

## Changing Power and Positions of *Mo Muang* in Northern Thai Healing Rituals

### 1. Introduction

Over the two decades of rapid economic development in northern Thailand from the 1970s to the early 1990s various forms of popular knowledge have been noticeably revitalized, mainly in urban and suburban areas. Within Buddhism there has been great enthusiasm for venerating meditation monks such as *Luang Pu*<sup>1</sup> Waen of Chiang Mai, a famous forest monk considered to be a saint (*arahant*) as well as an intensification of fetishistic obsession for amulets which resulted in sectarian, into cults devoted to holy monks (cf. Tambiah 1984). In the area of spirit cults, signs of vitality are evident in the increase of urban spirit mediums who are mainly women. The belief in mediums provides women, especially poor ones, with a symbolic idiom in a form of spirit mediumship to regain their social status which has deteriorated as a result of the decline in ancestor spirit cults where women were once considered to have high ritual authority (cf. Irvine 1984).

In between the Buddhist monks and female spirit mediums there exist several types of folk healers who are generally known as *mo muang* (literally, specialists of a town). They are men of a strong mind who gain their moral and charismatic power through their experiences in

astrology (*horasat*), magic (*saiyasat*), herbal medicines and manipulation of spirits (*mo phi*). At present the traditional healers whether they are herbalists or specialists in treating broken bones, are disappearing. By contrast *mo muang* who specialize in magic and shamanism, are active and some have managed to become charismatic masters of cult-like groups (*phu wiset*). A number of folk healers have gained such status through the transformation of their positions in the structure of the northern Thai moral system which is partially demonstrated by their devotion to Buddhism. In this manner they have been able to attract as their clients the emerging rural and urban middle classes who believe in religious syncreticism but try to dissociate themselves from the belief in spirits in an attempt to find a rational identity for their new social status. Many folk healers no longer provide occasional services to local villagers as in the past but have instead set up a formal full-time clinic-like service for a large number of clients who come largely from out of town. In this sense, the way in which *mo muang* organize their activities has been transformed: while they are charismatic masters of cult-like groups (in a Weberian sense), they have rationalised the way

in which they provide their services so that they resemble modern clinics.

This paper will examine the changes in the power and moral position of *mo muang* as seen through a study of healing rituals. The focus will be on the three case studies; *Po Liang Thong* of Nan, *Pra In Mi* of Phayao and *Po Liang Kaeo Ma* of Lampang. The approach adopted in this paper will first focus on the indigenous perspectives as seen through their ideas of power, knowledge and morality. These ideas will, then, be discussed analytically with an attempt to understand their totality and their dynamics in the context of socio-cultural changes. They are not to be confused with analytical or heuristic concepts in anthropology or other social sciences.

The analysis will be based on a conceptual framework which defines belief as a manifestation of ideological power which can be realised through participation in concrete activities of rituals expressing contradictions in real social life. Ideological power, here, is used in the same sense as domination at the level of meaning. Rituals, in this sense, transform the manifestation and concepts of social reality into ceremonial acts which can express meanings and feelings of all participants in a social context when they confront ambiguity and unclear changes. The analytical concept of morality is defined as culturally acceptable ideas and beliefs of how social relationships should be.

In addition, concepts of transformation of power and ideological reproduction will be employed for analysing changes in the moral position and power of *mo muang* in the context of continuous changes in the socio-political sphere resulting from capitalist development (see Anan 1990). The concept of transformation of power requires elaboration because it will be used specifically to explain the dynamics of various kind of powers in the mind of indigenous people of northern Thailand which operate at different levels of ideological domains ranging from an internal power credited to particular individuals to transcendental power. The process of the transformation of power, in this sense, will be concretely expressed in the social context which enables the process of ideological reproduction.

Using the above conceptual framework, this paper will try to explain the indigenous concepts

of power in northern Thailand through a case study of the dynamic process of ideological reproduction of ritual knowledge which is currently practiced by *mo muang*. In contrast to Tanabe's focus on the analytical concept of power in his study of northern Thai spirit cults as a duality of power, external and internal (Tanabe 1988), this paper attempts to understand the native perspective on the transformation of power and how it operates at various levels of ideological domains.

There is a dialectical relationship between the two processes: the reproduction of ritual knowledge and the transformation of power. Ritual knowledge can be manifested in a concrete expression of the *mo muang's* ability to transform power especially at a time of moral crisis. At the same time, ritual knowledge can not in itself be translated into power but, under certain conditions, its reproduction is possible through the transformation of power. Knowledge, then, does not directly relate to power but the reproduction of ritual knowledge that can both be carried out through the transformation of power and contribute to the transformation of power. In this paper, 'moral crisis' conveys a certain social condition where there exists contradictions in ideas and beliefs on how social relationships, such as relationships on the basis of communality and individuality should be ordered. In this sense, the transformative aspects of ritual (as argued by Kapferer 1984) in which ritual or practical knowledge is employed may be viewed as expressing the power of *mo muang*. In ritual, the transformative aspect deriving from the power of *mo muang* is central to the resolution of moral crisis at an ideological level.

## 2. Background of the Three *Mo Muang*

The first case study is 78 year-old, *Po Liang Thong* who lives in a village which he established not far from a district center in Nan Province. He was ordained as a novice in his boyhood and then spent his adult life mainly as a long-distance trader. He inherited the knowledge of healing from his father who also came from a healers' family. But *Po Liang Thong* did not begin to practice his craft until he was 35, when he decided to cure his wife with holy water. Since then local people have come

to him for ritual treatments. However, he was not satisfied with the knowledge of healing inherited from his father but continued to study both modern health care at a sub-district level and traditional herbal medicine in Bangkok. He also learned more magical skills from a Shan master in Burma. *Po Liang Thong* also is devoted to Buddhism. He donated income from his healing services to build a monastery in his village. As a result he can attract clients from the urban middle class nationwide. In 1973 he was invited to perform a ritual to save a Chinese businessman from calamitous misfortunes that had befallen him in Bangkok. The businessman survived and became a millionaire. Recently *Po Liang Thong* performed the same ritual for the husband of a member of the Royal Family. *Po Liang Thong* is thus considered to be *phu wiset* (a holy master) by his clients.

A Buddhist monk as well as a layman can also become *mo muang*. The second case study is of *Pra In Mi* who has been in the sangha since he was very young. He acquired the knowledge of healing from his abbot and from various manuscripts. However, *Pra In Mi* only decided to perform healing rituals on his own at the age of 43 when the abbot left the monkhood. *Pra In Mi* also specializes in the rituals of removing calamity but his clients are mainly rural villagers from various northern provinces. He is 66 and remains a monk in a monastery in a district of Phayao Province. *Pra In Mi* is popularly considered to be a holy monk but probably not yet a saint in the meditation tradition.

*Po Liang Kaeo Ma*, at 56, is the youngest person of the three case studies. He was originally from a poor peasant family. He never ordained as a monk but learned enough magical knowledge from various people so that he was considered a *khon kham* (an invincible man).<sup>2</sup> He also acquired other knowledge of healing while he was a long-distance trader in the Shan State of Burma. At the age of 45 he began to practice his craft when local people solicited his help after he had shown his courage by standing in between two buffaloes in order to stop them fighting. His specialty is a ritual to remove the effect of black magic, knowledge he claims to have learnt from a Burmese hermit (*rusi*) through a famous holy monk of Lampang who was his childhood friend. He may not yet have assumed

the status of *phu wiset* but he is well known as a shaman with clients from all over the country.

### 3. The Charismatic and Moral Power of *Mo Muang*

Common to the three case studies is a certain inherent charismatic quality. In the view of the *khon muang* (northern Thai), folk healers are considered to have a strong mind (*khwan khaeng*) because of external powers. This means that they can maintain the equilibrium of their body elements and good relationships with external powers, such as fates (*chata*), destiny (*kamma*), and spirits (*phi*). This quality can be clearly demonstrated in a strong determination to do ritualistic healing crafts. In the case of *Po Liang Thong*, he decided to perform a healing ritual for his own wife when he had found that no one else could cure her. Similarly *Pra In Mi* decided to assume the position of folk healer when the abbot of his own monastery left the monkhood. While *Po Liang Kaeo Ma* had shown he was a man of courage when he could stop two buffaloes from fighting, he was considered to be a *khon kham*. In this sense, *kham* can be considered an indigenous concept of charismatic power.

In addition to inherent charisma, some knowledge of astrology, magic, the manipulation of spirits and herbal medicines are required to become a *mo muang*. Traditionally a northern Thai man can acquire such knowledge from various sources. If he is a member of a healer's family he can learn from his own father, as did *Po Liang Thong*. However, most men learn as a monk since Buddhist monasteries are supposed to be a repository of all kinds of wisdom. Without access to the two sources, a man could learn from some well-known masters or unidentified masters from a far away land especially in the Shan states of Burma or in Laos or Cambodia. As long-distance traders in their youth, both *Po Liang Thong* and *Kaeo Ma* had ample access to learn from several masters.

But such knowledge will have no efficacy without moral power (*khlang*). In contrast to inherent charismatic power (*kham*), someone cannot simply possess moral power. To be a *mo muang*, one has to continue observing certain prescribed conditions in order to maintain and to reinforce moral power. These can be first

carried out by devotion to a certain holy, spiritual and mythical entity who is regarded as of deity. For *Po Liang Thong*, the efficacy of his healing rituals is due to the power of Pisanu (Vishnu) which he worships as his teacher (*khru*). Thus before every ritual *Po Liang Thong* will have to pay homage to the *phi khru*<sup>3</sup> (spirits of the teacher) with a tray of offerings soliciting supernatural help. This is known as *wai khru* or *yok khan tang*. He believes that the deity inspires him to select the right rituals and herbs for his clients. Lately he has claimed he can generate efficacy by himself without using magical objects or herbal medicines.

Most *mo muang* believe in the power of Pisanu as the deity of medicine. But many of them, for example *Pra In Mi*, think that his *khru* includes spirits of all the masters who taught him the craft of healing. He can communicate with them through meditation or a semi-trance like condition (*khao chan*) which they see as a male monopoly (Tanabe 1988, p. 5). In contrast *mo muang* do not go into a full trance, which is exclusively in the female sphere. Women and in some cases, transvestites, are culturally viewed as having a 'soft soul' (*khwan on*). *Po Liang Kao Ma* has faith in the spirit of a Burmese hermit as his *khru*. He also includes a Buddha image and a picture of a holy monk who was his childhood friend on the same shrine as an image of the hermit.

Successful healing treatment depends on the client having real faith in the healers and their masters. Before performing any healing rituals the healers will always ask their clients to pay homage (*yok khan tang*) to the masters. Doing this, the healers in effect are compelling the clients to accept not only their ritual and moral authority but the legitimacy of this authority by recognising the genealogy of ritual knowledge and power (healing/curative). *Po Liang Kao Ma* usually performs his healing rituals in front of the images of the Buddha, the hermit and the holy monk. The clients are also asked to pay homage to the images before begin any rituals. *Po Liang Thong* organizes an annual ceremony paying homage to all his masters in which he is joined by his faithful clients who come to show their gratitude.

In order to maintain moral power *mo muang* are also bound by certain rules of ethical

behavior. The most notable are generosity, compassion (*metta*) and avoidance of inauspicious behavior, such as eating at a cremation ceremony. In other words the healers have to be ascetic. But lately, folk healers tend to show their generosity through their strong devotion towards Buddhism which can be clearly seen in the frequent sponsorship of merit making activities such as making donations to Buddhist monasteries and sponsoring the ordinations of novices or monks. *Po Liang Thong* contributed some income from performing rituals to build a monastery in his village. *Po Liang Kao Ma* recalled that one of his clients had more faith in him because he learned that the healer made many donations to Buddhist monasteries. The healers also demonstrate their compassion by taking care of all the clients no matter whether they are local villagers or from out of town. Because of increasing number of clients the healers have to set up a clinic-like service.

Moreover the moral aspect of the power of *mo muang* is expressed and affirmed in ritual context. Through ecstatic rituals the healers can adjust the relationships with the external powers which are thought to be causes of their clients' illness. This ritual aspect of *mo muang* is at present in higher demand than their knowledge of herbal medicine. The three northern Thai folk healers tend to concentrate on their knowledge of *horasat* (astrology), *saiyasat* (magic) and the manipulation of spirits. Their interest in herbal medicines has, in most part, been abandoned. In the case of *Po Liang Thong*, he delegates the practice of herbal medicine to his brother because he is so busy with the rituals of removing calamity for his clients from out of town that he has no time to collect the herbs in the forest.

#### 4. The Transcendental Postion of Mo Muang

The term *mo muang* in northern Thai is loosely used for various types of male folk healers who can be layman or monk with knowledge in astrology, magic, herbal medicine, ritual performance and moral power. The healers utilize their knowledge and power to correct the relationship between their clients and powerful external forces which will help the clients return to normal.

In the past the healers were considered to be a patron for local believers who relied on their wisdom for both physical and spiritual problems which sometimes required long treatment. The clients usually spent this time living at the healers' house. They would be taken care of by the healers and were treated as members of the household. The relationships between the healers and their clients were often transformed into patron-client relationships. The clients would help the healers in the houses and in the rice fields. The relationship often continued for the rest of their lives. The former clients usually felt obligated to return their debt by helping the healers annually to plant rice while the healers occasionally sponsored their clients' ordination. This is why northern Thai often address healers as *Po Liang* (literally 'foster father'). *Po Liang* Thong had a large number of clients in his native village. When he set up a new village many followed him there in order to continue their relationships with him.

All the folk healers consider themselves to be Buddhist. Their ritual position in the

Buddhist-dominated moral system can be analytically divided into two groups. The first group relies mainly on non-violent magic (*khatha yen*, literally 'cold magic') which is considered meritorious and morally acceptable in Buddhist thinking. The latter group, sometimes known as *mo phi* (doctors of magic) tends to employ violent magic (*khatha hon*, literally 'hot magic') which is regarded as profane (see diagram 1). In this sense the first group tends to perform spiritual rituals strengthened with incantations while the latter group opts for rituals which use magical spells to attack malevolent spirits.

Both groups, however, can only deal with problems in an inter-personal sphere such as love affairs and conflicts. When ambiguities in power relationships within a socio-political sphere occur, such as conflicts between local and state authorities over natural resources, some *mo muang* are transformed into a transcendental personality, called *phu wiset* (literally 'holy master'), who are charismatic masters endowed with magical powers without any help from

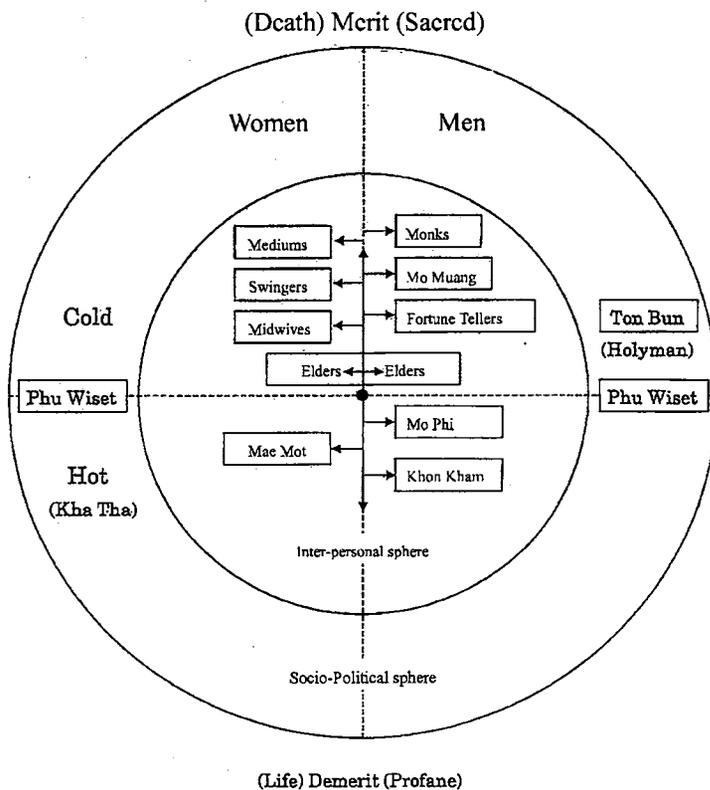


Diagram 1: The position of healers in the moral system

external power. These masters can perform rituals in both groups and become leaders in adjusting the disorder power relationships (see diagram 1 and cf. Tanabe 1986, p. 192–198 and Kapferer 1984). During the process of transformation, another dimension of morality will be reproduced out of the context of the problems in power relationships. Thus the moral and ritual positions of *mo muang* in the past were always oscillating between a patron and a holy master. In real life, however, the borderline between the two groups are not so sharply divided but are always obscure and even ambivalent. This suggests that the northern Thai concept of power such as, *bun* (merit) can be seen as transcendental to various indigenous notions of power, *kham* (charismatic power), *khlang* (moral power), and *sak sit* (holy power).

In this sense most folk healers continue to aspire for all known knowledge within the totality of their moral system. Judging from his ritual practices *Po Liang Kaeo Ma* is more likely to be a *mo phi* (a doctor of magic) than a *mo muang*, but every year he spends one month residing in a monastery strictly observing Buddhist precepts which is known in northern Thai as *khao kam* (literally, 'entering abstinence'). This kind of ascetic act can gradually improve his moral position in the eye of his clients and hence result in his having more ritual power.<sup>4</sup> Although *Po Liang Kaeo Ma* cannot yet be considered a *phu wiset*, he is regarded as a powerful doctor of magic. The ritual act of *khao kam* will continue to be used by him as a ritual process of restoring or conserving ritual power.

Since *mo muang* usually do not belong to any organization, they can articulate their practical knowledge in response to their clients' specific problems independently. Some share a common school by following textual traditions inscribed on palm-leaf manuscripts which can be found in monasteries or belong to families of healers. But the healers cannot rely solely on the texts in their ritual performances because the rituals require moral power which can only be gained through experience in a ritual process where most popular knowledge is generated and reproduced. Thus *mo muang* rituals have to be seen through the relationships between the folk healers and their clients in their attempt to cope with a changing social context.

At present the healers perform their services more for clients from far away than for local villagers. Their relationships have also become more professional rather than paternal as in the past. Famous healers can attract well-to-do clients. As previously mentioned *Po Liang Thong* was once asked to perform a ritual of removing calamity for a big businessman in Bangkok and a princess' husband. This kind of service, in turn, enhances the position of the healer in the profession.

The new extra-local clients are mostly from the urban and the rural middle class. They are looking for ritual performances more than knowledge of herbal medicine from the folk healers. Thus folk healers have now become more doctors of magic than herbalists. This change is largely due to domination of modern bio-medicine over traditional herbal health care which, in the case of rural northern Thai society, is still marginally subscribed to by the poor. As the case studies show, however, the emerging rural middle class wants healers who have a ritual position between the Buddhist and magical wisdom. The reason is that some middle class people have frequently found themselves morally confused. This is seen in their ambivalence towards their increasing desire for individual benefits while still having moral obligations for communal welfare. Many of them are also emotionally in stress because of their uncertain positions in capitalist markets. In this sense *mo muang* find their position in between Buddhist monks and spirit mediums. Their position, in some sense, is then more acceptable to some of the urban middle class who do not believe in spirits.

Modern medicine has partially superceded folk healing. Some traditional curers are disappearing, especially midwives, *mo pao* (blowers), and *mo khwak sui* who specialize in treating broken bones and *mo nuat* (masseurs). However, spirit mediums, doctors of magic and to some extent herbalists, are active in many areas where modern medical treatments are found to be expensive and sometimes ineffective against several kinds of fatal diseases. These practitioners are primarily in demand by the poor. What is significant is the emerging cults of *mo muang* who are experts in ritual performances and believed to be endowed with strong supernatural power as suggested in the

three case studies. The latter group of folk practitioners is more in demand by members of the middle class who can afford higher fees to deal with moral and emotional problems. As a result, some practitioners have transformed their ritual knowledge into a commodity.

These folk healers no longer perform occasional services to local villagers but have instead set up a formal full-time clinic-like services which accommodate a large number of clients. The three case studies have visitors ranging from 20 to 100 each day. Clients of *Pra In Mi* and *Po Liang Kao Ma* are allowed to stay overnight for treatment and sometimes up to several weeks. The fee, which in the past was up to the client, is now often set so high by the healers that local villagers can no longer afford it except for the case of *Pra In Mi* who only asks for small donations to his monastery. With increasing number of clients coming for ritual services each day, the healers' position is becoming more professional in contrast to the occasional and paternalistic services of the past. As a result the three case studies show that while *mo muang* embody charismatic qualities, their practices have nevertheless undergone a process of rationalisation.

It is clear that the social position of the traditional and modern healers has partially shifted from paternalism to professionalism but that their ritual positions remain somewhat unchanged. Both traditional and modern healer are considered to be holy. In this sense, the healers assume a significant position as a reproducer of morality because their rituals can contribute to readjusting conflicting social relationships between villagers and their struggles with the market and the state. The three healers in the case studies are so confident of their moral position that they openly disclose their crafts. This suggests that they are not afraid of being accused of illegal medical practices because they do not consider their services as only medical treatment but as bringing about the moral uplift of their clients' spirit.

### 5. The Clients of *Mo Muang* and Their Problems

Most people who use *mo muang* believe that they are ill-fated and look to healers as a last

resort. Many have received medical treatment in hospitals and some have even been rejected by hospitals. These people include both rich and poor. A number of them have sought treatment from several healers, which makes the cost of this kind of traditional cure rather high. Thus the very poor have to rely more on the low cost services of the spirit mediums. Only the wealthy use the services of holy healers like the ones in the case studies, who implicitly demand high "donations" (averaging 3,000 baht). These clients are the middle class, such as well-to-do farmers, government officials and businessmen, many of whom are not northern Thai. What is striking is that a large number of them do not believe in spirits.

Judging from the symptoms and stories that are told by these clients to the three spiritual healers, their problems are personal, involving emotional instability. The general symptoms are described as *mai sabai chai* or *chai mai di* (a sense of worry), *rok lom* (literally translated as wind illness but related to some kind of emotional disorder caused by organic disturbance of the nervous system), *phi ba* (mental disturbance), and *pong yam san* (swell and tumors). *Mo muang* and their clients approach what modern medicine would describe as the somaticization of stress with traditional categories of illness. These symptoms are thought to result from a sense of loss, injustice, failure and conflict in the work place, family affairs, inter-personal relationships and because of political pressure (cf. Klienman 1986, p. 51-67).

A closer look shows that most clients display moral confusion. Most notably this is related to gender roles which are complicated with the employment of women in non-domestic work and the dissolution of family and community. For example, a female client of *Po Liang Kao Ma* was considered by her family to be *phi ba* and had been treated by various mental hospitals before coming to see him. Through diagnosis, Kao Ma concluded that her problem resulted from an attack of sorcery or black magic (*tu* or *khun khon*). He accepted her several weeks for ritual treatment. She was a northern Thai girl who went to work in a small textile factory in Bangkok and later was entrusted by its owner to work as an accountant. This promotion angered the wife of the owner who accused her of being

his mistress. One month after she left the factory the girl began to feel uneasy and sometimes to have spasms. After the ritual treatment the girl felt happy and believed that the wife of the factory owner had used black magic against her.

In addition, a large number of clients are confused over the increasing cultural domination which stresses the power of money over morality and individual success over collective well-being. *Po Liang Thong* has several clients who are businessmen in the city of Nan. Most came to him with a symptoms of *mai sabai chai* and *chai mai di* because of worry over their business. Thong usually treated them with a ritual for removing calamitous fortune or asked them to make merit (*tham bun*) to Buddhist monasteries. Thong also has as clients a group of local politicians who often ask him to perform a ritual aimed at benefiting their campaigns for public office.

The three *mo muang* tend to explain the causes of their clients' symptoms in cultural idioms. In the case of *Po Liang Thong*, most of his clients' problems are seen as a result of *khrao* (bad fates), *kamma* (bad destiny), *khut* (calamity) and to a lesser extent the disharmony of humoral body elements. *Khut* is considered to occur most frequently as a result of violations of various customary rules especially those concerning the power of fertility which will be discussed in the next section. For *Pra In Mi* and *Po Liang Kaeo Ma*, the emphasis of the causes of affliction are on *khun phi* (attack by spirits) and *khun khon* (sorcery or black magic). This explanation suggests that the folk healers also associate their clients' complications more with morality than with diseases.

The result clients expect from *mo muang* treatments is not what they expect from hospitals but is more of a spiritual and moral nature. Most clients say that they see folk healers for *siri mongkhon* or *ma ao ruak ao chai* (auspicious reasons) which implies a need for strengthening morality that has become confused within a changing social environment.

## 6. The Healing Rituals and the Reproduction of Morality

Many rituals performed in northern Thai society can be considered as healing-related perfor-

mances. In fact, as most rituals are performed with some concern for the well-being of the participants, they may all be regarded as healing rituals. However, this paper is concentrating on a series of rituals which are performed by specialists for clients with social relationship, moral and emotional problems. These are in most cases manifested by physical and mental disorder. *Mo muang* usually utilize several rituals in dealing with the problems of their clients. Some may specialize in certain rituals.

In order to understand the meaning of healing rituals in the moral system the rituals themselves have to be seen according to complex northern Thai beliefs which represent various concepts of power in society i.e. Buddhist karma, magical power, supernatural power and astrology. Moreover, northern Thais believe that power has reproductive significance. This is expressed through the concepts of fertility and subsistence which are symbolized by various objects such as an egg, rice grain, and a banana shoot. The concept of power relates to the idea of seniority and respect for an elder's wisdom which involves ancestor worship. Although these beliefs have their own system in practice they are unified into a moral system which gives meanings to conflicting and changing social phenomena. Their relationship can be organized analytically into a diagram (see Diagram 2) which may be full of contradictions. While for example, spirit worship is closely related to the beliefs in fertility and seniority, it is also associated with magical belief and wisdom. In theory, Buddhism is on the opposite side of spirit worship but in practice there are many instances of the mixture of the two, as in the case of a guardian spirit shrine in a Buddhist monastery and the adoption of the Buddhist ordination ceremony for treating spirit possession (see Anan 1990).

Since healing rites will be classified through Diagram 2, a brief description of the diagram is needed. The innermost circle of the diagram represents the internal and spiritual composition of both men and women. Their stability depends on the equilibrium of the three constituted elements, namely *khwan* (life essence), *winyan* (soul), and *that* (basic humoral body elements). The complex belief systems are located on the outermost circle. These beliefs are thought of as sources of power in the sense that they can be

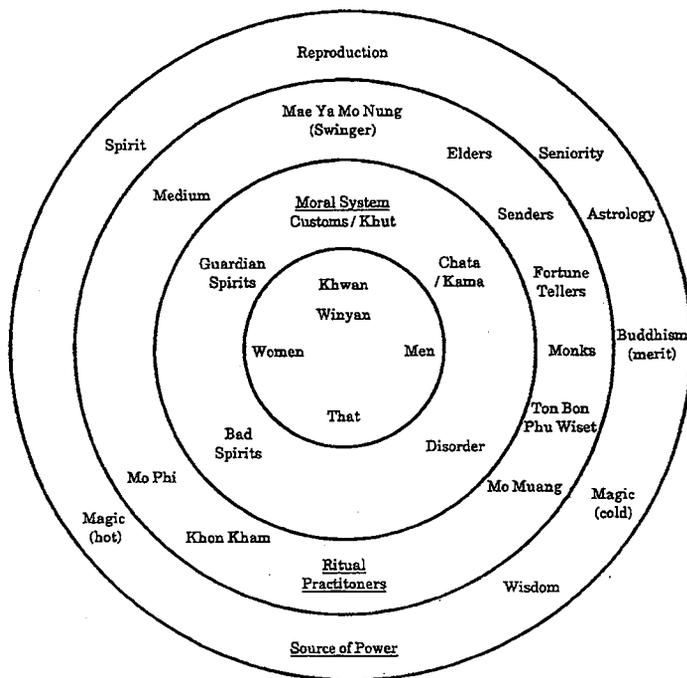


Diagram 2: The structure of northern Thai moral system

used to check morality which is felt through violation of external forces found on the second circle from the inside. These external forces which include *khut* (calamity), *chata* (fate), *kamma* (destiny), *phi* (spirit) and *hit* (precepts) can reinforce morality in a sense that they can affect the individuals' internal equilibrium and his or her social relationships. They can cause a person illness as a punishment for failing to observe certain rules continues and rituals which can result in misfortune or an attack by spirits. Observing them, however; can improve one's destiny (Anan and Shalardchai 1990).

The third circle from the inside represents various types of ritual practitioners who perform ceremonies corresponding to some moral concepts located close to them in the second circle from the inside. Female practitioners are on the left-hand side and males on the right. Those in the middle (at the top of the diagram) can be either male or female as in the case of fortune tellers who utilize the power of beliefs in fertility and are generally known as *mae ya mo nuang* (swinger) or *mo puk kalong* (spinner). The swingers are normally female elders who use a wooden rice steamer, a symbol of fertility, to elicit their divinatory power. The steamer

will be dressed in a shirt with a wooden hand sticking out from the two sleeves. When they are asked to perform the ritual two elders, holding the steamer, will invoke the 'spirit' of the steamer. The spirit will acknowledge its power by keeping the steamer swinging. Then the swingers will answer their clients' questions by using the steamer's wooden hand to write answers on a tray of rice. The spinners are male practitioners who invoke a spirit to reside in half a coconut shell where a spinning board is put on top. In the ritual, a client will be asked to sit on the board and spin to the left, right or around in response to questions by the spinner.

However, the classifications cannot be so neatly structured. In the case of spirit beliefs, which are supposed to be largely a female domain, *mo phi* who are mostly male, also play a role in those rituals. In addition to male and female specialists this diagram includes non specialist-like elders. Except for spirit mediums, who are mostly female, monks and elders, the other male practitioners can all be considered *mo muang*. Some *mo muang* who specialize in certain rituals are known according to their specific practices, such as *mo song* (sender) and *mo mua* (fortune teller).<sup>7</sup>

Based on the sources of power and moral concepts, healing rituals can be classified into six groups of various efficacy. With the help of folk healers villagers can choose the appropriate rituals for the type of ailment they encounter. The following are only samples of the rituals in each group. There are in fact many more variations found in northern Thai society.

#### Group 1. Rituals of diagnosis

1. *Wai Khru* paying homage to the masters (or teachers)
2. *Du Mua* fortune telling

#### Group 2. Brahmanistic rituals associated with the concept of *chata* (fate or destiny)

3. *Hong Khwan* calling back the life essence
4. *Song Khrao* sending away bad fate
5. *Sub Chata* extending the destiny (or life) of something or someone
6. *Bucha Tian* make offering with candles

#### Group 3. Spiritual strengthening with incantations

7. *Rot Nam Mon* blessing with lustral water
8. *Pao Katha* blowing incantations (in which the practitioner blows on the person being treated)
9. *Pluk Sek That* reciting of magical spells over body elements
10. *Tham Yan* making charms

#### Group 4. Attacking the spirits with *katha*

11. *Chet Hak* rubbing with sacred objects
12. *Thon Khut/Thon Tu* removing calamity or black magic
13. *Hiak Nam Man* removing calamity with sesame oil
14. *Tat Prai* breaking ties with spirits

#### Group 5. Appeasing the spirits with offerings

15. *Liang Phi* make offerings to spirits
16. *Bon* making wishes
17. *Khao Song* spirit possession
18. *Fon Phi* spirit dances
19. *Buat Ma Khi* spirit medium ordination

#### Group 6. Buddhistic rituals

20. *Tham Bun* making merit
21. *Tham Wipatsana* meditation
22. *Khuam Pha Sangha* blessing with monks' robe

23. *Tham Sangha Than Dip* making merit with monk's robe before dying

Most folk healers begin with diagnosis rituals because paying homage to the masters can confirm whether clients have faith in the power of the ritual practitioner. Fortune telling is also a way to make known the causes of the clients' problems. Several sources of power are involved here, ranging from guardian and ancestor spirits, spirits of the masters, Hindu deities, hermits, and Buddhism which can guarantee the success of the rituals. *Du mua* or fortune telling is always a prerequisite of any healing rituals since it serves as a spiritual etiology before the healers will know what healing methods should be taken. Most *mo muang* rely mainly on a complex system of astrology for this step.

After the causes of the clients' problems are known, appropriate healing rituals can be performed. Their efficacy depends first of all, on the spiritual power and moral position of the healers. The *mo muang* who are considered to be *phu wiset* with transcendental authority are the most powerful. Ideally, from the villagers' perspective there is also some kind of a hierarchy of efficacy among various groups of healing rituals. Brahmanistic rituals and spiritual strengthening with incantations will be performed mostly for minor physical and mental disorders. Both non-specialists like elders and Buddhist monks and specialists like *mo muang* and spirit mediums can carry out some of these rituals. For a potentially fatal illness, villagers tend to request the service of Buddhist monks to perform certain kinds of Buddhistic rituals associated with the use of monks' robes. This confirms that Buddhism is held supreme in the northern Thai moral system in which death, especially a meritorious one, is most sacred (see diagram 1). Buddhist monks are normally called for performing rituals to ensure a meritorious death which will help secure a proper rebirth. Those who face fatal illness but still have a strong will to live, look for spirit mediums or *phu wiset* as the last resort.

When experiencing physical and mental disorders northern Thai villagers will not settle for any particular ritual but try a wide range of means which normally begins with a visit to a modern clinic. They turn to folk healing if they

find that modern medicine does not work or they cannot afford the cost. In general, villagers think of illness as being more than just biological disorders, which is the etiological basis of modern medicine, but problems of emotion, social relationships and morality.

Of all the ritual specialists, *mo muang*, particularly those believed to have attained transcendental status, are the most popular, especially among the urban and suburban middle classes. This is because others can perform only limited categories of rituals while the holy *mo muang* who are also Buddhist monks can perform all types of rituals. Strictly doctrinaire Buddhist monks, however, perform only Buddhistic rituals but in reality most also engage in some of Brahmanistic rituals and spiritual strengthening with incantations. *Pra In Mi*, for instance, specializes in *sup chata* rituals (extending destiny) and removing misfortune with sesame oil.

Although *mo muang* who are laymen normally perform the first four groups of rituals a few offer services in the other categories of ritual, such as the propitiation of the spirits (*liang phi*) and Buddhist rituals (*tham wipatsana*). Most healers specialize in certain rituals. For example *Po Liang Thong* specializes in the rituals of removing calamity (*thon khut*) and *Po Liang Kaeo Ma* in *thon tu*. In contrast, female spirit mediums primarily perform rituals of propitiating spirits and some incantations. They refrain from engaging in violent magic and Buddhistic rituals which are exclusively for male specialists.

At present, the most frequently performed healing rituals by the three case studies suggest that their clients encounter problems resulting from disorders in five spiritual concepts which reinforce morality: *khut* (calamity), *khrao* (bad fates), *kamma* (bad destiny), *phi* (attack by spirits), and *khun khon* or *tu* (sorcery). A large number of the clients are found to have critical spiritual problems that involve several types of disorder. In these cases a ritual performance concerning only one spiritual condition is not sufficient and a combination of several rituals is required.

*Po Liang Thong*, for instance, often mixes three categories of rituals together, beginning with a Brahmanistic rite to send away bad fate

and then a complex ritual of removing calamity which includes a sacrifice to supernatural powers and finally he recommends his clients to make merit at a Buddhist monastery. *Phra In Mi* conducts a combination of four rituals: extending destiny, blessing with holy water, rubbing with sacred objects, and the elaborate ritual of removing calamity with sesame oil. As a monk, he can perform the last two rituals only for male clients. *Po Liang Kaeo Ma*, emphasizes rituals to remove black magic and break ties with spirits. These rituals involve several steps, starting with going into a trance-like state or meditating, blessing with holy water, rubbing with sacred objects, and finally a suggestion to make merit at a Buddhist monastery.

It is clear from these performances that the three healers employ various spiritual concepts as an idiom of expression in their rituals. They are used to strengthen their clients' spirits in the face of moral crises. These are occurring more frequently at present when rapid capitalist development is evident in northern Thailand. With the growth of market-oriented economy and consumerism, family and communal ties once reinforced by those spiritual concepts are eroding. Most clients are from the emerging urban and rural middle classes and have developed a sense of individuality which causes problems with their family and community. Thus the crisis can be seen in terms of contradictions of meaning articulated in real life between the idea of self, family and community which is then reflected in the clients' problems. The rituals enable the clients to overcome their confusion and have their emotional disorders readjusted through various concepts of power and morality. In the ritual process a new dimension of morality that is more consistent with changes of social relationship is reproduced. This can be seen in new forms of communal organization.

## 7. Conclusion

In his study of two *ton bun* (meritorious holy man) in northern Thailand, *Khruba*<sup>8</sup> Sriwichai, a Buddhist monk who led a religious restoration movement in 1920–30s, and *Phra pho*<sup>9</sup> Pan, a peasant leader of a communal irrigation organization who had a vision for a utopian society, Tanabe argued that the two charismatic

leaders had successfully transformed, through certain rituals and social movements, their moral power into holy power which had some political implications. With the focus on practical ideology, Tanabe explained that the indigenous concept of holy power is manifested in a vision of utopian society and a number of ritual practices which can be concretely formulated under the condition of liminality and under political and cultural crisis. Tanabe concluded that in the process of transformation of power, the vision of utopian society which associates with the notion of holy power tends to contradict with political power and this process has a tendency to develop into an ideology of anti-state domination (Tanabe 1986).

While Tanabe is only interested in the change of holy power into political power, this paper has attempted to understand the process of transformation of various concepts of power in indigenous perspective with a focus on the three case studies of *mo muang* and their healing rituals. However, unlike *Khruba Sriwichai*, who is considered a *ton bun*, the three *mo muang* can only be regarded at most as *phu wiset*. Through the analysis of the position of power in the northern Thai moral system, *ton bun* are considered to have their power transformed into a position that is transcendental to all other concepts of power. In the case of *phu wiset*, they have a rather contradictory position. On one hand, they continue to struggle to have their position transformed from charismatic power to moral and holy power. On the other hand, they are still susceptible to political and economic change.

Following Tanabe's argument and the logic of the northern Thai moral system, the authority of *ton bun* extends beyond the individual and society and gives them a greater role in the inter-personal and socio-political spheres. But in the case of folk healers, some of them tend to become more professional while others are considered to be *phu wiset*. The folk healers in the three case studies have had their position transformed into *phu wiset* who incorporate various dimensions of power, i.e. Buddhism, magic and spirit cults and are only capable of readjusting an individual's moral disorder, mainly in the inter-personal sphere.

Through a study of healing ritual, this paper has demonstrated a way in which the popular

knowledge of *mo muang* articulates to the changing social relationships among individuals, family and community in the emerging rural and urban middle classes during the rapid process of materialistic capitalist development in northern Thailand. In the process, contradictions have occurred in the Thai political economy of power relationships where, on one hand a strong bureaucratic system still holds on to power and, on the other hand, the enlarging middle class finds itself with only limited power. In this situation, the new, volatile middle classes have had some difficulty finding rationality in their distorted social position.

At present, most of the new class tend to pay attention primarily to their individual and material self-interest without a clear spiritual and moral value which can be a basis for their own class formation. Moreover, they usually take the moral values of family and community for granted. Many of them suffer problems of emotional and mental disorder as seen from a number of cases that came to consult the three folk healers. Most of the clients do not know the reason for their illness but, from their own reports to the healers, what occurs concurrently with their suffering is some kind of conflict with their own relatives, fellow villagers and employers. The nature of the conflicts indicates that these clients have problems of moral relationship between the idea of self, family and community which had led to a moral confusion. Thus, in facing spiritual and moral crises in their lives the new middle class has no constraints but can freely look for any sources of knowledge and power. Many of them increasingly resort to folk healers for their ritual knowledge and not for their expertise in the herbal medicine.

In the relationship between folk healers and their middle-class clients, the power and position of the healers have been partially transformed, while the construction of middle-class morality is in the making. With more clients coming from outside their locality, the healers have begun to generate their moral power from more diverse sources of knowledge than in the past. In addition to the eclectic knowledge of various traditional masters, some healers are also reinforcing the rational idea of Buddhism and, at the same time, learning about some types of

modern medicine. The emphasis, however, remains on the complex ritual processes utilizing

various concepts of power within the moral system.

## Notes

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1. *Luang pu* is literally 'big grandfather'. It is a title given to a revered old monk.

2. Turton has translated the concept of *kham* as invulnerability which he considered to be popular knowledge with a transcendent meaning in between the concept of fear and courage. He associated this kind of knowledge with magical power that can protect individuals from dangerous and frightening situations (Turton 1987, p. 364).

3. Most types of knowledge, especially those that involve external powers, have to be obtained from the spirits of teachers who can be Indian deities, identifiable and unidentifiable masters. Turton also noted that the knowledge is mostly verbal but some less powerful objects can be obtained without verbal formulae or a teacher (Turton 1987, p. 365).

4. Irvine and Wijeyewardene have also observed a similar pattern among the modern spirit mediums who are giving increasing emphasis on Buddhism as means to enhance their status (Irvine 1984, p. 320 and Wijeyewardene 1986, p. 203–206).

5. The herbal medical knowledge of folk healers in northern Thai society has been discussed by Brun and Schumacher (1987).

6. Davis, however, described *khut* as a form of evil which results in disaster for the perpetrator as an unconscious repugnance for violating the discreteness of an orderly universe which is based on the categories of binary opposition such as high and low (Davis 1974, p. 15–17).

7. *Mo song* is a *mo muang* who specializes in performing a ritual of sending away bad fate. *Mo mua* is a kind of fortune teller who subscribes to the knowledge of astrology.

8. *Khruba* is a title given to a senior Buddhist monk in northern Thailand.

9. *Phra pho* is an odd title given to Pan because *phra* is a term used in northern Thailand for novices and *pho* (father) for elders. The title can be translated literally as an elder novice. Traditionally only children will be ordained as novice. When Pan was ordained as a novice at a rather old age villagers gave him this title.

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