

## CHAPTER 5

### NORTHERN THAI BONE HEALING AND CULTURAL EMBODIMENT

This chapter aims to present a treatment that complements the Northern Thai practice of bone healing. I focus on the Northern Thai cultural practices of two female bone healers during treatment in their homes. I view this bone healing, which is conducted in a ritualized house context, as a dynamic performance by female bone healers. This healing process encapsulates and communicates the subtle language of Northern Thai beliefs, which is encoded in every component of the home and embodied in many aspects of non-verbal communication.

#### 5.1 Integrative Knowledge of Northern Thai Bone Healing

Northern Thai bone healing is part of a comprehensive Northern Thai knowledge system. It is specifically given to patients who suffer from dislocated joints or bone fractures.<sup>1</sup> A common treatment session consists of a healer resetting the dislocated joints in their original positions. For fractured bones, a proper wooden cast is made of sticks that are tied together. The cast is put on the fractured area after being treated with *khwak sui*, massaged with sacred oil and treated with blown sacred words. It is believed that for the sacred words or magical spells to gain their utmost efficacy, the bone healer must receive healing power from his teacher spirits, which are present during the entire treatment session. Therefore, a ritual ceremony to invite

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

the teacher spirits before each treatment must be conducted. In this way, healing power is revitalized in each healing session. The healers are, however, not possessed by their teacher spirits. They treat their patients under the spiritual guidance of their teacher spirits, for whom they simply hold a *wai khru*— a ritual ceremony to pay respects to teacher spirits—prior to each healing session. This ritual requires the following items: a teacher spirit fee, one bottle of rice whiskey, flowers and candles, joss sticks and popped rice. Words of invitation are recited in everyday language. It is believed that the *khatha* or chanting of magical spells is an important part of the healing ritual. *Khatha* can stop bleeding, fix dislocated joints and rejoin fractured bone parts. These magical spells are also recited and blown over the water that is offered to patients during their recovery process. It is quite difficult to distinguish bone healers from other traditional healers. This is because this healing knowledge is part of a dynamic local knowledge; each healer mixes and creates his or her own process of treatment by integrating local knowledge with other types of knowledge.

Some bone healers, especially male bone healers, also prescribe herbal medicine to go along with magical healing to expel bad spirits, while many female bone healers do not use herbal medicine, but combine bone setting with massage therapy. Male bone healers therefore focus more on the power of magical spells to heal fractured bones while female bone healers are more concerned with the bone and its physiologically related systems. Some healers, such as one female bone healer and her children in my study, combine three elements of treatment: bone relocation, spot-pressing massage to rearrange the *sen* (the invisible lines that pass across the body and link the muscles and bones), and egg-rubbing to remove toxic substances (*pid*) that are concentrated in painful areas. In the egg-rubbing treatment the white part of a boiled egg is squeezed and applied over the painful areas; a silver coin is put in the middle and wrapped with a handkerchief. Next, it is blown with charms (*khatha*), and the painful area is gently rubbed. If the silver coin turns black, this indicates a type of toxic substance in the body of the patient. Green is a sign of a toxin from a malevolent spirit and the patient should consult a specialist in the area of malevolent spirits. This egg-rubbing treatment is also commonly found in Burma and Vietnam, and among some ethnic groups in Southern China. This treatment is also combined with some

biomedical techniques, such as the use of special elastic bandages that are tied up in the shape of a number eight to fix fractured clavicle bones tightly. In sum, Northern Thai bone healers provide healing rituals that integrate physiological, magical and sometimes herbal treatments.

It is remarkable that this type of treatment focuses on holistic healing rather than specific bone related symptoms. It includes physical, social and spiritual bodies. Although Northern Thai bone healers follow bone setting procedures that can be compared to that of biomedical doctors, the treatment they provide is rather different from biomedical treatment. Northern Thai bone healers have an integrative knowledge of the structure of bones and related physiological elements, a knowledge that is inseparable from spirituality. This knowledge is not recorded in Northern Thai manuscripts as in the case of herbal and magical knowledge. To some degree bone healers explain the human skeletal system similarly to biomedical doctors. But the process of gaining that knowledge is totally different. While biomedical doctors gain knowledge from anatomical dissections, charts of the skeleton or X-ray photographs, bone healers construct this knowledge from touching and exploring the bodies of their patients with their hands during practical training. Thus, it is not surprising that Northern Thai bone healers have more imaginative explanations of the physiological body. The body is not only composed of bones, muscles and ligaments, but also of *sen*, invisible lines that pass through muscles and are attached to the joints. A balanced physiological body is, according to this perspective, an integrated balance of bones, muscles, ligaments and *sen*. Moreover, *sen* play the crucial role in balancing the physiological body according to Northern Thai bone healing procedures. Different degrees and durations of stiffness of *sen* may cause an imbalance in the certain areas of the skeletal system, which consequently causes different degrees of pain and malfunction in bones and muscles. The integrative treatment provided to these patients is a re-arrangement of the bone system in problem areas and spot-pressing massage by bone healers. It is important to note that Northern Thai people also learn human anatomy from everyday life practices, having massaged their parents or the elderly since childhood. Thus, when they undergo treatment from traditional healers

they are certainly receptive to the treatment procedure that revitalizes their past memories.

Although the basic concept of bone healing is to restore the balance of the physiological body, this kind of treatment is also based on the Northern Thai understanding that the health of a person is the dynamic balance between body-*khwan* and external forces, especially spirits (*phi*). Bodily pain, bone fracture or dislocation can be attributed to wrong behavior or an unbalanced relationship with one's parents or with other persons or spirits. In these cases, besides undergoing physiological treatment, people must submit to certain ritual ceremonies to ask for spirits' forgiveness and/or to restore balance. These kinds of ceremonies might be prescribed by bone healers or specialist healers such as spirit mediums, or any specialist who is chosen by the patients themselves and/or their families. In the case of a simple illness such as a common fracture of an arm due to falling from a ladder, the family may offer food to the spirits themselves, but when the illness is serious, such as a bone fracture from a car accident, a specialist is needed to perform a ritual ceremony to offer special things to the spirits and bring the *khwan* back to the patients' body.

Therefore, Northern Thai bone healers deal with patients' problems in an encompassing way, and do not limit themselves exclusively to physiological, social or spiritual bodies. This is similar to Helman's observation that in traditional systems of healing, practitioners work not only with the concept of balance, but also with models of the structure and function of the body. These models usually link the individual body to the greater forces of the universe (Helman 2000: 20).

## **5.2 Body and Bone: Healing in a Home Setting**

Since neighbors and nearby villagers are the major clients of bone healers, a house, either that of a healer or patient, is traditionally a common healing setting for a fractured bone and related treatments. Traditionally, patients' relatives would ritually invite the bone healer to provide treatment at the house of the patient, especially in the case of a severe injury. The relatives of the patient would assist healers in preparing a wooden cast. Sometimes they helped healers to pull fractured bones and reset them

into their original positions, and then wrapped them tightly with the prepared wooden casts. The patients were thus cooperatively treated by healers and their kin. After fixing the fractured parts, healers visited the patients daily and provided magical spells or sacred treatments until they recovered. Patients who have largely recovered might continue their treatment at the house of the healer because this is more convenient. Only injuries that are not severe, such as dislocated or sprained ankles, are treated at the houses of healers. It is beyond doubt that every healing process includes a ritual ceremony. In the beginning, relatives of the patient come with offerings composed of flowers, candles, joss sticks and popped rice—a symbol of the request for help from the healers and their teacher spirits. In serious cases, a big set of offerings is required composed of the items just mentioned and also includes a bottle of rice whiskey and a spirit fee. After full recovery, another ritual ceremony is organized by the patient and his or her relatives. The aim of the ceremony is to express gratitude to the healer. Offerings, which basically consist of flowers, candles, joss-sticks and popped rice, are given to the healer. Other offerings are optional. These extra offerings depend on the economic status of the patient. Some patients add fruits from their own orchards, while richer patients may offer a substantial amount of money. The ritual ceremony to express gratitude begins with offerings from the recovered patient and his or her relatives who communicate their feelings of appreciation to the healer. Then the healer make known the acceptance of their gratitude and wish them good luck and happiness.

With life in the village changing rapidly, some aspects of the healing technique and the exact number of offereds have been significantly modified. Many healers, for example, change material for making the wooden casts from the wood of the local thorny tree called *mai ki*, which is believed to protect against bad spirits, to a more easily available wood such as bamboo. The use of ready-made ritual offerings can also be more convenient to patients. What still remains the same is the setting of the bone healer's practice. It is done in the house of the healer or sometimes that of the patient. Since this special space contains a wealth of Northern Thai symbols and cultural meanings, receiving treatment in a traditional Northern Thai house has important meaning to local people who are not caught up by modernity.



In the following sections, I will discuss the meanings of the Northern Thai house and its spatial arrangements, as well as the ways in which these meanings are reproduced during the healing process. I will focus on the houses of two female bone healers, *Ui Buachan* and *Ui Nam*.

### 5.2.1 The 'Authentic' Northern Thai House of *Ui Buachan*

On 15 June 2003, I walked down a small lane almost opposite a private kindergarten to visit *Ui Buachan*'s house. When I arrived, I was immediately attracted by the words '*Ban Ui Buachan*' written in both the Central Thai and Northern Thai (*kham mueang*) alphabet on two sides of the concrete fence. Since few people can read and write Northern Thai, the inscription in this language can be seen as a representation of *Ui Buachan*'s 'authentic' Northern Thai healing. In fact, many other aspects of this therapeutic setting are typical of Northern Thai culture. When I entered the open gate to a courtyard that was full with local large fruit trees such as longan, litchi and mango, it created a feeling of calmness and relaxation.

### Meaningful Ritual Space of Healing at *Ui Buachan*'s House

When *Ui Buachan* was still alive, her place represented an old shaded Northern Thai style home. The wooden house was raised about one and a half meters above the ground. In front of the house, under a wooden façade near the roof, an inscription noted the year it was built: *Buddhist Era 2501* [1958]. There were three more wooden houses, belonging to her daughters, and a rice granary near her house. In the past, it was a strict rule that daughters had to build their houses near that of their parents and keep their rice in the family granary. This practice has now become rare. Near the first step of the front stairs of the house were a large number of walking sticks left behind by recovered patients. According to Northern Thai beliefs, keeping used walking sticks in a house signifies that the owner of the house has strong magic and moral power to control bad luck. Since a walking stick symbolizes bad fortune or suffering, it is forbidden to be kept at home after a patient has recovered. It is suggested that one leave a used walking stick at a special place that has power over bad things such as a temple or the house of a person who possesses strong magical

spells. For many patients, the presence of numerous walking sticks is a confirmation of *Ui Buachan's* bone healing expertise. Middle class people from big cities who no longer live in wooden houses perceive the image of *Ui Buachan's* house as a symbol of their own childhood home, and their imagination leads them to recall the past. A 55-year-old female patient, a lecturer at the Faculty of Medicine at Chiang Mai University expressed her feelings as follows:

*Ui Buachan's* house was an old shaded local style home filled with a sacred atmosphere. It represented a relaxed environment and the simplicity and serenity of the Northern Thai life style that I dream of.

A 70-year-old male patient, the owner of a private University in Chiang Mai, saw *Ui Buachan's* house as an antique home (*ban boran*) that should be preserved as part of Northern Thai cultural heritage. Nearby villagers, however, perceive of this house as a common and familiar place that is very different from a hospital. Nui, a 50-year-old female dressmaker who lived in a nearby village, said:

Before I had a *sen* treatment by *Ui Buachan*, I was examined at a private hospital. They asked 80,000 Bath for an orthopedic surgery, which was too expensive. I also went to a district [public] hospital and had physical therapy for almost two months. I did not recover. My neighbors told me about *Ui Buachan* and accompanied me to her house. Within two weeks I felt better and could sew clothes all day. During the two weeks I was treated at her house, I went there very early in the morning with my prepared breakfast [food and rice] hoping to be the first client. I usually helped her to cook breakfast in her old style kitchen. After that we had breakfast together, rested and talked before beginning treatment. She sometimes gave me fruits and local snacks her clients had given to her to take home. I certainly never experienced such an atmosphere at any hospital.

The whole scene of both *Ui Buachan's* house and her treatment session recollected familiar stories of Northern Thai culture and spiritual beliefs that are

practiced in daily life. Below the ceiling of the eastern wall of the house was a shelf with four Buddha statues and two electric candles. Pictures of the Thai King and Queen were hung on this wall below the shelf. On the wooden floor under this shelf was a local foot-tall red offering-tray (*khan*) with flowers, candles and popped rice where patients placed their teacher spirit fees. Flowers, candles and popped rice are the three basic offerings used for worshipping teacher spirits. Traditionally, patients have to bring these ritual objects from their homes. Many people no longer aware of this tradition, however, so *Ui* Buachan prepared all three items for them. To the left of this *khan* was a white board listing the treatment fees.

On the floor, near a set of tables and in front of the installation of a Buddha statue, stood a money tree decorated with crisp, clean bills for donation to the temple near *Ui* Buachan's house. It is quite common that when local people want to donate a large amount of money to the temple, such as to mark the construction of a new building, they prepare a money tree (*ton ngoen*). The trunk and branches of the tree are made of bundled straw. Each branch is decorated with crisp, clean bills made to look like the leaves of a tree. This money tree is put in a prominent place within the house in order to invite other people to join this temple fundraising effort. Another wall was covered with photographs of *Ui* Buachan, her family and relatives. Near the top, on the right side of the wall, was a picture of her mother. Another picture showed her uncle and teacher who taught her the art of bone healing. Two other pictures, one of her deceased husband and one of herself, hung on this wall. Other pictures, one of her deceased son and one of herself attending the university graduation ceremony of her grandchildren, were hung lower.

These ritual objects on the wall express the Northern Thai belief system, which is a mixture of spirit cults, Brahmin and Buddhist beliefs. The hierarchical arrangement of the pictures on the walls of the house depicts the hierarchy of power relations according to Northern Thai beliefs. Lord Buddha is on the highest level and has the greatest power. The King and the Queen were given the second highest position and may be treated as deities themselves, although they have less power than the Lord Buddha but more than ordinary persons. The bone healing teacher and the



relatives of the healer have approximately equal power. The teacher spirits have less power than the Lord Buddha and the deities, but more than a healer. The belief in hierarchical power is expressed through the routine practice of *wai*, which marks the beginning of each traditional treatment. A patient ‘*wais*’, pays respect, to the Buddhist statues first, then to the picture of the King and Queen, and after that he or she should place the teacher spirit fee on the offering tray and *wai* the teacher spirits. Simultaneously, while paying his or her respects, the patient usually asks to be healed by the Lord Buddha, the deities and the teacher spirits who can grant supernatural power to support the treatment procedure.



Figure 5.1 The Northern style house of *Ui* Buachan, with on the concrete fence its name in both Central Thai and Northern Thai alphabets



Figure 5.2 The hierarchical arrangement on the east wall of *Ui* Buachan's house that represents Northern Thai cosmology

### **Toen or the Raised Floor**

*Ui* Buachan provided treatment on the raised wooden floor of the house, called *toen* in the Northern Thai language. This is the main area of the house used for holding a healing ritual. On this floor, near one of the house pillars, were an old beautiful basket for the use of *mak*, a betel set (a set of areca nuts and betel leaves that are smeared with lime and in the past were commonly chewed by elderly persons), a dish with *miang* (fermented tea leaves for chewing), bottles of drinking water, glasses, and fruits or local snacks such as rice crackers. These things were provided to anyone who visited the house. An earthenware water jar (*mo nam*) was also available at the other corner of the house for people who preferred to drink shallow well water. A set of *mak*, *miang*, *muli* (cigarettes, *buri* in Central Thai) and the water jar comprised the traditional set to welcome guests. Nowadays, these items have all but disappeared from Northern Thai life, though they were still present in this house.

When there was no patient, the raised floor was a place to welcome guests or to go on with daily life, such as sitting while having a meal or sleeping on the reed mat (*sued*). Some patients rested briefly after the massage session; others brought food to share as lunch with *Ui* Buachan. During the process of treatment, the raised floor was a special area. The patient and *Ui* Buachan with her assistants (her daughter and a niece) sat on the raised floor. Others would sit on the lower portion of the floor while observing the treatment. The setting was like that of a stage set of performers and audience members. During a therapy session, all elements of the house seemed to play a role through their symbolic meanings. Everything surrounding the raised floor, such as the Buddha statues on the top shelf of the eastern wall of the house, the picture of the King and Queen near the shelf, the picture of the uncle who was the bone-healing teacher of *Ui* Buachan, and a ritual tray under the shelf of the Buddha statues—all of these turned into elements on a ritual stage. Even the rather expensive treatment fees shown on the whiteboard were overshadowed by the meaning of the big money tree. The scene evoked trust in the effectiveness of *Ui* Buachan's treatment. *Ui* Buachan's sacred healing environment was a curious combination of a warm, welcoming house and a meaningful healing area.



Figure 5.3-5.4 *Ui Buachan* provides treatment on the *toen*

### 5.2.2 The Peasant or Working-Class Style House of *Ui Nam*

I felt distinctly different when I entered *Ui Nam*'s house. The house had no special symbols to distinguish it from other villagers' houses. *Ui Nam*'s house was a modest Northeastern style house, similar to other old wooden houses in the village. To the Northwest of the house was a simply built rice granary. The space underneath the rice granary was modified into a shelter for her youngest son, *Khiao*, and his family members. The atmosphere of *Ui Nam*'s house was not calm and warm like that of *Ui Buachan*. The sound of quarrelling occasionally burst from *Khiao*'s house. Sometimes I witnessed *Khiao*'s daily behavior, which disturbed the neighbors. He routinely played loud modern Thai songs on his stereo. People often shouted epithets to him and even cursed him. When he was drunk, he usually quarreled with other villagers or sometimes hit his wife or his sisters. *Khiao* returned from Bangkok eight years ago after marrying a Northeastern widow. They had a five-year-old son. During my fieldwork period, *Khiao* and his wife worked as farmers in his mother's paddy fields and sometimes took on temporary work as laborers. Although he was thirty-three years old, *Ui Nam* and other family members agreed that *Khiao* was emotionally and mentally immature. In *Ui Nam*'s opinion he was not totally normal. The local terms she used to describe his unusual personality were *bo koi tem* or he does not have all of his faculties; *chit lu sak noi* or his spirit is broken. The villagers also said that *Khiao*'s wife seemed to be in the same shape. Being accepted as a man with a mental-disorder gave *Khiao* an excuse for his outbursts. The unpleasant social environment caused by *Ui Nam*'s son was in the opinion of the villagers not a big problem, but

only an annoyance. It seemed to be part of the real life drama that almost all villagers experience at some stage in their lives.



Figure 5.5 The simply built, Northeastern style house, of *Ui Nam*

### **Phuen Kalang**

The space beneath the Northern Thai stilted wooden house, which is called *phuen kalang* in Northern Thai (or *tai thun ban* in Central Thai), distinguished *Ui Nam*'s house from those of other villagers. Underneath the first floor of the raised house hung a few timeworn hammocks and a *tang*, a large locally made wooden bench covered by an old reed mat. Local (Northern) Thai people usually spend the daytime sitting in the cool shade underneath the house. A large simply built wooden bench is usually placed in this area. It is a place where people lie, sit and talk. This bench is called a *tang* (*tang* or *tiang tang* in Central Thai, or *khrae* if it is made of bamboo). The *tang* of *Ui Nam* was normally occupied by a group of villagers, males and females of middle and old age, lying or sitting in a relaxed manner. At one corner of the *tang* was an old betel nut basket filled with *mak*, a small plastic bag filled with *miang*, a big faded blue plastic water container and a plastic glass. While *mak*, *miang* and water were found on the raised floor of *Ui Buachan*'s house, similar items were on the large bench underneath *Ui Nam*'s raised house. This certainly shows that this specific space was a suitable treatment place where *Ui Nam*'s daily patients and



guests were welcomed. A 62-year-old housewife and a 42-year-old male who usually stayed at the house of *Ui Nam* in the daytime said that:

The *phuen kalang* of *Ui Nam* is never silent. Even in the periods of working in the paddy field, older persons still gather at her breezy *phuen kalang*. More importantly, the owner of the house never shows any disapproval of this lively atmosphere. When people have completed their work in the paddy fields and are waiting for the harvest season, the *phuen kalang* is so crowded that the container has to be refilled with five liters of water. Otherwise, there will not be enough for all of them to drink in one day.

Joining a group at the *phuen kalang* of *Ui Nam* releases our loneliness (*hai-ngom hai-ngao*). *Ui Nam* is so kind and funny. She never expresses any hostility or hurts our feelings. Her *phuen kalang* is so cool and airy that we can take a nap.

The daughter of *Ui Nam*, a 42-year-old woman reflected:

Anyone can join our group at the *phuen kalang*. If it is lunchtime, we can have lunch together. It is usually a simple dish such as *som tam* (papaya salad). We have enough rice to accompany one dish of spicy salad for guests since we grow our own rice. However, we do not have nutritious dishes.

It should be noted here that the *phuen kalang*, the space underneath a raised house, is considered by almost all traditional healers, including *Ui Buachan*, as a taboo place. According to the accounts of traditional healers and some villagers, the *phuen kalang* is treated as an inferior and polluted area. In daily life, people always walk or move their bodies on the floor above the *phuen kalang*, so that culturally polluted items such as skirts of women (which might be contaminated with menstrual blood) or the feet of people—the lowest part of the body—may be located above the



head of the healer. Staying at the *phuen kalang*, or even passing through this area, could result in a decrease in the healer's magical power. I was therefore extremely surprised when I saw that *Ui Nam*, who possessed powerful magical spells (*khwak sui*), sit and gave magic-related treatments at her *phuen kalang*.

In contrast to the house of *Ui Buachan*, the house floor of *Ui Nam* was rarely occupied during the daytime. It was used on special occasions, for example, on Northern Thai New Year's day (a special day when people conduct a ritual ceremony to pay gratitude to *Ui Nam*), or on the *pha pa* ceremony day (a day when people participate in the *pha pa* ceremony before robes or basic necessities are offered to the Buddhist Monks at the local temple).<sup>2</sup> Walking up the house stairway, one can see a long veranda with a corner that is used for cooking. Opposite this open area is a long raised floor (*toen*). At the left side of the *toen* is a small corner where the shelf of Buddha statues is located. Under this corner stood the large bench where *Ui Nam* always sat in daytime. Near this corner was the main bedroom of all the family members—*Ui Nam*, her two widowed daughters who were forty-five and fifty years old, her five-year-old grandson and a fifteen-year-old granddaughter. Sitting on the *toen*, I could see through the open doors of this bedroom two mattresses with rather old mosquito-nets hanging above them. The mattress that was located in the north certainly belonged to *Ui Nam*, whereas the other one was shared by the rest of her family members. *Ui Nam* allowed me to enter her bedroom when I asked her about the shelf of her teacher spirits; I thus had an opportunity to see the place where her teacher spirits were located. The shelf of *Ui Nam*'s teacher spirits was situated one third of the way down the eastern pillar. This pillar was situated between the two mosquito nets. This shelf was arranged in a lower position than the shelf of Buddha statues outside the bedroom. On the shelf of *Ui Nam*'s teacher spirits stood a small old bamboo basket, about six inches long, six inches wide and four inches high. She explained that it contained dried flowers, which her mother had given her during the ritual ceremony to receive the teacher spirits.

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<sup>2</sup> The *Pha pa* ceremony is a ceremony to offer robes and basic necessities to Buddhist monks and novices such as medicine, toothbrushes, toothpaste and money.

A wall separated this room from the *toen*. Numerous pictures of *Ui Nam*'s family members were hung on this wall. On the uppermost left corner of the wall was a picture of all of *Ui Nam*'s family members standing near the *prasat sop* of her husband. The *prasat sop* is the funeral castle in which the coffin is placed. It is a miniature of a divine house with a roof made of three tiers. The coffin inside the *prasat sop* contained the dead body of *Ui Nam*'s husband. The picture was taken in front of the village cremation grounds. He had passed away in the 1970s. Pictures of her son and daughter who had also passed away were hung nearby. She told that her son committed suicide in the 1990s because of a psychiatric problem when he worked in Singapore. A few years later, her daughter died of cancer while she was working as a laborer in Bangkok. Other pictures showed the rest of her family members. Some were taken in studios and others during trips to various places.

From late evening until nighttime, part *Ui Nam*'s *toen* was an area for family members to sit in a circle, have dinner together, and enjoy watching television while chatting. It was also a place to welcome neighbors who occasionally came to visit them at night. Only a small corner of the *toen* underneath the Buddha shelf was seldom used. This small corner was the area where male ritual specialists and elderly males would sit during the performance of special ceremonies. This area at the *phuen kalang*, under the small corner, was where the *tang*, the large wooden bench, was situated. *Ui Nam* always sat on this bench when she treated her patients during the day time. *Ui Nam*'s explanation treating patients in this space of the *phuen kalang* without fear of losing the power of the *khata* was exclusively related to her interpretation of the cultural meanings of the Northern Thai house and its spaces. She explained that this specific space under the raised house was an area that was not contaminated, since it was below the shelf of the Buddha statues. Therefore this area was a space that was subordinate to the power of the Lord Buddha. According to this interpretation, *Ui Nam* did not violate the cultural taboo or disrespect the hierarchical order of the power of the teacher spirits, whose power is certainly lower than that of the Lord Buddha.



Figure 5.6 *Ui Nam* dressed in a bright green sleeveless and collarless local blouse and a rather old blue factory-made traditional skirt, sits cross-legged on the *toen* of her house



Figure 5.7, 5.8 *Phuen kalang*, the space beneath the stilted wooden house of *Ui Nam*, is used as a space for relaxation and providing Treatment

### 5.2.3 Body, House and Cosmology

To comprehend how the two healers and patients implicitly reproduce and reinterpret eclectic Northern Thai beliefs during each bone treatment session within the specific sacred space of the house, it is crucial to understand the way in which the Northern Thai miniaturize their cosmological beliefs through the spatial arrangement of the home.

Locating a house in the proper cosmic order is very important for Northern Thais, since its location influences the well-being of all family members. An auspicious time and correct ritual ceremonies have to be followed before the building of a new house is started and before the family moves into the house. The location and relationship of each component of the house is also significant. These components include, for example the bedrooms of the house principal and other family members, the kitchen, the *toen*, and the front and back doors. Since the fundamental beliefs of the Northern Thai are a mixture of a belief in spirits, Brahmanism and Buddhism, the spatial arrangement inside the house represents the Northern Thai practice of balancing those heterogeneous beliefs. It is remarkable that people nowadays, especially after they have been involved in modern life, to some extent change their traditional beliefs, including their beliefs in the cosmic order. For some groups of people, like the two female bone healers and her patients, these beliefs still have a strong influence on their lives.

Davis (1984a), Rhum (1987) and Santi (1987) note that space in a Northern Thai house is traditionally arranged according to the three orders of spatial orientation: cardinal points, height and interior. Regarding the cardinal points, north (*nuea* or up) and east (*ok* or rising) are considered auspicious directions, whereas south (*tai* or down) and west (*tok* or falling) are inauspicious. East, where the sun rises, is associated with rising and is generally regarded as the most auspicious direction. It is in this direction that people should position their heads when they sleep. West, where the sun sets, is associated with death and is the most inauspicious of all. Heads of corpses are usually positioned towards this direction. Following this belief, the traditional Northern Thai house tends to be built on a north-south or east-west axis. The north-south axis is the major axis of Northern Thai orientation. The length of the house runs from north to south. The front of the house is on the south side, so that one moves to the north—an auspicious direction—when one walks into the house (Rhum 1987: 131). The room of the principal of the house (*huan luang*), which is the room of the grandparents or parents, is located in the northeast direction. The influence of Theravada Buddhism can be seen from the shelf of Buddha statues,

which is located at the highest position and faces the eastern direction, the most auspicious direction of the house.

Concerning the spatial order of the interior, the room of the principal of a house is the most important. This room is located at the core of the house, and its eastern wall is supported by one of the two main house pillars, the Auspicious Pillar (*sao ek* or *sao mongkhon*). Another pillar, the Lady Pillar (*sao nang*) is the next pillar to the west of the *sao ek* (Turton 1980:118 cited in Santi 1987: 115). The Auspicious Pillar (and sometimes the Lady Post) is believed to be where the life essence (*khwan*) of the house resides (Rhum 1987: 147). The structure of the house corresponds to the city and village pillars that are believed to embrace the *khwan* of the city (*mueang*) and village (*ban*). The importance of these pillars is still evident in the practice of the ritual ceremony of raising the two pillars (or at least the *sao ek*) before a new house is built. It should be mentioned here that the two main pillars, which represent the male and the female, are also interpreted as the ambiguity of male and female power in Northern Thai cosmology (Rhum 1987: 147).

The spatial order of the house interior is also related to social space and the relationships among the Northern Thai. Rhum (1987) explains the spatial order of the interior of a Northern Thai house as a series of progressive exclusions. The *huan luang* or the room of the house principal, which is related to the *khwan* of the house and similar to the innermost of a set of Chinese boxes, has the highest degree of exclusion (Rhum 1987: 152). Males are normally prohibited from entering this room. Only sons and male ritual specialists may be allowed to enter if a grand ritual ceremony is conducted in this room. The outermost part of the house is the *toen* where people who are accepted as guests are allowed to sit. If they are strangers, they probably will not sit on the *toen* but take a seat on the un-raised floor or sometimes are received at the bench underneath the house.

Another important spatial dimension of a Northern Thai house is the order according to height, which is related to the hierarchical order. A typical Northern Thai house is built on high stilts. The house is raised high enough to allow people to easily walk underneath it. Villagers usually spend the daytime sitting in the cool shade



underneath the house, doing everyday work such as making bamboo baskets or passing the time with their neighbors. This area is also used for storing agricultural products or parking motorcycles. It has a sense of friendliness and relaxation, but is considered an inferior part of the house. It is the place where persons of lower status are received. Through the spatial arrangement of height, the architecture of a traditional Northern Thai house expresses a higher position such by making the raised floor or *toen*—already described in the house of *Ui* Buachan and *Ui* Nam—into a special place for those with a higher social or moral status.

The complex symbolic meaning of the spaces of the house is evident when considered from several dimensions. The *toen*, for example, is the external or the most exclusive space of the house when considered from the interior dimension. From the dimension of height, however, it is the highest position in relation to the *phuen kalang* and the un-raised floor of the house. Therefore, when people are invited to sit on the *toen*, they are culturally perceived as special guests or highly respected persons. But the owners of the house see them as persons who are at some social distance since they are only allowed to sit in the most exterior space.

### **Objectification and Embodiment in the Space of the House**

The previously mentioned studies of the spatial ordering of the traditional Northern Thai house (Davis 1984a, Rhum 1987, Santi 1987), focus mainly on special ordering as a representation of a ‘system’ of Northern Thai morality and society, which in a specific way is related to a matri-focal system. My study is different since I explore the spatial reordering and arrangement of the house in accordance with Northern Thai culture as practiced by healers and their patients. The house of the female bone healers in this study will be considered as a place that is significantly related to people’s ‘habitus’—a shared cultural structure that is embodied in a person and in a certain group of which he or she is a member.<sup>3</sup> Like the example of the Kabyle house given by Bourdieu (1977: 80-95), the social organization of the internal

<sup>3</sup> ‘Habitus is a system of durable transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary to attain them’ (Bourdieu 1990: 53).

space of the Northern Thai house is related to the mental structure of the Northern Thai world. This structure of the world is encoded and decoded through all activities performed in this space. Therefore, the way in which Northern Thai unconsciously move or position their bodies in accordance with the meaning of the internal space of the house is, in the words of Bourdieu, the way the 'structural exercises' are built up in practice (Bourdieu 1977 88, 91).

I should point out here that the space of the house that is reproduced by healers and patients in my study clearly reveals the heterogeneity or 'harmonized differences' of the Northern traditional beliefs mentioned by Morris (Morris 1994: 34). These are, for example, the tutelary spirits that are positioned in the innermost area of the house at the same horizontal level, but lower than the Buddha statues as seen from the vertical dimension (the dimension of height). The statues that represent the power of the Lord Buddha are located at a peripheral area of the house, when we look from the dimension of the interior. However, they are placed at the highest position of the house and face the eastern direction, the most auspicious direction of the house. This combination of spatial orders recognizes the power of the tutelary spirits and that of Lord Buddha as equally powerful protecting resources. On the other hand, the two different sources of power, the power of the spirits and of Buddhism, are mobilized and located in positions that are believed to produce the highest efficacy for each bone healing treatment.

It is an eclectic characteristic of Northern Thai beliefs that some spaces of a house are left to be ambiguous. The vague characteristic of these spaces is very crucial since it allows the Northern Thai to actively create alternative spaces and meanings, so that their beliefs can be adaptive and flexible vis-a-vis daily life. The ways in which the two female bone healers in this study implicitly recreated meanings of spaces in their houses provide good examples of the advantages of these ambiguous spaces. The bench underneath the house (the *phuen kalang*), for example, can be utilized as either an inferior or as the most friendly and relaxed space of the house depending on the context at each moment. The raised floor of the house (the *toen*) could be arranged as a formal area to welcome guests or an informal and relaxed

area for kin. Another interesting point is the power of reversed spatial ordering. While most studies focus on special ordering as a means of achieving power or well-being through strict adherence to the ordering structure, my study illustrates an alternative form of power. It shows that a reversal of the hierarchical order can also lead to positive consequences in social relations. The explanation of *Pi Nui*, one of *Ui Buachan*'s patients, of her sense of inclusion in the healer's family is a clear example. She should stay at the outermost part of the *toen* if she was strictly following the norm. When she was allowed to help *Ui Buachan* to cook food in the kitchen, she felt at home because of this privilege. This was not only because the kitchen is a private part of a house, but also because cooking in a kitchen is considered a private family activity. Therefore, being healed in *Ui Buachan*'s house gave *Pi Nui* a sense of being healed kindly by her own parents at home. The moral power she gained from a reversal in the hierarchical order could be seen from the way in which *Ui Buachan* sat in a lower position and blew at the twisted ankle of her younger patients who sat on the raised floor. For elder healers to locate themselves in such a position in relation to a patient who is below their social status tends to be interpreted as a sign of great modesty. It makes them more respected than those who strictly follow the hierarchical order. *Ui Buachan* is then perceived by her patients and other clients as an 'authentic healer' who is not attached to her high status, but is more concerned about her patients.

In sum, an incoherent spatial ordering of the house, which is represented as an eclectic Northern Thai belief, becomes practically coherent and extremely powerful in the ritual healing treatment.

### 5.3 Healing Performance and Bodily Practices

The body expression and movements of *Ui Buachan* and *Ui Nam* form a contrast. When I first met *Ui Buachan*, I could immediately understand why some clients were captivated by her appearance. *Ui Buachan*'s style of dress, and the way she sits and moves her body looked serene and dignified just like the traditional Northern Thai elders depicted on the mural paintings of the village temple. She was an attractive old woman with a light complexion and a smiling face. Her long gray

hair was knotted at the back of her head. She always dressed in neat and rather expensive clothes, a white lace blouse and a long traditional skirt (*sin*). This corresponded with her beautiful areca nut basket and the ritual setting described above. She always chewed areca nut while sitting in the *pap piap* position, which is considered a proper sitting position for women. For some patients, especially those from urban middle-class backgrounds, her style of dress and sitting posture met their expectation of an 'authentic' Northern Thai woman. Some of them mentioned that *Ui Buachan* reminded them of their late mothers or late grandmothers.

I met *Ui Nam* at her house approximately three months after having met *Ui Buachan*, and was rather surprised by the great difference between the two female bone healers. *Ui Nam*'s bodily expression and movements presented a considerable contrast to those of *Ui Buachan*. On the first day I met her, *Ui Nam* wore a bright green sleeveless and collarless local blouse (*suea ba hoy*, in Central Thai *suea ko krachao*) and a rather old blue factory-made traditional skirt. *Ui Nam* always dressed in this causal local style outfit, both in daily life and while providing treatment. Sometimes she wore a flowered-sleeveless and collarless blouse with a colorful long skirt. Her dressing style represents the kind of local taste that middle-class women seem to avoid (Pramote 2000). Only at a big religious ritual ceremony that took place at the local temple did she dress in silk, in almost the same style as of *Ui Buachan*, but in brighter colors. Whereas *Ui Buachan* had long hair that was knotted at the back of her head, *Ui Nam* wore her gray hair in a modern, curly style like many older persons in the village. A set of local snacks such as *mak* in a basket made from recycled-paper, *mieng* in a small plastic bag and drinking water in a plastic bucket, all of which represented peasant/working-class ways of life and their 'taste' were there for her neighbors and guests who would drop by. The way in which *Ui Nam* moved her body certainly represented a peasant/working-class person. Like other local people in remote areas, *Ui Nam* preferred sitting cross-legged (*khat samat*), which is culturally considered as a male style of sitting, and tends to be considered as impolite for females, especially when sitting in public. In fact, this way of sitting is more stable and comfortable than that of the *pap piap* position. *Ui Nam* would sit in the *pap piap*

position for only a short time during the special ceremony to pay respects to her teacher spirits.

The ways in which the two healers unconsciously communicated their body language when they held healing rituals at their houses provide insight into the different ways the two female healers constructed their healing legitimacy. Moreover, their legitimacy was closely related to the difference in class ‘habitus’ and ‘taste’ of their patients. The similarity in ‘taste’ among the middle-class patients of *Ui Buachan* and that of the peasant/working class patients of *Ui Nam*, as well the distinction in taste between the patients of these two healers, can be explained by referring to Bourdieu (1977, 1984). He states that ‘the practices of the members of the same class or in a differentiated society are endowed with the same objective meaning that is unitary and systematic’ (Bourdieu 1977: 81). This systematicity ‘is found in all the properties—and property—with which individuals and groups surround themselves, houses, furniture, paintings, books, cars, spirits, cigarettes, perfume, clothes, and in the practices in which they manifest their distinction, sports, games, entertainments, only because it is in the synthetic unity of the habitus, the unifying, generative principle of all practices’ (Bourdieu 1984:173).



Figure 5.9 *Ui Nam* dressed in a casual local style outfit, a flowered-sleeveless and collarless blouse with a colorful long skirt, sits cross-legged on the *tang* and blows *khata* to treat the patient’s injury at a patient’s house



### 5.3.1 The Power of Authenticity

*Ui Buachan* presented herself in an impressive way as an authentic Northern Thai traditional healer. Not only was her house full of symbols, but also her style of dress and the way she moved her body on the *toen* represents powerful symbolic power that deeply touched people's feelings. Her healing process was not an exotic treatment, as practiced by the spirit mediums studied by Tanabe and Thawat (Tanabe 2002; Thawat 2002). In simple cases she relied solely on her knowledge of anatomy. For more complicated treatments she invoked the power of her teacher spirits by reciting the *khwak sui*, while rearranging the fractured bones or dislocated *sen* of patients. Since her spirit and the teacher spirits were connected through a ritual ceremony to receive the teacher spirits (*rap khun khru*) when she was young, she did not need to go into a trance. The power of the teacher spirits could be transmitted through her body merely by reciting magical spells or *khatha*. Because of her non-exotic way of providing treatment and her bodily expression that fits the way middle-class people imagine Northern Thai healers, middle-class and high-educated clients do not feel reluctant to accept her treatment. A 55-year-old female patient, a lecturer at the Faculty of Medicine Chiang Mai University, expressed her feelings as follows:

*Ui Buachan's* smiling face looked kind and trustworthy. I observed that many clients were waiting for treatment. I was rather convinced the first time I visited her house that she must be an expert traditional healer. Moreover, she met my own criteria of an expert traditional healer as one who should not be a talkative person, but rather a calm and practical person.

Although *Ui Buachan* looked kind and calm, while providing treatment, her bodily movements showed a combination of physical strength and modest cultural refinement. Whereas the standardized Thai traditional masseuses, such as *Achan Somboon* who provided treatment in the same village, used their fingers, palms, elbows, legs and heels, *Ui Buachan* and her assistants used only their hands and sometimes their feet to give spot-pressing massage. Since patients might either sit or lie on the *toen*, *Ui Buachan* mainly sat while providing treatment. If she could not sit

in the *pap piap* position for a specific treatment, she changed to a kneeling position (*khuk khao*). She occasionally walked on her knees or *kan* (*khlan* in Central Thai language) when she changed her position to provide treatment to the other side of her patients. How *Ui* Buachan kneeled or walked on her knees could be considered polite conduct. The way she and her assistants used their feet, which are culturally considered an inferior part of the body, to give spot massage on the lying patients' bodies is also culturally appropriate. This technique is called *yiap kha phae* (using the foot to press on someone's crossed legs). A patient lies on one side with crossed legs, the lower leg in a straight position and the upper leg crossed over in an angled position. The healer stands on the patient's straight leg and presses certain spots with her foot. Moreover, this position evoked memories in some patients who used to give *yiap kha phae* to their parents or grandparents when they were young. An interesting point is that while the two female bone healers both possess mixed characteristics of healers and mothers, their dominant characteristics differ. The prominent characteristic of *Ui* Buachan is a representation of an 'authentic' Northern Thai female bone healer with a (grand) motherly personality, whereas that of *Ui* Nam is a friendly and kind (grand) mother who plays the role of a healer.



Figure 5.10 *Ui* Chan dressed in a neat Northern Thai style dress, sits (*pap piap*) on a reed mat (*suea*) giving *sen* treatment to a patient



Figure 5.11 *Ui Buachan*'s assistant gives *yiap kha phae* to a male patient on the *toen*

### 5.3.2 The Power of Simplicity

The bodily expression of *Ui Nam* and its symbolic meaning is highly related to a specific context of treatment. Providing treatment under the *phuen kalang* is part of the social interaction that occurs daily between *Ui Nam*, her family members and neighbors. Receiving healing services under the *phuen kalang*, therefore, gave them the feeling of being healed by a grandmother rather than a healer. Although *Ui Nam* presented herself as an 'ordinary older person', her extraordinary character is that of a humorous and kind elder who does not strictly follow cultural rules. One of her patients recalled as follows:

When being treated by *Ui Nam*, my mind is at ease (*muan chai*). I don't like to be treated by a doctor in a hospital.

I don't know how to explain my genuine feeling to you. A hospital environment, even its smell, is not conducive to my comfort.

The opinion and feeling mentioned above is from Di, a forty-two year-old male who lived in the house opposite that of *Ui Nam*. He had been a patient and received *khatha* and *sen* treatment from *Ui Nam* when he suffered from back pain

after falling off a scaffold. His mother, *Ui Mi* was another patient who received treatment after she had fractured her clavicle bone.

The body position and movements of *Ui Nam* while giving treatment are very simple. She always gave treatments while sitting cross-legged—a position she has gotten used to. She used only her thumbs, especially the right thumb, to give spot-pressing massage (*chap sen*). A big and thick right thumb was evidence of frequent use in massage sessions. She always demonstrated it to people, including me, to confirm how she used it to give spot-pressing massage. The *tang*, the large bench on which *Ui Nam* always sat in the daytime, provided the same function as the *toen* of *Ui Buachan*. They are ‘sacred spaces’ for healing sessions. These spaces were transformed from relaxed areas where people were received on their daily visits into ‘sacred spaces’ of healing rituals during the treatment sessions of both healers. Whenever *Ui Nam* started to provide treatment to a patient, her regular visitors moved out of the *tang* or sat at its edges, and the *tang* thus became ‘a sacred space’ for providing treatment. Those who were not patients moved from the *tang* and joined the others who were sitting on hammocks. They continued their previous activities such as talking and having *som tam* or papaya salad, while some of them observed *Ui Nam*’s treatment and gave encouraging words of support. The atmosphere of her treatments on the *tang* differed from the solemn ritual setting on the *toen* of *Ui Buachan*’s house. *Ui Nam*’s ritual treatment sessions took place in a relaxed and friendly context. Those who had treatment, therefore, did not feel like lonely patients but rather like people who simply had problems with their bodies and were undergoing a treatment session with supportive friends. This comfortable feeling could be also observed in the ritual process conducted before and after the treatment. Whereas the treatment of *Ui Buachan* required a ritual ceremony before the treatment to provide offerings, especially a teacher spirit fee, to the teacher spirits, this ritual ceremony was optional for a treatment by *Ui Nam*. During my six months of fieldwork, I never saw patients who had a treatment at her *phuen kalang* conduct a ritual ceremony to give offerings to the teacher spirits. They simply walked into the *phuen kalang* and described their symptoms. *Ui Nam* then immediately began to treat them. Only in the case of treatment for severe illness, such as patients who had

suffered an accident, did *Ui Nam* insist that they and their relatives make offerings and pay a fee to her teacher spirits. She felt then that she needed extra healing power.

#### 5.4 Conclusion

This chapter explores the power and symbols of a house as a healing setting of bone healers. The symbolic richness that is expressed through the house is derived from its character as a sacred living place that miniaturizes Northern Thai cosmology, which is embodied in people's everyday experiences, or their *habitus* (Bourdieu 1977). Those who (used to) live in a traditional house certainly share a collective memory of the past. The ritual practice during bone healing treatment that objectifies the heterogeneous and hierarchical system of Northern Thai beliefs reconfirms the existence of such traditional beliefs and evokes the feeling of a journey back to the past for people who feel lost in modernity. The healing rituals provided by the bone healers in the context of their homes strengthened patients' beliefs in the interrelation between the technical knowledge and moral power of the healers. The variety of technical bone treatments and their related ritual ceremonies practiced by different female bone healers, as described in this study, points to the heterogeneity and flexibility of Northern Thai traditional beliefs.