

A Study of *Mo Yao* Healers: Traditional health care of ethnic Phutai in Northeast Thailand

Thanyalak Chaiyasuk Mollerup, and Preeyawan Kanwittayee
(Khao Wong Hospital, Kalasin province, Thailand)

Abstract

Phutai is a Tai-Kadai ethnic group, closely related to Thai and Lao, living only in northeast Thailand and central Laos. *Mo yao*¹ (หมอเพช) is a traditional healer: a *mo* provides health care using a method called *yao*. This study was conducted by nurses at Khao Wong Hospital, Kalasin, in collaboration with local community leaders and a group of *mo yao* in a study area covering 16 villages. The study includes the following: (1) The *yao* method: the *mo yao* generally consist of female ‘shamans’ who cure by drumming, dancing and singing, and using ceremonial methods and utensils. (2) The relationship between *mo yao* and the local community: the *mo yao* are highly respected local people, mostly farmers, who mediate between the spirit-world and the mundane. (3) Factors and conditions that determine how the *mo yao* have survived until today: belief in local spirits (*phi*), community participation in regulated spirit ceremonies, and a strong social network among the *mo yao* groups in the area. (4) How to maintain and strengthen the local wisdom preserved in the *yao* method by making local villagers confident in their *mo yao* heritage, and by making modern doctors realize that the methods of the *mo yao* can be incorporated into modern governmental health care in a holistic way. A future project of the hospital aims to utilize both traditional and modern medicine.

Keywords: health care, healing, shamanism, *mo yao*, Phutai

Introduction

The ethnic Phutai have many types of traditional health treatment – the most important being the *yao* healing. *Yao* healing is ritual healing performed by a group of female *mo yao* healers through poetic speech, chanting, drumming and dancing. The Phutai community in general still adheres to *yao* healing, but the majority of the younger generations do not recognize any value or importance of traditional healing. *Yao* is a

¹ For the transcriptions used in this paper we have followed the guidelines prescribed by the Royal Thai Institute. Because this system is not fully consistent, we have furthermore added the Thai word written in Thai script in parenthesis. For the ease of the Thai reader, the terms are spelled in Thai, not Phutai – for example, *mueang* (เมือง) in Thai is pronounced *moeng* (เมือง) in Phutai; likewise, *kraduk* (กระดุก) versus *du* (ดู). Terms that are explicitly Phutai are written following Phutai pronunciation, for example, *yao* (เพช). The spelling follows the Thai tonal system.

process of healing closely associated with Phutai lifestyle. If *yao* healing declines, then traditional Phutai ethnic lifestyle and identity will decline as well.

Objectives

- (1) To study the past and present situation of traditional Phutai health care.
- (2) To study the factors and conditions determining why *yao* healing has survived until today.
- (3) To study the relationship between the *mo yao* healers and the local community.
- (4) To study methods on how to maintain and strengthen local wisdom as preserved in *yao* healing.

Methodology

This qualitative research has been conducted with community participation (community-based research). The study team consisted of nurses, leaders of the community, *mo yao* healers, health volunteers, and local government officials. The methods used were interviews, team observation and group process including *mo yao* healers, *mo yao* clients, community leaders, local resource persons, and youths from 16 villages.

Modern versus traditional treatment

A related project about Phutai health care, conducted by a medical team from Khao Wong Hospital in 2009, concluded that the patients admitted to Khao Wong Hospital could be divided into two groups. One group was solely treated by modern (Western) methods (46%). The other was treated with a combination of modern medicine and traditional medicine and accounted for 54% of the study population. The traditional medicine was roughly divided into *mo yao* (26%), *mo pao* and herbal medicine (22%), *mo thamma* (dharma) and *mo song* (20%), 'ceremonial arrangements' (20 %), and sundry (16 %).

Short outline of Phutai culture, language and history

Phutai culture differs in many respects from the surrounding ethnic Lao culture, e.g., wedding and cremation ceremonies and *mo yao* healing, the latter is a Phutai variation of ancient Tai religious, spiritual and political life. Phutai is part of a continuum of the Tai language as found spoken in northwestern Vietnam, all belonging to the Tai-Kadai language stock, which originates from Guangxi, southern China. Phutai is related to the surrounding Lao language, but the two languages are not mutually intelligible; a Phutai will understand Lao, but a younger Lao speaker will not completely understand an elder Phutai because many vocabulary terms as well as the tonal system are different².

Historically, the Phutai originate from the eastern part of Savannakhet and Khammouane provinces of Laos, from where they were forcefully relocated during the

² See: ภาษาผู้ไทเพื่อสุขภาพ (Phasa phuthai phuea sukkhaphap): 'Phutai Language for Health'. In Thai.

first part of the 19th century as part of a Siamese depopulation policy in Lao territories. The elder Phutai in eastern Isan still recall names as Mueang Bok and Mueang Wang in the Lao hinterlands. Phutai history before the 19th century is disputed and obscured in ancient myths informing us that the cradle of the Phutai was in Dien Bien Phu, Northern Vietnam, from where all humans allegedly descended from the sky.

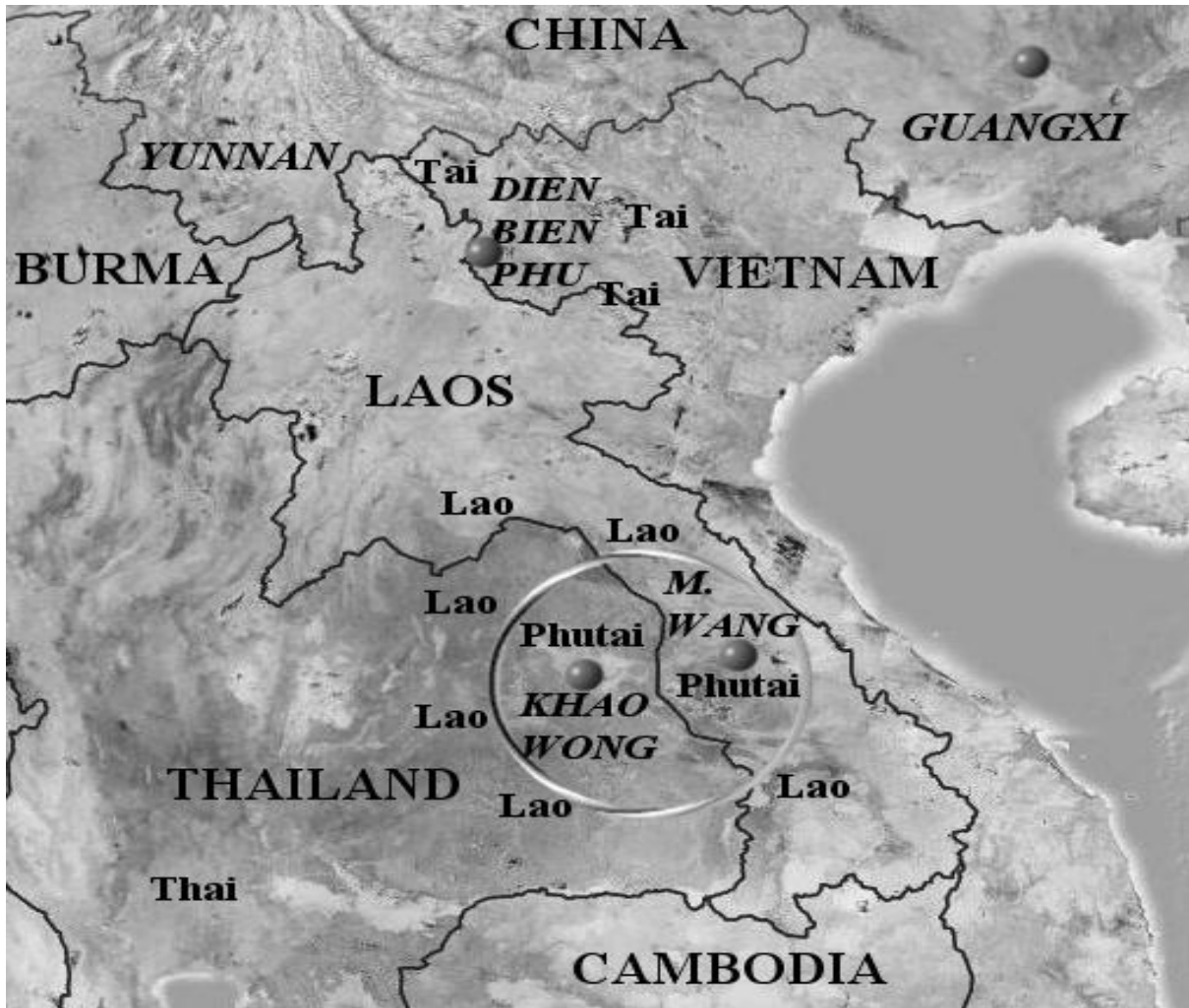


Figure 1: Map showing Khao Wong City and approximate location of ethnic Phutai and neighboring ethnic groups.

Yao health care - then and now

In the past *yao* healing was an integrated part of Phutai lifestyle, framing life from birth to death. The members of the community strictly adhered to beliefs in various spirits, maybe even more profoundly than in the later added Buddhist beliefs. *Yao* healing was a sacred ritual, highly valued by the community.

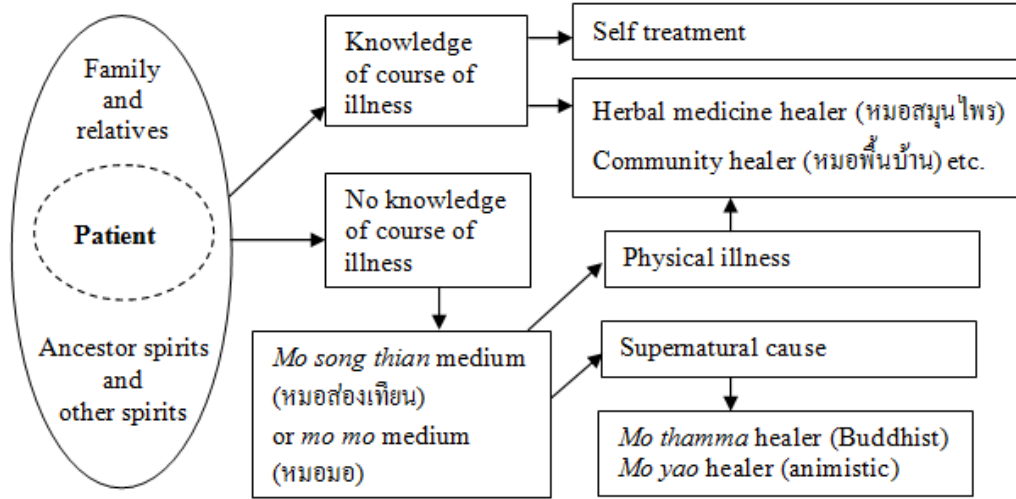


Figure 2. Health care in the past.

Nowadays modern (Western) development has been added to the traditional ways of life, affecting the basic values and concepts of life in the community. One result is a decrease in the use of traditional *yao* healing. Another result is that some types of *yao* – for example, *yao kuang sao kuang bao* – has become extinct.

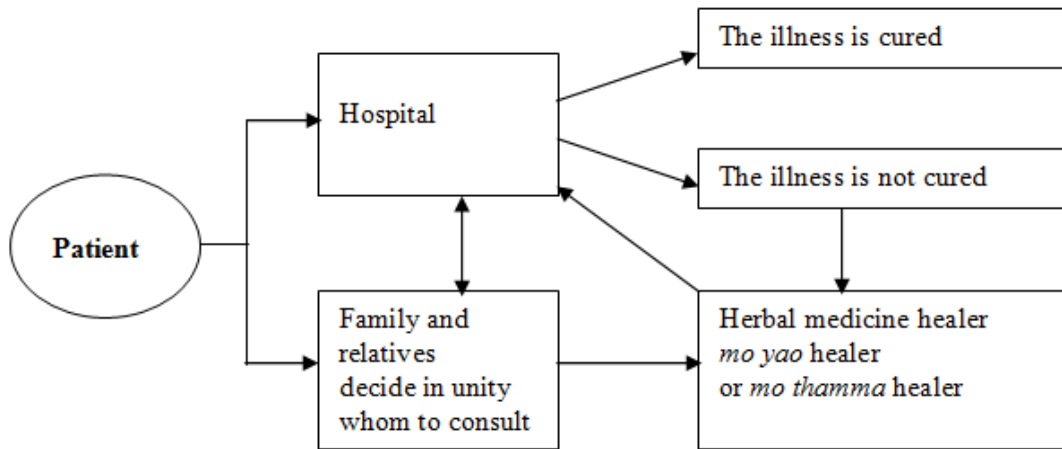


Figure 3. Present-day health care.

The Phutai have a range of choices for traditional medical care. If the patient does not know the cause of his/her problem, the elders of the family will consult a *song thian* (หมอส่องเทียน) or a *mo mo* (หมอมอ) medium, both of them only doing diagnostics, but using different methods. In case of physical illness, the next to be consulted is one of various community healers, *mo phuen ban* (หมอพื้นบ้าน), such as the herbal-medicine

healer, *mo samunphrai* (หมอสมุนไพร), the *mo chot kraduk* (หมอจอตกระดุก), or the *mo pau* (หมอป่า). If the illness is not clearly physical the cause of the problem will be considered to be caused by spirits and the Buddhist *mo thamma* (หมอธรรมะ) or the *mo yao* will be consulted. Nowadays the hospital system will be consulted as well – maybe before consulting the traditional health system, maybe after.

Yao healing

Yao healing is ritual treatment improving health through a medium (*mae mueang*), who acts as an intermediary between the human and the spiritual world. *Mae mueang* cures through poetic speech and chanting using an authentic and archaic Phutai language in accompaniment with musical instruments and ritual utensils.



Figure 4. *Luk Mueang* and *mae mueang*.



Figure 5. Medium in trance.

Mo yao healers can be split into two levels. (1) *Mo yao mae mueang* ('healer *yao* mother community') is the medium performing the *yao* healing ceremony. (2) *Mo yao luk mueang* ('healer *yao* children community') are *mo yao* members who still do not have the spiritual power to perform the *yao* healing ceremony. The roles of the *luk mueang* are to assist *mae mueang* in making utensils and to give mental support to the patient and his/her family. The *mae mueang* will perform healing ceremonies together with a group of *luk mueang*. The social bond between the *mo yao* is like that of an extended family whereby the *mae mueang* and the *luk mueang* have a mother–daughter relationship, and the *luk mueang* feel like siblings.

According to traditional belief problems – from day-to-day minor problems as headaches to major disasters – exceed the capability of ordinary people to change because they are believed to have a super-natural cause. Animistic (spirit) and Buddhist

(karma) beliefs coexist in the home of the *yao* healer, who will have two separate shelves for worshipping: *hing mo yao* and *hing pha*.

Before the development of the modern hospital system the community members consulted the various kinds of *mo* healers. Now, the governmental health system has reached every village through its health stations, providing another option from whom the villagers may consult. For some diseases, the villager will start consultation with the hospital and if it is not successful then they consult the various kinds of traditional healers, *mo yao* being one of them. Some diseases – mostly ‘mental’ (psycho-somatic) – the villagers relate to spirits and will start consulting the traditional health system.

Social levels of mo yao

The duties of the *mo yao* healers are performed at the communal level as well as at the individual. On the communal level the *mo yao* will be leading the annual *phi-thala*³ worshipping ceremonies in every district⁴ of the Phutai area. The *mo yao* will also lead the annual worshipping of the *phi pu ta* (spirit of the elders) at the village level. Every Phutai and Lao village in Northeast Thailand has a *san pu ta* (ancestral spirit house), which is mostly consulted for family matters. A third important communal task for the *mo yao* is during a drought, pleading for rain. At the individual level the *mo yao* provides support when sickness occurs, when villagers perform *tham khwan* ceremonies, when babies are crying continuously without apparent reason, during pregnancy, and when people are dying. A last and now extinct task for the *mo yao* was to *khuang sao khuang bao* (หลวงสาวควงบ่าว), where the ‘patient’ is an un-married teenager and the cure is pseudo engagement.

Reasons for becoming a mo yao healer

Several reasons were given for a *mo yao* to have chosen to become a *mo yao* healer, or rather why a spirit has chosen a person to become a healer. One occasion can be during personal sickness when a patient of a spirit may be confronted with the option of being cured if the patient becomes a *luk mueang*. A similar instance could happen when curing a member of the family, whereby a spirit can choose a participating member of the family to become *luk mueang*. The same spirit-choosing of a new *luk mueang* could happen while watching a *yao* ritual (regardless of why the locals formerly seldom attended *yao* rituals). Occasionally and very seldomly the spirit can choose a person who has never attended a *yao* ceremony or a *yao* healing. The aspiring *mo yao* will show ability in speech, dance, and utensil making without having been trained, and become a *mae mueang* directly.

³ The *thala* spirit is an ancestral spirit, who died in defense of the Phutai, allegedly during the era of Mueang Vang in Laos. *Phi-Thala* is still highly revered among the Phutai in Northeast Thailand.

⁴ Present-day Thai administration system: a province (*chang-wat*) is divided into districts (*amphoe*) and sub-districts (*tambon*), which again consists of a number of villages (*mu-ban*). Before the construction of modern nations, the Tais were structured in independent *ban-mueang* polities, where the *chao-mueang* (lord of the polity) ruled in close association with the leading *mo-yao* priest, and the *mae-mueang* (the mother of the polity).



Figure 6. *Mo yao* ritual dance.



Figure 7. Ceremonial utensils.

Steps in the yao healing ceremony

A Phutai is not an isolated individual, but an integrated part of a family, and when sick, the first to be consulted will be the elders of the family, who, in collaboration, will decide which solutions to choose. If *mo yao* is chosen, then *mae mueang* will be consulted and she will, assisted by her *luk mueang* and the family, prepare the required utensils for the *yao* ceremony in the home of the patient. In the initial phase of the *yao* ceremony the *mae mueang* will be sitting in front of the utensils inviting ancestral spirits to join for guidance and consultancy. When the spirit is present, the *mae mueang* will ask – using poetic speech and archaic Phutai language – what has caused the disease, simultaneously sprinkling rice on raw eggs (see **figure 7**). The answer from the spirit is interpreted by *mae mueang* by the way the rice has fallen on top of the eggs. The illness is mostly caused by another spirit that has been offended by the patient. *Mae mueang* will then invite the offended spirit to join the ceremony. When present, the spirit will be asked for the reason of offense and how to solve the problem. During bargaining with the spirit the *mo yao* will dance in a circle. If the spirit requires the patient to become a *luk mueang* the patient will attend the dance. But mostly the conflict is solved by offering food, alcohol, cigarettes, betel, sweets etc., to the spirits at their habitat in nature or the village. If the patient is cured within a month, then the session is over. If the patient is not cured within a month, then the *mae mueang* will repeat the ceremony. If it is still not successful at a third attempt, another *mae mueang* will be invited.

Types of spirits

Traditional concepts of spirit belief in the researched area count a wide range of spirits. Some spirits are malicious and feared, such as the *phi bob* (ผีปอบ) and the *phi tai hong* (ผีตายโหง). But the Tai⁵ spirits (ผีไท) – *mun* or *chuea* spirits (ผีมุน ผีเชื้อ), *mon* spirits (ผีมนต์), *far* spirits (ผีฟ้า), *nang Manora* spirits (ผีนางมโนราห์), *nang Ai* spirits (ผีนางไอ), *nong han nong khai* spirits (ผีหนองหานหนองคาย), *kaeo* or *kup* spirits (ผีแก้ว กุบ), *pu ta* spirits (ผีปู่ตา), *thala*

⁵ Not the nationalistic term Thai; note the different spelling and pronunciation.

spirits (ผีตลกา) – are all friendly and beneficial to humans if treated correctly; if not treated correctly, then they turn malicious and can cause illness.

Utensils

The utensils used by the *mo yao* are numerous. The *yao* healing ceremony requires 21 items. For example, ‘kantoke’ table, rice, raw eggs, alcohol, cigarettes, betel, three kinds of candles, sword, perfume, *champa* flowers, six one-bath coins, three pieces of silver, cloth, etc. The annual spirit ceremony requires an additional 34 items.

Musical instruments related to yao rites

Instruments used during *yao* rites include traditional musical instruments such as the string instrument, the *vina* (พิณ), the reed organ or the bamboo flute (แคน), and cymbals (ฆ้อง). Also implemented is the *mo kapip* (หม้อกะปิ๊บ), which is a cooking pot used as a drum.

Mo yao internal rites

Once a week, following the lunar calendar, the *mo yao* will perform offerings to the spirits at home on a pedestal, which consists of a shelf, the *hing mo yao*, located above eye level. Every new-moon and full-moon, the *luk mueang* will visit the *mae mueang*, presenting white flowers as a sign of respect. Once a year, during the ascending part of the lunar month in March or April,⁶ all *mae mueang* and *luk mueang* will gather for a two-day, one-night spirit worshipping. The main features include monotonous music and dance as a tool to get into trance, simultaneous with invitations to be possessed by the beneficial spirits listed above.

Mo yao and shamanism

Shamanism is a western term being brought to our attention after completing our report on *mo yao*. Literature studies indicate that *mo yao* is a kind of shamanism: “Shamanism can be described as a group of techniques by which its practitioners enter the “spirit world,” purportedly obtaining information that is used to help and to heal members of their social group.”⁷ Krippner also notes that, “any society may have one or more types of shamanic practitioners”.⁸ The role of women as shamans are often overlooked and we hope that our reporting on *mo yao* will provide other researchers with knowledge about this type of hitherto overlooked shamans.

Other parallels between *mo yao* and shamanism are monotonous chanting and drumming, ritual performances, and the use of symbolic ritual utensils. Shamans are widely known for their travelling to ‘the other world.’ The *mo yao* call the spirits to travel to ‘this world.’ Actually *mo yao* cosmology does not operate within ‘worlds’ – spirits live in this world together with us.

⁶ Except half-moon and full-moon days, which are Buddhist holy days.

⁷ Stanley Krippner, “The Epistemology and Technologies of Shamanic States of Consciousness,” *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 7, no. 11-12 (2000): 93.

⁸ Stanley Krippner, “Humanity’s first healers: Psychological and psychiatric stances on shamans and shamanism,” *Revista de Psiquiatria Clinica* 34, no. 1 (2007): 16.

We agree with Chilson and Knecht's suggestion that, "in treating psychosomatic disorders, shamans are capable of acting as mediators between humans and spirits".⁹ And, finally, we miss literature describing practical experiments integrating traditional wisdom (shamanism) with modern health care.

Discussion and conclusions

In this study *yao* healing is perceived holistically as a part of the Phutai health care system and critical to Phutai lifestyle and ethnicity. In the past *yao* healing was involved in every step of life; presently, *yao* healing is mainly for adults and the elderly. This study has therefore focused on how to teach the young generation to appreciate the wisdom of *yao*.

The Phutai community is rural, and the relationship among relatives is very strong. The young obey the elders, and the members of the community rely on one another. These are the main factors resulting in the fact that the *mo yao* healing tradition has survived at the village level, unlike in larger urban societies as seen, for example, in the Khao Wong municipality where people rely on themselves as individuals, not as part of a group. In the modern urban context, traditional knowledge transmission and learning from the elder generations to the younger generations has changed, resulting in a decline of, for example, *yao* healing. For a revival and continuation of the traditional Phutai health care system among the young generations, we propose the local governmental bodies to support the various kinds of *mo* healers morally, legally, and economically. We also propose that the government provide a new health care policy, integrating the traditional and modern health care systems. Otherwise, this and other crucial aspects of Phutai ethnicity will become extinct in the present era of globalization.

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