


Fall 2006

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Geoffroy Fauchet  
*SIT Study Abroad*

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## Recommended Citation

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School for International Training, Fall 2006

# Dai Medicine: Preservation of and Changes in Ancient Healing Practices

This independent study project discusses the general concept and theories of Dai medicine and focuses on the conservation of and transformation that both, the traditional and modern Dai medical system have undergone over time.

Geoffroy Fauchet  
November, 2006

## *Introduction to Xishuangbanna*

The Xishuangbanna Dai autonomous administrative prefecture is a sub-tropical region located in the southern most part of the Yunnan Province of China. The prefecture borders Myanmar and Laos and its name, Sip Sawng Panna, originates from Thai culture and means “12,000 rice fields” (Mayhew, Miller and English 404). It has since been renamed Xishuangbanna by the Chinese. This peaceful region with plentiful rainfall and fertile land is filled with small minority villages, tropical rainforests, mountains, and abundant flora and fauna. The Dai prefecture has a dry season from September to February and a rainy season the rest of the year (Mayhew, Miller and English 404).

Xishuangbanna is a melting pot of minorities. The largest minority group are the Dai, consisting of about 800,000 people. Another third of the population are the Han Chinese, and the rest is made up of other minorities such as the Hani, the Miao, the Yi, the Lisu, the Hani, the Jinuo, the Bulang, the Lahu, and the Wa (Mayhew, Miller and English 404). Xishuangbanna is slowly becoming a popular destination for Chinese tourists for its tropical weather, nature reserve, tropical gardens, and exotic minority dances and festivals. However, it is definitely possible to quickly escape the hordes of tourists by taking off on a bike or mini-bus to explore remote minority villages and local monasteries filled with Buddhist figures and deities.

Not only is Xishuangbanna known for its diverse range of minorities but it is also referred to as “The Kingdom of Plants.” This kingdom makes up less than 0.2% of China’s land but contains more than 4,500 plant species and over 600 species of

terrestrial wildlife (up to 100 have been placed under state protection by the Chinese government). In addition this region possesses 50% of China's rare and endangered plants under state protection (Youju 10). With this incredible rich flora and fauna, the Dai people have learned over the years to adapt to their environment and with it, they have developed their own traditional medicine.

I decided to focus my study project on this popular ethnic medicine. After just a couple of days studying and performing field work, I discovered that Dai medicine was a lot more complex than I had first expected. I found out that this medicine could be divided into two aspects. The first type of Dai medicine resembles a typical medical system, which is characterized by having documented knowledge and institutions for training doctors like Western medicine and traditional Chinese medicine. The second type of Dai medicine cannot be learned in a book or at a school. It is typically practiced by ethnic minorities and Han Chinese living in remote villages and is performed by distinctive healers at a household level. This type of Dai medicine also utilizes a mix of spiritual and herbal practices and is often orally transmitted.

My paper will not only concentrate on the theories and practices of Dai medicine but will also touch on the differences between modern Dai medicine and the ancient Dai medicine and how they have been preserved over time.

### ***Brief overview of the Dai***

It is important to learn about Dai culture in order to begin to understand the characteristic of Dai medicine that distinguishes it from the other healthcare system around the world. The Dai first appeared in the area of Xishuangbanna 2000 years ago

after being driven southwards by the Mongol invasion during the 13<sup>th</sup> century (Mayhew, Miller and English 356). The unified Dai kingdom, “Jinglong Golden Hall Kingdom,” was quickly annexed to China during the Ming dynasty but retained its minority heritage and traditions (Yaping).

The Dai follow the Theravada Buddhism (Hinayana, or lesser vehicle) school of thought, a sect common in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar; whereas the rest of China follows mostly the Mahayana Buddhism (greater vehicle) teachings from India (Guangyuan 25). The Theravada branch of Buddhism, which is believed to have been introduced at least hundred years ago (according to various Dai works in local temples), was brought to Xishuangbanna from the Shan<sup>1</sup> states of Myanmar (Guangyuan 25). Buddhism has now been well established among the Dai, I observed the many influences that it had and still has on their culture. Almost every Dai village that I stayed in contained different Buddhist temples and Buddha effigies, and some monasteries even had an altar with local deities. In these temples, older monks recited texts and prayed while the younger generation read, wrote and chanted scriptures. I later learned that these Buddhist monasteries not only serve a spiritual purpose but also function as a place where young children study Buddhism and ancient Dai language.

After Buddhism was introduced, it quickly took roots in the Dai culture and has since then remained mostly unchanged, except for the turmoil period of the Cultural Revolution when many Dai Buddhist temples were destroyed (but are now being restored

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<sup>1</sup> Shan state is the largest province of Myanmar, bordering China's Yunnan province to the north and Thailand's provinces to the east. The Mekong river serves as border line between China and Shan state for a short 40km at the eastern tip. Many ethnic tribes live in the state, including Shan, Intha, Danu, Taungyoe, Pa-O, Musay, Akha, Palaung, Lisu, Wa, Bamar and Dai; they are all mostly Buddhists (Sukhin 2).

with government funds). Theravada Buddhism has incorporated itself into the Dai society and has significantly influenced various aspects of Dai culture as well as Dai medicine.

### *Introduction to Dai Medicine*

The history and theory of Dai medicine that I will describe in this section concerns the general beliefs that most of the Dai doctors that I interviewed held and agreed upon. The information that I will present also comes from various Dai medicinal articles.

Dai medicine is a 2,500 year old ethnic medicine practiced in Xishuangbanna and is associated with Theravada Buddhism. Dai medicine has become popular in China for being one of the four major ethnic minority medicines<sup>2</sup>. Some Dai doctors that I talked to said that they had had patients come all the way from Beijing to their remote villages to get treated.

Over the years, the Dai have used the unique species of plant life of their region to develop their own medicine. These plants, along with secret healing Buddhist chants, are the predominant components that Dai doctors prescribe and use to restore health in their patients. The healing benefits of these plants have been discovered over time by trial and error and even today new therapeutic infusions of herbs are still being uncovered. There are considerable overlaps in the plants used by the various medical systems in China, as would be expected from their shared histories and geography. Thus, traditional Chinese medicine and the ethnic minority medicine of China all share, more or less, similar plant recipes. However, Dai medicine has its own distinct theories, plant categories, and

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<sup>2</sup> Tibetan medicine (associated with Bon and Buddhism), Mongolian Medicine (associated with Buddhism and with similarities to Tibetan Medicine), and Unani/Uigur Medicine (associated with the Islamic system) are the three other major ethnic minority of medicine practiced in China (Hamilton 6).

healing beliefs that differ from the other types of traditional medicine in China.

### *The Balance of Four Elements*

The basis of Dai medicinal theory comes from the Theravada Buddhist belief that both the world and the human body are made up of four basic elements *Ta, Du, Dang,* and *Si* (or Wind, Fire, Water, and Earth); all in balance and all connected to each other. As one of the Dai doctors in Jinghong explained, this concept of Dai medicine is closely tied with Theravada Buddhism because in the past when Dai people were very poor fell ill, Buddhist monks treated everyone equally, fairly, and cheaply (Lin, Interview with Expert Dai doctor at Jinghong Hospital).

In Dai medicine, it is believed that illnesses occur when the four elements, mentioned above, are unbalanced. To restore health requires reestablishing the order between these four elements. This theory is very similar to traditional Chinese medicine, except that Dai medicine does not have the concept of Qi, the five elements and the Ying and Yang<sup>3</sup>.

As the Dai doctors explained to me during my interviews, each element represents part of the human body. However, it was difficult to pinpoint in detail which element corresponded to which body part or which disease due to language barrier. The information I gathered on the elements and their corresponding body parts or diseases are as follows:

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<sup>3</sup> In traditional Chinese medicine, it is thought that the imbalance of Ying and Yang, *qi* and *li*, and the 5 elements (wood, fire, earth, metal, and water) causes disease (Ho 15).

Table 1. *Four Elements Concept*

	Associated Body Part	Theory	Disease
<i>Wind</i>	Lungs, nose	Air in the body	Cold, sneezing, flu, cough
<i>Fire</i>	Heart, throat, muscles	Body temperature and energy in the body	Fevers, heart disease, throat aches
<i>Water</i>	Ear, skin, eyes	Nutrition	Disease associated with body part
<i>Earth</i>	Mouth, stomach, intestines	Environment	Disease associated with body part

### ***Dai Medicinal Herbs***

To restore the balance of the elements and cure illnesses, Dai doctors use mixes of herbs<sup>4</sup> that are identified in various ways and have different properties to cure illnesses.

Three categories classify the types of plants: *mai* contains plants with hard, straight, and tall stems; *he* contains plants with slender flexible stems; and *ya* contains all herbaceous plants (Hieng Phu 149). Eight more categories classify the herbs' flavors: sour, sweet, pucker, salty, bitter, anesthetic, pungent, and fragrant (Hieng Phu 150). The environment of the herbs such as the color, the location (mountain, tree, ground, swamp, etc.), the season (dry or rainy), and weather that the herb is picked during, as well the eight categories mentioned above all affect the medicinal properties of the herbs (Hieng Phu

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<sup>4</sup> I will refer to as herbs the whole category of plants, roots, leaves, fruits, and barks that Dai doctors use for their treatment.



150). For instance, one Dai doctor explained to me that “the best time to go pick up the herbs [in Xishuangbanna] is during the winter, December to February. The quality is the best during that time of the year compared to any other season. If the plants are picked during that period of time, the plant’s quality will stay good for a long period of time. However, if the plants are picked during the rainy season, the plants will go bad quickly and will not be of good quality. Thus January and February is the best time because it, rarely rains during that time of the year.” (Bo, Interview with Dai Doctor in Ganlanba)

The herbs are prepared in various ways but the most common methods that I observed are to boiled or steam the herbs, grind them into fine powder, or to simply leave them as be. The fine powders are often mixed with water, boiled, and then drank. The vapors can also been inhaled and the fresh cut herbs warmed and wrapped around the ailing body part. The herbs are often mixed with each other and rarely used alone. It is believed that one combination of therapeutic herbs can often cure ten illnesses if not more.

### *Field Study of Dai Medicine*

Throughout this independent study project, I had the unique experience of observing and interviewing Dai doctors in several different settings. My travels to each of the different Dai communities allowed me to better understand Dai medicine’s ancient practice, as it was performed thousands of years ago, as well as its current practice, which is strongly influenced by the globalization of medicines. Exploring each of these Dai areas showed me the different ways that Dai medicine can be practiced and interpreted. I

will present my observations and interviews, which I have carried out with the help of a translator<sup>5</sup> in rural and urban settings. I will present my findings the evolution and changes that Dai medicine has undergone over time. I discovered that the different rural and urban settings also demonstrated a strong correlation between ancient and modern Dai medicine. While the rural settings retained the more ancient Dai medicinal practices, the urban settings exemplified the evolution of Dai medicine.

### *Gadong*

Gadong is a remote Dai village a couple hours from Jinghong. This village of about a hundred families does not have any Western or Traditional Chinese doctors but has three traditional Dai doctors. It was there that, we met Dr. Ai Yinglong my interpreter who only spoke Dai language. However, his grandson, Liu Wangxing, 24, and Only who knew Putonghua helped me translate.

We arrived at his house, which is also his “clinic”, at around five o’clock and a line of patients of all ages and of all nationalities were patiently waiting for their turn to be treated in the courtyard. Dr. Ai is a 66 year old Dai doctor, who specializes only in fractures and bone problems. His house is easily accessible by all the villagers in Gadong. I had the great opportunity to observe him treating patients for about 2 hours before being able to interview him. He first diagnoses patients by examining the patient’s injured limb and after a quick verbal exchange, he dips his hand in cold water mixed with Dai medicinal herbs and then vigorously massages and blows on the patients’ injured bone

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<sup>5</sup> All the interviews that I conducted were done with the help of my translator and friend, Only. Born in Beijing, he attends Xishuangbanna College in Jinghong where he is a Thai and business major. His English was surprisingly fluent but as always information was still lost in translation.

while chanting secret healing Buddhist chants. This painful massage, which often brings the patients to tears, only last for about three to five minutes. Afterwards, he stabilizes the wounded limb with slings and wooden bars before moving on to the next patient.

Dr. Ai had quite an interesting story to tell. When he was young, he built houses for a living. However, one day at work, he fell off and broke his leg. He was treated at the hospital in Jinghong, except that after two days he was forced to leave the hospital because he could not afford the heavy medical bill. Not properly healed at all and not being able to afford proper treatment, he was fortunate to meet a Dai doctor who took care of him. In no time, he was healed and was able to go back to building houses. His relationship with the Dai doctor grew and he regarded him as his father. The Dai doctor looked down on own his son who drank too much, and decided to teach Dr. Ai Dai medicine instead of own his son, who he thought did not deserve to be trained. Dr. Ai quickly proved to be a talented student and the Dai doctor passed down all of the knowledge that his family knew about Dai medicine. Dr. Ai was allow to practice alongside the Dai doctor and together they even built the house/clinic that Dr. Ai now lives in. Their popularity and healing success spread quickly and attracted patients from all over the region.

Dr. Ai stated that “Dai medicine is passed down orally from generation to generation, from father to son. As a tradition, we are not allow teach Dai medicine to woman.” (Ai, Interview with Dai Doctor in Gadong) Even after the Liberation<sup>6</sup> of China, he has not agreed to teach women. However, as was the case with Dr. Ai, when there is not a son or

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an alternative one, exception can be made to teach a trustworthy man.

Dai medicine, first requires a person to be a monk for six years and to learn ancient Dai language. The secret healing chants of Theravada Buddhism, passed down from generations only, must then be learned and not a single mistake must be made when reciting them or the healing will not work. When I asked Dr. Ai what his chants meant, he just laughed and told me that he could not tell me. After mastering the chants and the art of massaging, the gathering of herbs to be mixed in the water must then be mastered. These herbs are just finely cut into pieces and combined with the water to give it its special healing ability. It took Dr. Ai about twenty years to fully learn and master Dai medicine.

Dr. Ai works everyday from 8am to 10am and sometime to 11am during busy days. He resumes his clinic hours at 5pm until 7pm and sometimes until 8pm if there are lots of patients. In between his clinic hours, he rests and works around the house. He treats on average about twenty to thirty patients a day at his clinic/house but he never goes out to heal. His son in law, Doctor Ai Ming, whom he taught Dai medicine because he does not have a son, also helps him care for patients.

For very serious injuries Dr. Ai charges on average about 5,000 Renminbi. A wrist fracture costs 1,000 Renminbi, and a leg fracture costs about 2,000 Renminbi. These prices seemed incredibly high but as he explained to me, patients are required to come back every day for treatment until they fully recover, which often takes about a couple weeks. Dr. Ai clarified that these prices were very inexpensive compared to what patients would have to pay in a “modern” hospital. As for patients who come all the way from

Burma, Thailand, and Kunming (he even had one patient come from Beijing once) they are permitted to stay in his house until they are fully recovered. For life threatening or critical fractures, doctors from the Jinghong hospital are called in and their treatments along with Dr. Ai's are both administered to the patient.

When I inquired about the changes of Dai medicine over time, he replied with firmed "No!" that nothing had changed. He also mentioned that Western medicine and traditional Chinese medicine has not had much influence on his practice, nor will they in the future because he has passed down all of his knowledge to his son in law and all his knowledge came from his teacher. He also does not see his way of practicing changing in the future.

Meeting this doctor was an interesting experience because he preserved a significant knowledge of the traditional Dai medical system compared to the other doctors that I met along the road. He has passed down his knowledge orally to his son in law who is now teaching his son and has a very distinct way of curing his patients different from the other Dai doctors that I met. His family was really friendly to us and welcomed us warmly. To thank them for the long hours that we spent in their company, Only and I invited them out to dinner at a Dai restaurant.

### *Ganlanba*

Ganlanba, meaning "Olive Plain" in Dai, is a spread out medium sized town of about two thousand inhabitants located approximately thirty kilometers from Jinghong (Mayhew, Miller and English 356). Decaying Buddhist temples, traditional Dai houses, and pineapple and coconut Dai vendors dozing off in the heat of the afternoon lined the road leading to the heart of the town. These traditional Dai houses are usually made out

of wood and are elevated above the ground or water. The bottom part houses the farm animals while the top has spacious rooms reserved not only for the nuclear family but also for the grandparents and relatives. This raised structure prevents flooding and dampness during the rainy seasons and provides shelter for the animals. The houses are also very open to the outside to let the home stay cool during the hot and dry season. This distinctive architecture is one way that the Dai have learned to adapt to their tropical climate and environment over the years (Hieng Phu 148). However, the relaxing charm of this Dai town disappeared when we reached the cement houses, busied streets, and the popular Dai minority park that has recently put Ganlanba on the map.

Ganlanba has four Dai doctors working out of their homes and five Western and traditional Chinese medicine doctors practicing in their pharmacies. All of them are easily accessible by the Ganlanba community.

We had decided the day before to travel to Ganlanba because Lin Yenfan, a famous Dai doctor practicing at the Jinghong hospital, had informed us about a traditional Dai doctor practicing in Ganlanba.

Unlike the traditional Dai house described previously, this one appeared to be very modern and had two stories from the ground up. The house had a patio where medicinal herbs were stored in cardboard boxes, and powdered herbs of various colors in soda bottles lined the shelves. This family seemed to be really well off compared to the rest of the town.

Unfortunately, the Dai doctor, Bo Moy, that we wanted to see was out of town gathering herbs but his daughter (who is also a Dai doctor) and his grandchildren were

home. I planned on going back after talking to his daughter to interview but when I returned a week later no one was home.

The granddaughter of Doctor Bo Moy is in her teens and is not currently enrolled in school. She finished middle school but as Only explained to me it is tradition for Dai women not to continue schooling after basic education. They usually work as housewives and marry quite early. She has already learned a little bit of Dai medicine from her mother and her grandfather for the reasons that I will mention below. She also has a ten year old brother. He was wearing a monk outfit but his head was not shaved. He attends the Ganlanba elementary school, where he is learning mathematics and how to read, write and speak Putonghua<sup>7</sup>. However, like other children his age, he also goes to the local Buddhist temple where he learns ancient Dai language and Buddhism.

The daughter of Dr. Bo Moy, Dr. Bo Mieng is a middle aged woman. She has had a basic education (elementary and middle school) and after learning ancient Dai language, she was taught Dai medicine by her father. She started studying Dai medicine in 1987. I learned from her that her father is 79 year old and was taught Dai medicine from his father. Their skills are passed down from generation to generation just like with Dr. Ai in Gadong. However, as she explained to me, their families allowed the teaching of Dai medicine to woman since the Liberation of China by Mao Zedong. She has already taught her daughter and son a little bit of Dai medicine but it will be their choice to decide if they want to enter the medical field or not.

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<sup>7</sup> Putonghua, also known as Mandarin, is the standardized official Chinese language spoken throughout China. But, in many regions of China, especially in minority areas, many people speak their own dialect. In this case all the Dai doctors spoke Dai language and only some of them spoke perfect Putonghua, which made translation for Only a challenge.

This Dai family sees on average about six or seven patients during the day, either early morning (8-10am) or late at night (5-7pm). In between the clinic hours, the family works out in the farm and around the house. They treat their patients mainly with herbal medicine. The family owns one acre of land where they grow basic medicinal plants but they travel to the mountains to pick fresh plants themselves. This way they can also gather rare herbs. It takes about one week for her father Dr. Bo Moy to gather the herbs because he is careful to pick the right herbs he needs. However, if he is in a hurry, the process can be greatly sped up. She mentioned that “the best time to go pick herbs is during the winter. The quality is the best during that time of the year compared to any other season. If the plants are picked then, the plant’s quality will stay good for a long period of time. However, if the plants are picked during the rainy season they will go bad quickly.” (Bo, Interview with Dai Doctor in Ganlanba) They keep their medicinal plants out on the porch in boxes or in the closet. Most of their herbs were bark and powders made of grinded bark, minerals, plants, and roots contained in plastic bottles. The bark and powders can be boiled in water and then the water is drank by the patient She pointed out that they mix a variety of herbs to produce a therapeutic concoction that can cure multiple illnesses.. The herbs can often be boiled and the vapors inhaled by the patients. Their herbal medicine can cure a wide range of illnesses. They diagnose their patients by looking at their face and tongue and by asking basic questions about the ailment.

The patients that they treat live in Ganlanba or in the surrounding towns, but some even come from Beijing to get treated. Most patients come to their houses for treatment. However, if some patients are too sick to come to their house, then the doctors will go to



their house, but only if it is in Ganlanba. The Beijing patients come to them mostly for the famous cancer treatments, especially breast cancer and stomach cancers. She explained that cancer is very difficult to cure and it takes an incredible variety of rare plants to prepare the appropriate treatment. She said, “the main thing that we can accomplish is to extend lives.” (Bo, Interview with Dai Doctor in Ganlanba) The patients that they get also come from hospitals whose illnesses was not completely cured because of its complexity.

When mentioning the theory of Dai medicine, she agreed upon the importance of the balance of the four basic elements. However, due to the language barrier (she spoke only basic Putonghua), it was very difficult to identify exactly what body part and disease each element was related to.

When I asked her what she thought about Western medicine, she said that: “With Western medicine you get better very quickly. So today you will feel very good, right away. But tomorrow you will feel bad and get worse everyday and the disease will not be cured completely. Western medicine for instance cures colds but sometimes you take a drug and you have a stomachache or another side effect, but with the Dai medicine you never get a stomachache or have any side effects. With Dai medicine you get better slowly everyday. You get better and better. With Dai medicine we never operate, everything is done with medicinal herbs.” (Bo, Interview with Dai Doctor in Ganlanba)

Dr. Bo Mieng told me that she thought the differences between the modern Dai hospital in the Jinghong were that the Dai medicine in Jinghong lacks the right plants and rare Dai plants from the mountains. They use a mix of Western and traditional Chinese

medicine with their Dai medicine. “However”, she said, “we use one hundred percent Dai medicine, one hundred percent Dai plants from the mountain or from our private garden.”

(Bo, Interview with Dai Doctor in Ganlanba) Sometimes the Jinghong hospital even sends her family with rare and complicated cases and also refers them patients who do not have enough money because their medicine is a lot cheaper than in Jinghong.

She believes that Dai medicine has not changed over the time. She said, “Dai medicine is almost the same as it was before and that it hasn’t changed much at all.” (Bo, Interview with Dai Doctor in Ganlanba) Still she did point out some changes such as that after the Liberation of China, Dai medicine was not restricted only to men and her family decided that they could allow to teach women. She added that sometimes they come across a new species of plant and from there new combination of herbs are used to make new remedies.

The interview went fairly smoothly. Her Putonghua was very simple and she often had to rely on her daughter to translate certain questions or to replies. We followed her around for a couple hours, observing her way of treating patients, and interacting with them. This family was also very welcoming and very open to having us stick around unscheduled.

### *Experience of Manao Village*

Manao is a small village consisting of about fifteen houses thirty minutes away from Jinghong. We found that village by chance after asking directions on our way to Gasa, another Dai community. After asking a couple of locals for the Dai doctor we found the place very easily. People knew right away who we were looking for. When we were at the

Dai doctor's hut, another couple showed up seeing treatment because the woman was sick. In their small clinic of three beds, the doctor uses Western, traditional Western medicine, and Dai medicine to cure his patients. At that time, the Dai doctor was sleeping in his room and his nurse had to wake him up to take care of my wrist, which I was swollen from falling playing the soccer the day before. The doctor was not friendly at all. We tried to ask him questions through the nurse and the couple who spoke Dai language but he did not seem that we were bothering him and did not answer our questions.

The few details that we got out of him from his nurse was that he was taught Dai medicine by his father. After finally getting him to look at my wrist, he rubbed *bajiu* (Chinese rice liquor) on my hand and blew on it while massaging it. After that was over, he asked us if I wanted him to wrapped it up with Dai herbs or not. Shocked to be asked this question since he was the doctor and should know what treatment to give, I finally agreed just to see what he was going to do. He went out to his backyard, picked a big banana leaf and another Dai herb that he grinded in a mortar and wrap it around my wrist with a big piece of medicine tape. That cost me a heavy price of thirty yuan. The other patient that was there was diagnosed by the nurse and not looked over once by the doctor. She was given pill and an injection of glucose and was put in bed to rest.

The whole time that we were there, we felt like that doctor was not interested at all in helping us and we sensed that we were bothering him. There were lots of anatomy posters about the human body on the wall that I had not seen in any of the other Dai doctors' clinic. This was poor a experience and I doubt that he was a true Dai doctor since his nurse treated the patient with a techniques similar to traditional Chinese medicine and

Western medicine (thermometer, glucose injection, and pills).

## *Jinghong*

Jinghong is the major city of Xishuangbanna. It is a typical urban setting and it has a major traditional Chinese and Western medicine hospital, pharmacies on every corners, and the only Dai hospital in all of China. This Dai hospital is quite large and contains a medicinal tree garden, many different rooms for specialized treatments, a medicinal herb pharmacy, and a research institute. The medicinal garden, located in the center of the hospital, has different kinds of therapeutic trees which have been planted long ago but not much care seems to be given to them. They appear to be growing on their own and occasionally, bark, leaves, and fruits are missing because the doctors uses them as medicine for patients .The hospital as Dai and Putonghua writing, seven classified “expert” doctors by the hospital, usually the ones who have been working there the longest and who are the most qualified and about fifteen other doctors. The Dai hospital is open everyday twenty four hours a day and there is always a doctor on call for emergency treatment. The clinical hours are from 8am-11am and from 1pm to 5pm. There is no need for an appointment, it is on a first come first serve basis. The atmosphere of the hospital seemed to be very relaxing. It is not extremely busy and patients often never have to wait in line. I was taken to the Dai hospital, on my first day in Jinghong, located in the center of town and along with my interpreter, we were introduced to doctor Yu. She was really helpful throughout the course of my project because she put me in contact with many traditional Dai doctors in remote village as well as with famous Dai doctors in the hospital. I consider her my main advisor for this

project.

Doctor Yu is a 37 year old Dai doctor. She studied at Xishuangbanna Medical College for four years before working at the Jinghong Dai hospital in 1990. This Dai minority woman specializes in skin disease. The interview was conducted in her office and with the help of my translator Only.

She first described to me the history of the Dai hospital. Zhao Cunxing was the founder of this hospital. A Dai minority man, he was a spy for the People's Republic of China during the war. Once the Liberation happened, he was rewarded and worked as a government official in Jinghong. A leader of the Dai people and proud of his heritage, he wanted to revive the culture and explored the surrounding mountains of Xishuangbanna to look for Dai doctors who would be willing to help teach and form the only Dai hospital in China. With the aid of government money, he transformed an old Western medicine hospital into the Dai hospital that presently stands. He is now 75 and retired. (Yu, Interview with Dai Doctor in Jinghong Hospital)

She also explained to me that before 1949, before the Liberation of China, Dai people already had Dai medicine and had been practicing it from long before. However, Dai medicine at that time was only reserved, taught and passed down to men; women were excluded . After the Liberation of China by the People's Republic of China and Chairman Mao, women were allowed to learn how to be Dai doctors and were allow to study Dai medicine. She said, "It is much easier now for women to be equal to men and enter the medical field." (Yu, Interview with Dai Doctor in Jinghong Hospital) Just like in the United States, she told me that in order to become a modern doctor you need a lot of

money, about 2,000-3,000 Renminbi per year of studying. This seems quite cheap for American standards but not many people can afford that price. However, as discussed earlier with the previous doctors living in the remote Dai villages, Dai villagers can learn Dai medicine from their parents, relatives, or other doctor how to recognize and use the Dai herbs as medicine. The training of doctors in the traditional medical system is free of charge, as fathers do not charge their children money.

That day I was supposed to observe her consulting patients but the weather was really cold and only a few patients showed up. One interesting fact that she told me was that when it is really cold there are not a lot of patients compared with a hot weather. She said, this is because “During hot weather, there are a lot more skin diseases.” (Yu, Interview with Dai Doctor in Jinghong Hospital) About eighty percent of the patients that she sees are young adults and the rest are a variety of ages. The major skin disease that she treats are acne, minor burns, rashes, and insects bites that cause skin disease (mostly in summer).

On average she sees about ten patients a day come to her clinical hours and she usually spends from seven to ten minutes with them. During the time that I was interviewing her, Dr. Yu had one patient. She did not spend a lot of time, at maximum ten minutes, with her. There was not much discussion about the person’s personal life either. The patient showed the doctor Yu her problem, discussed the matter for a couple of minutes and Dr. Yu prescribed her some medicines. Once again, I did not observe any physical contact, there was not a thorough examination, and no patient confidentiality.

Her opinion was that Dai medicine is very similar to traditional Chinese medicine,

that in the hospital “they do not use manual work to prepare the medicine, machines do it for them.” (Yu, Interview with Dai Doctor in Jinghong Hospital) In her field, she uses eighty percent of herbs to cure skin disease. Some are inhaled while others are rubbed on the skin. All the herbs that she prescribes and uses comes from the area of Xishuangbanna. Now, the hospital does not go and collect the herbs themselves but in the past the doctors had to go and gather the plants. It is merchants who bring the herbs to the hospital to make a living.

When I inquired about the difficulty in becoming a Dai doctor if you are not Dai, she replied that, “the difficulty is the same except that non Dai people need to learn modern Dai language in order to be able to practice.” (Yu, Interview with Dai Doctor in Jinghong Hospital)

Dr. Yu later took me to see Kang Lang Xiang, one of the famous Dai doctor practicing in the hospital. Doctor Kang, seventy years old, is the oldest Dai doctor who smokes, rarely gets sick, has many Dai tattoos all over his arms, and only speaks Dai language, working at the hospital. He knows traditional Chinese medicine and Dai medicine. His specialty is blood, meningitis, rheumatism, and children disease as I was told by my translator. As a teenage, he had been a monk until the age of twenty six. However, one day he became really ill and was miraculously cured by Dai medicine. His faith changed and decided to learn the secret healings of the ancient medicine. He has now been a doctor for over forty years. He was the one who trained Doctor Yu when she was an intern.

While I was there, I was able to observe one of his patients who came in with a bad

bruised knee. The patient had fallen while working in the mountains. The diagnosis was quick, Doctor Kang examined at the injured area and moved him to the next room. There was no physical contact or detailed observation. In the other room, another Dai doctor took care of him. She warmed up green herbs in a bowl for a couple of minutes and when the herbs were hot enough, she scooped a little bit in a bag, placed on the patient's knee, wrapped it up and patient was sent on his way.

The second doctor that I interviewed at the Dai hospital was Doctor Lin Yenfan. She is a thirty two year old Han<sup>8</sup> minority woman who was born in a small country side Dai village in Xishuangbanna during the Mao Zedong era. In her village, she had a close relationship with a popular Dai doctor. Throughout her childhood, she observed the effectiveness of Dai medicine. Thanks to Dai medicine, patients were able to recover fully and rarely relapsed. In addition, the medicine was affordable to all regardless of age, minority or social status. She even experience first hand Dai medicine's strong healing power when she got very sick. It was then that she decided to learn and become a Dai doctor.

Doctor Lin graduated in 1980 from Kunming Medical College where she had learned traditional Chinese medicine. After learning modern Dai language in Jinghong, she was able to intern at the Jinghong Dai hospital. It has now been twenty five years since she began practicing Dai medicine and she has become famous for her specialization in treating breast cancer, meningitis, blood disease and children disease<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> China is often believed to be with ethnically quite homogenous, with black-haired Chinese speaking people constituting the majority known as the Han. The percentage of people officially classified as Han is about 92 percent (Blum 69).

<sup>9</sup> I would like to point out that due to language barrier, my translator was unable to accurately describe to



She is now classified by the hospital as an expert and focuses primarily on research.

She was the first one who taught me the most about the concepts and theories of Dai medicine that all the other Dai doctors agreed on. As discussed earlier, she mentioned the four element theory, and the significant influence of Theravada Buddhism on Dai medicine. She pointed out that Dai medicine is very similar to traditional Chinese medicine but it does not encompass the Ying and the Yang, the qi or li, and has different 5 elements. As stated earlier from previous interviews, she retained the same views about Dai medicine compared to Western medicine. One interesting remark that she had was that their mix of Western and traditional Chinese medicine along with Dai medicine is a better and more complete way of treating their patients; the cure will be more affective than just by using one type of medicine. She went on to say that, just like the balance of the four element, the three medicines complement each other very well. I agreed with her, because as seen with Doctor Ai from Gadong, they call in Western doctor for life-threatening cases or very complex cases that even they cannot cure.

### *Conclusion*

Dai medicine is a medical system that is hard to fully understand. All the Dai doctors that I have visited agreed on the principle theories and concepts of Dai medicine but each of them had their own ways of healing their patients. None of them treated their patients the same exact way and I conclude from this observation that Dai medicine is not fixed or regulated medicine like Western medicine or traditional Chinese medicine. There

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me, the illnesses that the doctors discussed or specialized in. Thus, I ended up with terms such as children, male, and woman diseases.

is not one correct way of practicing Dai medicine.

Similarities that I noticed between the rural and modern system was their ways of diagnosing patients. Unlike, the other healthcare system, the Dai doctors did not examine their patients much and a remedy was quickly prescribed. All of them also used, Dai herbs to cure their patients but the modern hospital also used traditional Chinese herbs.

Some of the differences that I noticed between the Dai doctors were of course their healing techniques; healing chants, massage techniques, and herbs that they used. Their belief on teaching Dai medicine was a sharp contrast. The modern hospital taught to everybody regardless of the minority or background as long as one graduated from medical college. On the other hand, the traditional system restricted the instruction of Dai medicine to the family members and some even did not teach woman; however, as discussed exceptions can be made.

It is important to note that all the information that I gathered through my interviews was with the help of my translator and language barriers still had a significant impact on my data. I did not fully get the information that I intended especially when the Dai doctor spoke only a bit of Putonghua. However, I am really lucky to have found my interpreter Only the first day that I arrived in Jinghong. He was an unbelievable help and I owe a lot of my study to him. The doctors that I visited were on the most part really kind and willing to take time of their busy schedule to answer my questions and have me around to observe them.

I am intrigued to learn how many variations of Dai medicine are out there and it would be a shame to lose such precious ethnic healing techniques if the knowledge had to

disappears. I agree with Doctor Lin that just like the balance and complementation of the four elements, Western medicine, traditional Chinese medicine, and Dai medicine as well as other alternative medicine all work together and complement one another. By realizing that not a single health care system is correct and by using all the medicinal knowledge together, the level of care and treatment of illness will be more complete.

### *Contacts*

Yang Wen Wu, Foreign Affairs Official of Jinghong

Lee, Yang Wen Wu personal driver

Jao Laoshi, English professor at Xishuangbanna College

Lu Yuan, Academic Director

PhD, Professor Chun Lin Long at Kunming Institute of Botany

### *Possible Topics for Future Study*

- Ecological and modernization impact on Dai medicinal herbs
- How is Dai medicine prepared
- Influence of globalization and tourism on Dai culture
- Effectiveness of Dai medicine compared to the other medical system
- Dai minority issues with other minorities in the area

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