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BRUN, VIGGO and TROND SCHUMACHER. *Traditional Herbal Medicine in Northern Thailand* with a list of medicinal plants by Terje Bjørnland and Trond Schumacher. Comparative Studies of Health Systems and Medical Care. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987. xx+349 pages. Maps, illustrations, figures, appendix, bibliography, indexes of Northern Thai medical terms, of western medical terms and related terminology, of botanical vernacular names. Hardcover US \$48.00; ISBN 0-520-05271-4.

From June 1978 to February 1979, Viggo Brun, Trond Schumacher and Terje Bjørnland, accompanied by their families, lived in villages in Northern Thailand where they carried out intensive field work designed to enable them to describe and analyse the local herbal medical tradition.

Traditional Herbal Medicine in Northern Thailand is the first of two monographs resulting from their research and includes the ethnomedical results, with a compilation of ethnobotanical data attached as an appendix. The second volume, to be published at a later date, will include botanical and chemical data. *

The authors are to be congratulated for their perseverance in attempting to provide a rational description of what at first may seem to be a chaotic and endless profusion of medical and botanical data derived from a medical tradition which cannot approach uniformity in practice, owing to the secretive attitudes of many of its practitioners.

Their results published so far in this book will be a valuable guide for the layman as well as the academic interested in this field.

Brun and Schumacher have each contributed individual sections, the remainder being a joint effort.

Chapter 1 (Brun) provides the general historical and cultural background. Chapter 2 (also by Brun) attempts to outline what is sometimes referred to as the Royal tradition of Thai indigenous medicine, as opposed to the village practice described here. Not having read the particular manual discussed, despite Brun's belief that I have described it (note 7, p. 11), I am unable to comment on the details of this chapter except to note my preference for the clarity of the pharmacy handbook published by the College of Traditional Medicine at Wat Mahathat cited (note 8). The diagrams are intriguing, especially Figure 7, p. 33. This chapter contrasts noticeably with the excellent original research reported in the later chapters.

Traditional Herbal Medicine in Northern Thailand rightly begins at Chapter 3, with a summary of each of the important elements of the tradition. Diagrams illustrating parts of the body are followed by a list of medical terminology. The disease system is discussed. This chapter is clear, informative and interesting. In trying to classify diseases, linguistic terms combined with similarities of disease concepts are used to plot graphs which tend to show patterns of diagnostic relationship. This is a courageous effort! The authors conclude:

The fact is, though, we do not believe that there exists any all-encompassing taxonomic system for the Northern Thai diseases (95).

Chapter 4 (introduced by Schumacher) emphasizes the point [equally true of the Royal tradition] that

. . . an evaluation and interpretation of the local disease concepts by means of cosmopolitan medical concepts cannot be satisfactorily made by means of recorded information or direct observations of diseased persons by biomedically trained interpreters alone (99).

Details of names, symptoms, causes, treatment and diagnoses of diseases are given as far as possible in Western terms, with a large section, almost half, being on skin diseases. That is excellently done.

Chapter 5 (sections by each author) considers treatment—in particular—with medicine, setting out the common types of medicine used. A rather lengthy discussion follows, on how the prescriptions might be analysed in order to discover the active ingredients. However, in adopting a Western approach, it would seem almost inevitable that they failed to find factors in ingredients common to more than a few remedies for the same disease. They conclude, amongst other things, that there is a need to focus 'on the curer's own understanding and use of their tradition' (226). My comments on this problem have recently been published (Mulholland 1987, chapter 10). The practice of medicine is an art, not a science. The choice of drugs must be analysed in Thai, not western terms.

Chapter 6 (Brun) demonstrates the declining numbers of traditional doctors in Thailand and the westernization of midwives. It concludes that there are many factors influencing the survival or demise of traditional medicine.

The Appendix (Bjørnland and Schumacher) lists hundreds of medicinal plants collected in Chiangmai and Lamphun Provinces in Northern Thailand. It gives the plant taxon, vernacular name, locality where collected, medicinal uses, parts of plant used, physical qualities and form of preparation and administration—a veritable omnibus of Northern Thai medicinal plants. Unfortunately, the pages of this appendix are not numbered.

Three very useful indexes follow: of Northern Thai medical terms, of Western medical terms and related terminology and of botanical vernacular names.

Traditional Herbal Medicine in Northern Thailand makes a valuable and original contribution to our understanding of one of the many facets in the study of the practice of indigenous medicine in Thailand.

REFERENCE CITED:

MULHOLLAND, Jean

- 1987 *Medicine, magic and evil spirits: A study of a text on Thai traditional paediatrics*. Asian Studies Monographs, New Series No. 8. Canberra: Faculty of Asian Studies, Australian National University.

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