthopedic surgery of his left leg from the hospital three months ago, but he could not walk. We [noi Duan and Suay] refused to give bone treatment because his fractured bone had been fixed with metals and screws, and his hip joint was not in a normal position. Khaow asked us to help him as much as we could. I decided to give only sen treatment so that he could move his leg and help himself in some degree. After that his children asked Sii if she could give bone treatment and she did. They provided offerings and 1,160 baht for the teacher spirits fee. I wonder what the final result is. She knows very little of bone fracture treatment. From my experience, it is impossible to rearrange bones and joints when metals and screws are not removed from the fractured parts. Until now he [Khaow] cannot walk. If Sii concentrates on money received from bone treatment fees, then she miscalculates. Giving sen treatment 160 baht each visit, will provide her more money. In my opinion, we have to keep our mother’s reputation. If we are not sure about the success of treatment we must refuse to do it. (Informal conversation with Suay and Pin on 10 June 2005)

Yesterday, I visited Sii while she was giving sen treatment. The way she pressed a spot near the hip joint was not correct but I did not dare to teach her. (Gossip between Pin and Suay on 24 June 2005)

Pin does not get a correct teacher spirits’ tray and she does not share the blood of our family. She is not close to our teacher spirits.44 (Informal conversation with Sii on 5 July 2005)

Although the competition between these female healers remains quite implicit, the competition between Suay and noi Duan is even more enigmatic. They told stories to communicate their competition in two respects – their close relation with ui Chan, and their morality. As mentioned in Chapter 5, only noi Duan is considered by villagers and patients as a person who can practice khwauk sui effectively, but in practice Suay is the person who arranges the fractured bone before noi Duan provides the khatha. This induced some embarrassment between them. Although they tried to accept this situation, I found that there is some degree of moral competition between them. Consciously or unconsciously, noi Duan sees himself as a more moral person than Suay. He often told a story to the villagers to represent himself as a kind of healer who does not concern about money:

44 When I asked Sii to clarify about the teacher spirits, she explained that it was the combination of the spiritual power (sometimes she used the local term winyan or soul) of ui Chan’s uncle (ui nhan Chak) and ui Chan. This power is transmitted within a healer’s matrilineal family. As a consequence a healer outside her matrilineal family has less power than she and other children of ui Chan.
When *ui* Dang, a ninety-five year old patient, was recovered from a hip joint dislocation, she gave extra money (treatment fee) to Suay and me, 4,000 baht each.45 My wife insisted to return the money to the old woman. She said that it is not suitable to receive money from an elderly person who cannot earn money by his or herself. It is a duty of the young to provide money for the elderly. Finally we returned that money and asked for her blessing instead. (Interview with *noi* Duan on 13 June 2004)

The story of his family’s morality moreover was also told during treatment. When *noi* Duan treated Pong for example by using the *khatha*, he told the story of his eldest daughter who had practiced meditation at Wat Rhampheng, a famous Buddhist temple in the city of Chiang Mai. The night before his daughter attended the meditation course, there was a loud noise from the place where she kept her white meditation dresses. His daughter told him the next morning that *ui* Chan might have come last night because she had prepared *ui* Chan’s dress to wear during meditation. This story was chosen to tell to Pong’s wife and his mother, who deeply respected *ui* Chan. The story remembered *ui* Chan and linked all actors together – the patient and his family members, and the successors of *ui* Chan. It contained also the implicit message that *noi* Duan’s family follows *ui* Chan’s ideology.46

The competitiveness between Suay and *noi* Duan can also be seen in the ways they refer to *ui* Chan’s spirit for legitimation of their healing power. Miraculous events related to *ui* Chan’s spirit were repeatedly told to villagers and former patients of *ui* Chan.

Suay claimed her mother’s support through the story of a Buddhist monk who indicated that *ui* Chan’s spirit was still in the old house to support her children’s treatment, while *noi* Duan referred to unbelievable events that sometimes happen in his house:

A few months after the death ceremony of my mother, I gave *sen* treatment to a Buddhist monk from Nakhon Sawan province. He complained about an unclean house and asked me to take care of the house and provided food for my mother like when she was alive. The monk did meditation in the house and told me that my mother’s *winyan* (soul) stays in this house. Her *kwhan* is still here. He told *noi* Duan to keep the

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45 Normally, people who recover from joint dislocation or bone fracture have to provide offerings (*dham hua*) to healers and their teacher spirits. The offerings consist of flowers, joss-sticks and candles. Some people also provide snacks and fruits. Money or a treatment fee is however optional.

46 Observation when *noi* Duan and Suay treated Pong on 29 May 2005. Pong’s wife and his mother also accompanied him.
main ritual spirit tray in this house. [After the death ceremony of ui Chan, noi Duan kept a main spirit tray at his house. The main ritual tray has now been separated, part of it has been kept in his house and the rest is in ui Chan’s house.] He also told me that my mother was most worried about me. She (ui Chan) will support me to heal people by staying in this house one day according to the time of the spirit world, which is one year in the human world. (Interview with Suay on 11 May 2004)

When I gave my first treatment to a man who had a right fractured patella, he provided offerings to the teacher spirits including one bottle of rice liquor. I put them in the ritual spirit tray kept in my house. One day later, I noticed the shaking of a bottle of rice liquor. Surprised, I called my wife and my children to come and see. I brought the bottle out of the spiritual tray and put it on the floor, it was still shaking by itself. I told my family that it might be my mother. She wanted to help me to succeed in this complicated case. (Interview with noi Duan on 11 May 2004)

Cultural negotiation

Hidden and complicated politics are going on among ui Chan’s children and her niece about the claim who is becoming the new successor. These politics never erupt, neither are they expressed openly. Ui Chan’s children attempted to negotiate and find acceptable solutions within their socio-cultural context. They referred especially to the spiritual beliefs to find their answers.

On 14 May 2004, I observed and interviewed noi Duan, his wife and Suay, while they were treating a joint dislocation and giving sen treatment to ui Dee, a ninety-five year old woman. At that time Suay taught noi Duan’s wife to correct sen. Duan’s wife was not able to do it well, because she could not continue her treatment when an old woman cried loudly. Suay told me that she might stop giving treatment in the future and wanted noi Duan’s wife to continue, so that husband and wife could help each other. Noi Duan told me that he did not want to practice sen treatment. He felt embarrassed to touch a woman’s body because he was a man and still young. If his wife could give treatment, it would be a good solution. When I interviewed noi Duan again on 11 May 2005, he told me that he still worked with Suay to provide fractured bone and sen treatment. His wife had given up learning sen treatment because her hands were not strong enough to press the sen. More important, in my eyes, is that noi Duan referred to a man who had given him a warning. If, according to this man, he and his wife would continue practicing all the khatha of ui Chan, his family might break up:
Wan told me to beware of holding \textit{khattha}. He told me that it was a \textit{khattha} of a widow-widower. My mother’s uncle [\textit{ui nhan Chak}] who had very strong \textit{khattha} was single all his life. My mother was famous when she was a widow. I think it is better to separate \textit{khwauk sui} from other \textit{khattha}, and it is a good reason for me to motivate my sisters to help me to give treatment like when my mother was still alive. (Interview with \textit{noi} Duan on 23 May 2005)

A reference to the suggestion of the spirit medium also solved the potential conflict between Pin and Suay. Pin told the story when I interviewed her in the first week of my field study:

Suay asked me after \textit{ui} Chan’s death ceremony why I disappeared when we had a ritual ceremony for cutting my mother’s spirit from her teacher spirits. On that day I was so busy. I felt deeply worried. When I visited Sii’s house, I noticed her well-prepared ritual tray with twenty-four \textit{suay} [a set of flowers, candles and joss-sticks wrapped in banana leaf]. It was a correct ritual tray. She told me that \textit{noi} Duan set up a ceremony for her. Last month when my husband was sick, we consulted a spirit medium in our village. This spirit medium never visited my house, but he asked me about my ritual tray. He said that it was full of other people’s poison. It was not a correct ritual tray. He warned me that I had no strong power to protect myself. If I gave treatment to persons who suffered from bad spirits, I would be in trouble. (Interview with Pin on 24 May 2005)

Suay also told that Pin would quit giving treatment:

Pin told me that she might stop treating the patients. She referred to the spirit medium who warned of the weak power of \textit{khattha} to protect herself. He (the spirit medium) said that even \textit{ui} Chan who had a strong \textit{khattha} was still defeated by the bad spirits. He pointed out that my mother died of accumulation of poison (\textit{pid}) given to her patients by the bad spirits. How can she believe that spirit medium! He is only a teenager in our village. (Interview with Suay on 29 May 2005)

In my opinion, it seemed to be a clever way for Pin to avoid competing with Suay. Since Suay also told me in the first week that Pin’s aunt, who was a merchant in the village market, always suggested that her clients have treatment with Pin by claiming that Pin was also \textit{ui} Chan’s apprentice. It should be noted that Pin used this reason only to reduce the tension during that period. In the last week of June, Pin told me that she found a way to continue her healing practice:
I have just learned that Suay received another *khatha* from *ui* Chan as protection against poison from bad spirits. On the next *wan pha ya wan* (15 April 2006), I will ask this *khatha* from Suay and ask *noi* Duan to prepare the correct ritual tray for me. (Interview with Pin on 29 June 2005)

The politics between *ui* Chan’s children were commonly known by the villagers in Ban Mae Guang. The patients who were in contact with *ui* Chan’s children tried to keep away from these politics:

I have felt pain at the left side of my body for more than two months. I took medicine and went to many clinics. The pain only relieved but did not disappear. I did not have an opportunity to tell my symptom to Suay who sometimes visited my mother-in-law. But I complained about my problem to Sii when she came to my house. Sii suggested to treat me at her house. Although I know that Suay has more skill than Sii, it is better to have Sii’s treatment. And I never tell Suay about my treatment. If I ignore Sii’s suggestion it might bring some conflicts in the future. It is possible that one day I may ask for her help. We still work together in the paddy fields. (Informal conversation with Rath on 27 June 2005)

In a society in which people still have close relationships and constant contact in daily life activities like in Ban Mae Guang, the direct expression of conflict is always avoided. The dissatisfaction and competition can be expressed by means of metaphor and symbols. Since northern Thai have a shared belief in spirits, placing the problems and the solutions in a spiritual world seems to be an effective symbolic communication and helps to avoid the destruction of social relationships. The good relationship is especially crucial in the cooperative treatment of the two new healers. Competition and negotiation by referring to the spirits is therefore the cultural way to keep their relationships.
Chapter 7

Symbolic healing and ritual performance of a healer

Symbolic communication between the two new healers and their patients is the main theme of this chapter. Since both healers are in a process of legitimizing themselves as a healer, there are clear differences from the symbolic healing and ritual performance of their mother. I will therefore start with a description of healing and ritual in the case of ui Chan. Moreover, the patients’ perception and their interpretation of the treatment, which is part of the culture shared between patients and healers, will also be presented.

Change of the symbolic power of the healing setting

The symbols involved in fractured bone healing and sen treatment are not communicated exclusively through patient-healer interactions. The healing context in which the treatment takes place is a crucial condition to create meaningful symbolic power.

Ui Chan’s house appeared to me on the first day of my six-week-fieldwork as dreary and quiet. It did not provide any warmth or lively feeling to its guests as in the past. A roughly built new bamboo fence separated the house from Suay’s new western style building. Around the house many vines had covered the fruit trees and some of them climbed up to the house. The corner near the stairs that had been used as a place to leave behind walking sticks of recovered patients was now filled with a pile of old books and magazines. This state of the house formed a great contrast with the situation when ui Chan was still alive. At that time ui Chan’s house had a healing atmosphere and reminded people of life in the past.

On 15 June 2003, I walked through a little lane almost opposite to a private kindergarten to visit ui Chan’s house. When I arrived, I was suddenly attracted by the word ‘ban ui Chan’ written both in central Thai and northern Thai (kham muang) alphabet on two sides of a concrete fence. When
entering the open gate to the courtyard, the old northern style house and the shady environment created a feeling of calmness and relaxation.  

_Ui_ Chan’s house was an old shaded northern Thai style home, surrounded by plenty of fruit trees. The wooden house was raised about one and a half meter above the ground. In front of the house, near the roof, was the inscription: _Buddhist Era 2501_ [1958], which referred to the year the house was built. For many patients the large pile of walking sticks near the stairs was a confirmation of her bone healing expertise. Middle class people perceive the image of _ui_ Chan’s house as a symbol of their parents’ house, which leads their imagination back to the past. Nearby villagers perceive this house as a common and familiar place that is very different from the hospital. Every element and the whole scene of both _ui_ Chan’s house and her practice told deeply familiar stories of northern Thai culture and spiritual belief.

The wooden floor of the house was partly raised. It is called _tern_ in the northern Thai language. This floor can be seen as a stage for healing performances and as an informal place where healer and patients join in a family-like-atmosphere. _Ui_ Chan usually sat on a mat ( _sua_ ) spread over this floor, while her guests, her patients and their relatives sat on a lower floor. When she sat on the raised floor, people on the lower floor could see that above her head, on the eastern wall, was a shelf with four Buddha images and two electrical candles. Pictures of the King and the Queen were hung on this wall below the shelf. On the wooden floor under this shelf, was a local red offering-tray ( _khun_ ) in which the patients put the teacher spirit fee. To the left of this _khun_, was a white board showing the treatment fees written by _noi_ Duan (see Chapter 4). Near one of the house pillars, were an old beautiful basket for _maak_, a dish with _miang_ (fermented leave tea), bottles of drinking water bought from the drinking-water company, glasses, and fruits or local snacks such as fried rice. These were provided to anyone who visited this house. An earthenware water jar ( _moo nam_ ) was also offered at the other corner of the house to people who preferred drinking water from the well. A set of _maak_, _miang_, _mulee_ (cigarette) and an earthenware water

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47 Peng, and Malee, two of _ui_ Chan’s patients, told me a similar experience, namely that the environment of _ui_ Chan’s house gave them a feeling of peace and relaxation, compared to the stressful life of the city.

48 _Maak_ is composed of areca nuts and betel leaves smeared with lime. In the past elderly persons commonly use them for chewing to keep awake.
jar comprise the traditional set to welcome guests. This set has almost disappeared from northern Thai life, but it was still provided in this house.

When there was no patient, the raised floor was the place to welcome guests or to go on with daily life, such as sitting while having a meal or sleeping on the mat (sua). Some patients took a nap after having a massage; others took their food from home to have lunch with uï Chan. When there was a patient the raised floor became, however, a therapeutic space. Only uï Chan, Suay, Pin, and a patient were sitting on the raised floor, the other people sat on the floor observing every minute of treatment. Therefore, at this moment the raised floor looked like the stage of a lively performance. Whereas people on the raised floor appeared as the performers, those who sat on the floor became the audience. During a therapy all elements of the house seemed to be selected for their symbolic power. Everything surrounding the raised floor, such as the Buddha statues on the shelf of the eastern wall of the house, the picture of the King and Queen near this shelf, the picture of the uncle who was uï Chan’s bone-healing teacher and a ritual tray under the shelf of the Buddha statues, turned into a stage ritual. This scenery created the trust in the effects of uï Chan’s treatment.

Not only the scenery of the house was full of symbols, but also the way uï Chan moved her body. Her bodily movements represented many symbolic meanings that deeply touched people’s feelings. Uï Chan naturally represented herself as an authentic northern Thai traditional healer who brought the past to the present. The patients’ feelings were induced by the symbolic expressions of her body. Uï Chan was a good-looking old woman with a white skin, smiling face and white-knotted hair at the back of her head. Her charisma was also subjectively explained, she was credited with morality and religious conduct. She was usually dressed in neat and rather expensive clothes, such as a white lace blouse and a silk sein (a long traditional skirt). It corresponded well to her beautiful antique basket for maak and the just mentioned ritual scenery. She sat in a typical traditional manner, folding both legs beside her erect body, a position called pub-peep and considered polite conduct, but rarely practiced nowadays. While she was providing

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49 Details about uï Chan’s charisma and magical power in relation to her religious conduct were already given in Chapter 4.
therapeutic treatment her bodily movements showed a combination of physical strength and modest cultural refinement.

A gloomy therapeutic setting

On 20 May 2005, I visited ui Chan’s house for the first time since August 2004 without informing Suay before. She felt uncomfortable in showing me the messiness and dirtiness of her mother’s house. She said that she did not have time to clean her mother’s house because she was busy taking care of her six months old nephew.

When I entered the house, I noticed a thick layer of dust on the floor and spider webs hanging from the ceiling. Many things on the tern were rearranged. On the right hand side of the Buddha shelf, was a main teacher spirit tray (khun khru luang), which has always been in ui Chan’s bedroom, hanging from the ceiling. It was the same ritual spirit tray that was received by noi Duan during the phi thi khwam khun khru, the ritual ceremony of cutting ui Chan’s spirit from her teacher spirits (see Chapter 4). Inside this tray were offerings, consisting of a bottle of rice liquor, areca nuts (maak), and money. A big table that has never been in the house was put in front of the Buddha shelf. On the table were two pictures of ui Chan and one picture of a dog. The last one was an embroidered handmade picture of a dog, given to her as a gift at her eightieth birthday by noi Duan’s eldest daughter. The first picture, on the right hand, was a picture of ui Chan with a white blouse and a brown sein, sitting in pub-peep manner. A small microphone hung on a collar of her blouse. It was a picture taken when she was interviewed by staff members of the Institute of Thai Traditional Medicine. The second picture was a picture of ui Chan sitting in front of a big money tree. She is dressed in a uniform for practicing meditation – a white

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50 It is the tray that, according to Suay’s story, the Buddhist monk asked noi Duan to keep in this house. Noi Duan told me that at the bottom of this tray money was kept that was given by the former patients of ui Chan, approximately twenty thousand bath. ‘I never told anyone only Suay and you. I believe that nobody dares to touch this money’. (Interview with noi Duan on 23 May 2005)

51 A dog represents the year of birth of ui Chan according to the northern Thai astrological calendar.

52 When local people want to donate a large amount of money for some activities of the temple, such as for construction a new building, they will prepare a money tree. The trunk and branches of a tree made of the bundled
blouse and a white sein while holding a red traditional tray with flowers and candles. This picture presented also explicitly her big money tree, decorated with a lot of money. Behind these pictures stood a red offering-tray for the teacher spirit fees, which before was put in front of the Buddha shelf. The white board with information about the fee was located on the floor at one of the house corners. It was pasted over with a white paper with the new fee. The price for spot-pressing or sen treatment had increased from 150 to 160 baht. Other new information written on one side of the cupboard was the home telephone number of Suay and the mobile telephone number of noi Duan. The set for maak and miang (areca nut and fermented leave tea) had now disappeared from the tern. Only the moo nam still was at the same place.

New practices

Suay and noi Duan normally use ui Chan’s house to give treatment. Suay tended to avoid providing treatment at her own house. Only in the case of Pong, a high-educated patient with fractured heels, she used her new house for the treatment. Noi Duan however provided sometimes treatment at his house. Unfortunately I had no opportunity to observe noi Duan’s healing practice at his own place. I could only observe his healing practices at three different opportunities at the houses of ui Chan, Suay, and that of a patient. All of these treatments were provided by both Suay and noi Duan.

Getting access to treatment by Suay or noi Duan was quite different from that in the case of ui Chan. If patients came to the house in the way they always did when ui Chan was still alive, they had no certainty that they would get treatment. In the morning and evening, Suay was usually busy with domestic work – cooking food, cleaning her new house, and doing the laundry. She thus preferred that patients make an appointment by calling her at home. In the case of a fractured bone Suay would call noi Duan to come to ui Chan’s house or sometimes they would go to the patient’s house. However, most of the patients with a fractured bone went to noi Duan’s

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53 Some of these uniforms currently belong to noi Duan’s first daughter. She is now studying at Chiang Mai University. Before she stayed in the university dormitory, she lived in ui Chan’s house. It is said that she was the beloved niece of ui Chan. According to ui Chan’s testament, she is the owner of this house.
house first. As already mentioned in chapter 4 the local people felt more familiar and more comfortable in receiving treatment from noi Duan than from Suay.

For some new patients ui Chan’s house was currently becoming mae Suay’s house. The same mat (sua) that once had been used by ui Chan would be spread over the tern, that often was covered with dust. The pillow was put at one side of the mat in such a direction that the feet of a patient were opposite the Buddha shelf when he or she was in a lying position. If a patient came with family members or when more patients came at the same time, which rarely happened since the death of ui Chan, another mat was spread at another corner of the tern to let them sit on. Sometimes Suay asked a patient to wait for her treatment while she was sweeping the house:

The first day when father Tai came to my house, I had to sweep the house. He could not lie down. It was so messy and dirty. The day before he came, there was a storm and many leaves from the trees fell inside the house. He was so kind that he helped me sweeping the house. (Informal conversation with Suay while she was giving sen treatment for Tai, a 70 year old man, on 27 June 2005)

For the former patients of ui Chan the house no longer presents a warm and clean environment as in the past:

The [i.e. ui Chan’s] house without a person living inside looks dreary. (Interview with Kiow, a 50 year old woman, on 17 June 2005)

The house without ui Chan causes a feeling of sadness and loneliness. (Interview with Lamoon, a 67 year old woman, on 23 May 2005)

The sense of a journey back to the past declined when ui Chan disappeared from the house. Koi, for example, was a 55 year old woman who owned a grocery shop in the district market who

54 The term mae literally means mother. In this context, it is a metaphor of a middle-aged woman who has specific knowledge. On 24 June 2005 I met a thirty year old woman riding a motorcycle from the city of Chiang Mai to Suay’s house. She complained that it was very difficult to find this house. She had asked the villagers about mae Suay’s house, but people did not know it. Several times she called back to noi Duan to ask him how to reach the house. Then she noticed the name of the house, ‘Ban ui Chan’ (ui Chan’s house), written on the house gate. Somebody told her that this was the name of her mother, who was also a healer but had already passed away. To me this was interesting, since it made clear that Suay attempted to legitimize herself as an actual healer to her new patients outside the village, while she still referred to her mother when dealing with patients who used to have had treatment from ui Chan.
visited *ui* Chan regularly for having massage, having lunch or for taking a nap. She felt that the house or even the treatment that still was provided in the same house had lost its warm-hearted feeling:

> I rarely visited that house since *ui* Chan has passed away. It is not the same. It does not give me a warm feeling anymore. The house is only open when there is a patient. When *ui* Chan lived in that house, the house was open for everyone. She normally sat there — on the *tern* of the house. I often visited her, even though I did not have any problems with my body — just only for sitting or putting my head on her lap while lying and talking with her. She was a lovely and respectful older person. Whenever I met *ui* Chan in that house, I had the feeling that my life is not lonely. When I came back to work in my shop […] my body could feel the difference in being touched by *ui* Chan or Suay. The touching of *ui* Chan during treatment was directed to the point [that caused the problem] and showed the confidence of her knowledge and skill. More than that it had a sense of love (*mettha*). Perhaps because I love and respect her as my mother.

(Interview with Koi on 11 June 2005)

Although *ui* Chan’s house was depressing in the eyes of former patients, it had another meaning for some new patients and middle class patients. To them it became an antique house (*ban boran*) that the elderly people want to keep to remind the new generation of the northern Thai heritage.\(^\text{55}\) This meaning is however not related to any ritual practices during treatment, as in the past.

**Ritual performance and bodily movements**

There is quite a difference between the symbolic meanings presented in the ritual performances and bodily movements of *ui* Chan at one hand, and Suay and *noi* Duan at the other hand. Even their dressing style was totally different. Both Suay and *noi* Duan were dressed in a relatively western style, like most of the middle-aged groups in the village. *Noi* Duan was dressed like other men in the villages with a T-shirt and long or short trousers. Suay, with short hair, usually wore a T-shirt and long or short trousers, rather neat in comparison to other villagers. She usually wore beautiful earrings, a golden necklace and a wristwatch. She could not sit in the northern style (*pub-peep*) when she talked or gave treatment to patients. This means that, compared with *ui*

\(^{55}\) Informal conversation with Tai on 27 June 2005, and Somsak, a 68 year old business man who lived in the city of Chiang Mai, on 29 June 2005.
Chan, Suay could not represent the authentic northern Thai woman. She represented a modern, northern Thai, middle-aged woman in a village that was relatively successful in the khwam thansamai period. It corresponded well with the story she sometimes told her patients about the success of her daughters in study, work and family life. But the symbols Suay and noi Duan communicated in their healing practices were different according to the healing context and characteristics of the patient.

Healing at ui Chan’s house

Suay an noi Duan could not create the same therapeutic environment as in the past. Although they tried to make good rapport to the patients, it could not provide a warm and relaxed relationship. They were usually in a hurry to continue their work and the conversation after treatment was short.

Since almost all of Suay’s patients had already made an appointment when they came to ui Chan’s house, Suay opened the house and was immediately ready to treat them. She asked them to sit or lie down on the mat (sua) spread over the tern. She then began to ask about their symptoms and to provide treatment. During pressing certain spots she checked with the patients if these were the correct spots. Whereas ui Chan spent more time to press the sen and taught patients the knowledge of sen and how to correct them, Suay sought only for the correct sen and had merely the purpose to treat them. The transmission of knowledge between healer and patient disappeared therefore in Suay’s treatment. Normally Suay would ask new patients personal questions such as the place where they lived, their job, who had introduced them to be treated by her etc. If they were former patients of ui Chan, then they were mostly familiar with her and ui Chan, and she would ask about their daily life, their family members and sometimes discuss stories that were related to the time ui Chan was still alive. After finishing treatment, the patient gave money to her by putting it in her hand (as I once could observe) or putting it on the red offering tray, according to the fee instructions written on the white board.

The symbolic content of the common bone fracture treatment as practiced by Suay and noi Duan implicitly communicated their healing relationships. I had however only the opportunity to
observe this treatment, after the fractured bone had already been fixed. According to my
observation, the way Suay and noi Duan had divided their roles unconsciously expressed a power
difference in knowledge and healing status.

When I got treatment of my fractured patella with Suay and noi Duan, Suay assisted noi Duan and checked
the sen system, while noi Duan healed the fractured parts with khatha. She practiced like a nurse while noi
Duan was in the position of a doctor. (Interview with Peth, male patient, on 1 July 2005)

I could precisely understand what Peth meant while I observed the treatment of a 62 year old man
who had a fractured bone at his right wrist on 9 July 2005. On that day, Noi Duan called me to
come to ui Chan’s house because a patient was waiting there for his treatment. When I arrived,
Suay was rearranging the fractured parts of bone. Around twenty minutes later, noi Duan arrived
on his motorcycle. He carried a big leather handbag of ui Chan full of all kinds of ui Chan’s
belongings for treatment, such as elastic bandage, wooden casts, and olive oil that is blown with
khatha. He sat down on the mat (sua) near the patient, murmured khatha and blew the khatha
over the fractured area. Suay who sat near him pointed to the painful areas she had noticed when
she rearranged the fractured pieces of bone. She told him to blow the khatha at those particular
areas. After that noi Duan opened the handbag, applied the olive oil and wrapped the patient’s
wrist with new elastic bandage.

Healing at a patient’s house

Whereas ui Chan usually treated all the patients at her own house, Suay and noi Duan sometimes
provided treatment of a fractured bone at a patients’ house. I observed both of them on 14 May
2004 while they were treating ui Dee, a ninety-five year old woman whose left dislocated hip
joint had been fixed a week before. Noi Duan had brought his wife and two daughters with
him. He told that ui Dee looked like ui Chan. The first time when his elder daughter saw ui Dee
she had cried because the old patient reminded her of ui Chan. Ui Dee was sitting on her bed in
the living room when the group arrived. Noi Duan embraced her while his wife touched her

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56 It is this patient who gave the money to noi Duan and Suay, 4,000 baht to each, that was returned by noi Duan
(see Chapter 6).
hand. All of us including Lamoon, *ui* Dee’s daughter, sat on the floor talking with each other. Suay and *noi* Duan asked about *ui* Dee’s symptoms after their first treatment. Lamoon spread a wide thick cloth over the floor, while *noi* Duan moved the old woman from her bed to the floor. Suay, *noi* Duan and his wife helped *ui* Dee to lie down on the spread cloth. While Suay rearranged the hip joint and corrected the sen, *noi* Duan and his wife touched the old woman’s hand to give her support. After that *noi* Duan asked *ui* Dee to walk by using a walking stick. He walked besides the old woman and taught her how to move her body, while Suay and his wife supported her. It seemed that the relationship between healer and patient as shown in this context was dominated by the family-like relationships.

_The local mat in Suay’s house_

Suay’s house is for her a private area. She does not want to use her new house as a therapeutic place. But the case of Pong, a high-educated man who had resigned from his job at the district administrative office, was exceptional. He had both heels fractured one month ago, and it was difficult for him to come to *ui* Chan’s house. Pong’s grandmother, his mother and his elder sister had been *ui* Chan’s patients for a long time. He was therefore invited to have his last treatment and do the final ritual ceremony of giving offerings to the teacher spirits (*dham hua*) at Suay’s house.

On 29 May 2005, Pong, his wife and his mother went to Suay’s new house. Suay sat on the floor and the other three sat on the chairs. The bowl for receiving the offerings to the teacher sprits and

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57 Traditionally, the younger persons have to sit in a lower position than the elderly persons. This represents the hierarchical relationships of northern Thai culture.

58 Pong’s mother and grandmother were rich and well-known persons in the district. His grandmother, who already had passed away, owned the first grocery shop in the district. Although Pong’s grandmother was very rich, she never visited a doctor when she had problems with her muscles or bones. She asked *ui* Chan to treat her at her house. Pong’s mother and elder sister, Koi, believed also deeply in *ui* Chan’s treatment. Koi always visited *ui* Chan for a talk or to have lunch with her. All generations in this big family – from grandmother to nephews and nieces – used to have had treatment from *ui* Chan.

59 End March, Pong fell from a ladder while he was repairing the ceiling of his house. His wife and Koi, his elder sister, sent him to the private hospital in the city of Chiang Mai. The doctor X-rayed his heels and found that the bones at his right and left heels were fractured into many pieces. He only gave Pong some medicines and told him to take a rest at home to let the bones heal themselves. His elder sister suggested his wife to bring him immediately to Suay and *noi* Duan for treatment. But finally Suay and *noi* Duan treated him at his house instead.
the two healers stood on the table. Suay treated Pong’s heels and feet with an egg-rubbing therapy. When noi Duan arrived and was ready to provide his treatment, Suay spread the local mat (sua) over the raised floor at another corner of her house. Pong moved himself to that place and laid himself down on the mat. Suay sat near his left leg and noi Duan beside the other leg. While the three persons on the mat were arranging themselves to become ready for the treatment, the rest of us – Pong’s grandmother, his wife and myself – automatically organized ourselves. Pong’s mother who was seventy-eight years old sat outside of the mat, his wife who was older than me sat on the first step and I sat on the floor. It appeared to be the same arrangement as a healing setting at ui Chan’s house. While on the raised floor of the house, noi Duan blew his khatha over Pong’s heels and used olive oil blown with khatha, he asked Suay to do spot-pressing massage at the upper part of Pong’s leg.

I tend to conclude from my observations that the local mat or sua was unintentionally used to demarcate the ritual healing area from the other area of Suay’s western style house. Only the patient and healers sat on the sua while the others sat outside. This is not an explicit rule but it is embodied in northern Thai everyday practices. Surprisingly, while I was sitting on the floor observing the two healers treating a patient on the sua at the raised floor, my perception of Suay’s house was no longer that of a samai mai house. It was dominated by the atmosphere of northern Thai ritual healing. Moreover, a meaningful healing performance took place on the raised floor and at the moment of the healing performance the healers were in the highest position, an elderly person sat relatively lower than the healers and the younger ones sat at the lowest level. This represents northern Thai cultural embodiments, similar to the hierarchical system of Thai society and the acceptance of the power of healers, although they were still young. After Pong’s family had left, noi Duan carried the offering to ui Chan’s house. He put the offerings, which consisted of oranges, rambutans, flowers, candles, joss-sticks and money given to him and Suay, in front of

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60 The ground floor of Suay’s house is not at the same level; one part is raised. The two different levels of the floor are connected by two steps. Suay used the high-leveled floor to give treatment.  
61 When I observed and interviewed the local people about the meaning of sua in everyday life, I found that its meanings depend on the context. If the local people prepare the sua for a guest, the space on the sua became a special area for this person. Usually, people sit outside or at the rim of that sua. But if the local people use it in their daily normal life such as for chatting, sleeping or eating, the sua becomes a relaxing space where everyone sits or lies down to enjoy him or herself.
the Buddha images. He hung the jasmine garlands over the two pictures of *ui* Chan, burnt the joss-sticks and paid respect to (*krab*) the Buddha images. When the joss-sticks were totally burnt – which means that the teacher spirits already received (or ate) those offering –, *noi* Duan picked up three oranges, gave one to me and another to Suay. He also gave one envelope filled with money to his sister. Suay felt reluctant to get the money in front of me. She received it and asked why *noi* Duan was in such a hurry to take the money. It should be kept in the ritual tray for a few days.

**Building up healing confidence**

Compared to *ui* Chan, her children were not able to convince people strongly of their healing capacity, especially not in the first period of treating bone fractures and dislocated joints. In fact, it is not only the patient who needs to have high confidence in his or her healer, also the new healers, especially *noi* Duan, needed support to build up their confidence. Moreover, people in Ban Mae Guang and the nearby villages wanted also to prove the ability of *ui* Chan children’s. All of *noi* Duan’s patients were persons from the adjacent village who knew him and his mother before. It would be a painful situation for both of them if the treatment was not successful. Some of *noi* Duan’s patients were disappointed with the hospital and expected that he could help them. Others knew that their problems were not complicated and could be treated by local healers. One patient misunderstood that her problem was not serious and decided to have *noi* Duan’s treatment. But when the complicated healing process was going on she could not withdraw and stop treatment. *Noi* Duan had to cope with those different symptoms and expectations.

He built up his confidence in the first period of becoming a healer by asking support from the teacher spirits and especially from his mother’s spirit (*winyan*). In the more complicated cases he performed a ritual in which he asked for help twice. He brought *ui* Chan’s leather handbag that she usually used together with him. For *noi* Duan this symbolized that his mother had come with

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62 In the past, the offering-bowl would have been given to *ui* Chan. She would receive it by touching the bowl and by giving a blessing. The money would be kept in the main spiritual tray. Some patients, for example Koi and Lamoon, expressed the opinion that giving the offering-bowl (*dam hua*) to *ui* Chan and receiving her blessing in front of the Buddha image were more meaningful. (Interview with Koi on 11 June 2005 and Lamoon on 23 June 2005)
him and supported him. To some patients he explained the meaning of this handbag. In the eyes of other patients however the handbag represented the knowledge of *ui* Chan that was transmitted to him:

> My most complicated case was Kiow. She had been hit by her cow in July 2004. The lower part of her left arm was fractured – one part of the bone had almost pierced the skin – and her elbow joint was also dislocated. Suay and I had to fix both the fractured bone and the joint with a wooden cast and to wrap it outside with elastic bandage. When she came to my mother’s house the next day, all her left fingers were swollen. They were as big as bananas and their color turned into blue. At that time I lost my confidence, but I had to support her strongly. I told her that I guaranteed her with all my life that she should recover. That night I performed a ritual ceremony in front of the main spirit tray at my mother’s house and asked for support from the spirits again. I also asked my mother’s spirit to help me. I had to pass this examination. Suay also suggested Kiow to buy medicines from the drug stores; medicines for relaxation of the *sen* [the local expression for the muscle relaxing medicine] and medicines to reduce swelling [antibiotics]. I also loosened my wooden cast a little bit to reduce the swelling. Her hand was swollen for almost a week. After the bone and the joint were completely fixed, I referred her to Suay to arrange her *sen* again. I was extremely happy that she completely recovered; no deformity remained and she could use her arms as normal. It took two months for this case.

In March 2005 Suay and I treated *ui* Ta, my mother’s cousin, at her house in Ban Tha Khwai. She was eighty-five years old and had a dislocated hip joint. We fixed her joint, blew the *khatha* and wrapped it with a long elastic bandage from her waist to her knee. On the next day the leg became dark blue. When I opened the elastic bandage to apply olive oil and to blow the *khatha*, she began to cry. I asked her if her neighbors had criticized our treatment. I then guaranteed the effectiveness of the treatment. I loosened the wrapped elastic bandage on the third day of treatment and visited her everyday for two weeks until she began to walk. (Interview with *noi* Duan on 23 May 2005)

After *noi* Duan and Suay had succeeded in many cases, the stories were repeatedly told to new patients and raised the trustworthiness of the patients and, in turn, they confirmed the confidence of the healers themselves.

Northern Thai culture is embodied in northern Thai or *khon muang* daily life activities, such as in eating patterns, bodily movements, dressing, house decorations etc. The ways people perform their everyday activities communicate therefore their cultural beliefs and social structures. The space arrangement of *ui* Chan’s house for example – the Buddha images in the higher place, pictures of the parents and a main spiritual tray at a lower level – indicates the mixture and
hierarchy of Buddhism and spirit beliefs. This cultural embodiment is powerful in the sense that it is unconsciously internalized and expressed in every minute of all daily life activities. When these familiar symbols are condensed in a special situation and a specific context, they provide meaningful symbols for people who share the same culture. The healing of ui Chan and her children are still powerful in the sense that familiar symbols from northern Thai everyday life are expressed in a condensed form during their treatments, although in the healing of ui Chan’s children these symbols were recreated and communicated only in a complex case treatment. The symbols of everyday life are crucial cultural capital that local people continuously mobilize and recreate. The ritual scenery for example of ui Chan’s house, which represented the integration of Buddhism and spiritual power, declined when she passed away; her children brought out a more familiar symbol – the local mat (sua) – to form the stage for a ritual healing treatment. Local people however select and mobilize these symbols unintentionally. This is what they normally do in their daily life.
Chapter 8

Conclusion

The northern Thai terms *samai, samai mai* (new *samai*) and *khwam thansamai* that are given to the western concept of ‘modernity’ reveal the difficulty of the northern Thai in explaining the rapid changes of life. These three terms are dynamically defined. In general, they refer to the ever-changing socio-cultural conditions through time. The term *khwam than samai* is sometimes critically defined to consider the position of a person in the complicated modern society. It focuses on the word *than*, which is short for *tow than*, to understand, and judges in particular the ability of a person in dealing with modern life. The dynamic meanings of the so-called modernity offer people an opportunity to give their own definitions and meanings, which consequently provides them with new spaces to deal with modernity.

While the perception of people in Ban Mae Guang is that to become an actually *thansamai* person who succeeds in coping with modernity is an untouchable goal, they create the new space called *klang samai* or in-between *samai* to allow them to articulate the beliefs and practices of the old *samai* with those of new *samai*. A desire for something in-between the two *samai* indicates that people do not totally resist or completely accept the new *samai*. They try to find the way to articulate their own culture and negotiate to this change. It is in this unidentified space – in-between the old and new *samai* – where all people in Ban Mae Guang, including *ui* Chan, her descendants and their patients locate themselves.

The old ritual ceremonies however are still preformed by some villagers to cope with new threats and uncertainties, such as the lightening of magical candles to expel a bad fortune from the modern workplace. It seems that to those who are highly exposed to the rapid changes of *khwam thansamai*, the potential danger outside the family and community is too complicated to be handled with the old ritual ceremonies. This group of villagers recreates new ritual ceremonies.

The alienated teenagers in Ban Mae Guang for example invented a new ritual practice of the village-protecting spirit (*phi siao ban*), a guardian spirit who protects the whole community from external forces. Through possessing the teenager spirit mediums– a boy and a girl – the village-
protecting spirit is able to give them active daily protection instead of the traditional ceremony once a year. New roles are also given to this spirit that are relevant to the thansamai period, such as being a consultant about love and life problems. It also implies that the teenagers in Ban Mae Guang decide to reconnect themselves to the community instead of constructing their own network separately or participating in the other networks outside the village. It points also to the powerful familiar cultural beliefs and practices applied in coping with the complicated life of khwam thansamai.

The healing practice of ui Chan in the context of khwam thansamai indicates also the rich cultural capital that is embodied in the daily life activities of local people. The familiar symbols that have been embodied and routinely practiced by ui Chan, such as the old northern Thai style house with its traditional accessories, northern Thai dressing and her bodily movements, evokes the nostalgic feeling of people who dream of the happier life of the past. These symbols moreover are effectively condensed and expressed in the ritual healing stage. The customary Buddha images and the ritual tray in the house combined with the charisma of the old female healer, impressively communicate that not only effective technical knowledge, but also the power of northern Thai magic-religion are brought out during bone treatment. This integrated healing treatment was transmitted to ui Chan’s descendants during their apprenticeship.

Whereas technical knowledge can be in some degree explicitly transmitted through practice, the ritual practice is implicitly transferred. Since spiritual belief is deeply rooted in northern Thai culture, a healer is not expected to have only technical knowledge but he or she has to be able to transfer supernatural power to restore the equilibrium in the patient. Therefore, to approve that the healer’s spirit is connected to the teacher spirits – both through implicit or explicit declaration during providing treatment and in a big ritual ceremony – is a crucial step in becoming a bone healer. However, with the greater influence of khwam thansamai in the lifestyle of ui Chan’s children and their relative lack of charisma, they create different symbols and a different ritual stage. It is remarkable that they still mobilize the familiar symbols to communicate to the patients. The passed away ui Chan is invented as a powerful spirit who supports the new healers. Beside the stories of her marvelous spirit, the two pictures of ui Chan that represent her expertise and morality and the main ritual tray form the new ritual scenery in a house without ui Chan. It is
noteworthy that a more simple and friendly stage ritual – *sua* or local mat – is unconsciously used by the new healers to demarcate the healing area from the other area if the treatment is provided at the patient’s house.

It is obvious from this study that the symbols that are embedded in everyday life are a rich and crucial cultural pool for the local people to deal with their daily life in *khwam thansamai*. Even in the conflict between the new healers (see Chapter 6), the form of symbols and the reference to the spirits are unconsciously selected in a way that they communicate and negotiate with each other. This kind of symbol is internalized by local people who share the same culture, so that it becomes an impressive symbol. More importantly, it is automatically conducted during practice by all villagers, including *ui* Chan’s children. It is only through their daily life practice that the local people can find the gray area or the flexible rules, and portray their culturally shared symbols within that area.

In sum, the spiritual beliefs that are deeply rooted in northern Thai culture and continuously practiced in everyday activities still produce rich and effective cultural resources even in the time of so-called modernity. This points to Morris’ remark that the modernity which was adopted by Thai people is only modernity in appearance or image (Morris 2000: 147). Although modernity brings many changes to northern Thai culture, it does not bring the radical change to the traditional belief as assumed by Giddens (1991: 1-2, 17). It is evident from this study that local people still attempt to reconnect modernity to their local world. It is not as Giddens (1991) described for what took place in the West, namely that ‘the emergence of the new mechanisms of self identity …are shaped by… the institutions of modernity […] no matter how local their specific contexts of action, individuals contribute to and directly promote social influences that are global in their consequences and implications’ (Giddens 1991: 2).
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Figure 1 The shaded old northern Thai style house of ui Chan

Figure 2 A patient was paying respect to the Buddha statutes. At her left side was a money tree and at her right side was a white board showed the treatment fee

Figure 3 A patient’s offerings for the teacher spirits (after recovering)
Figure 4  Ui Chan in a neat northern thai style dress, sat (pub peep) on a local mat (sua) giving sen treatment

Figure 5  A bottle of olive oil blown with khatha

Figure 6  Different sizes of the ready-made wooden casts
Figure 7  Ul Chan’s nephew was providing an egg-rubbing treatment

Figure 8  The color of a silver coin turned into black after rubbing

Figure 9  A big leather handbag of ul Chan full of all kinds of her belongings for treatment. It was usually used by noi Duan.