

Finding a Happy 'Medium': Alternative Medicine in Southeast Asia



In this time and age, when medical sciences are depending more and more on sophisticated technology which drives the cost of medical care higher and higher, many people are returning to basic traditional medicine. Some are promoting herbal medicine, while others are moving in the direction of something which can not be explained totally by medical science.

This book extensively describes practices carried out by shamans, mediums, and healers, which the author witnessed personally in the countries of Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand. These traditional healers are well accepted by the locals and have many followers, and with exception of a few are not well-to-do financially. The author, Ruth-Inge Heinze, spent a year in Southeast Asia observing and studying the influence of the religious beliefs of Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, and Islam on folk practitioners working among the various ethnic groups of Malay, Thai, Indian and Chinese.

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Trance and Healing in Southeast Asia Today.

By Ruth-Inge Heinze. Bangkok:
White Lotus Press; 1997. 341 pp.,
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(ISBN 974-8496-59-7).

Where there is a split between science and religion, these traditional healers seem to fill the gap. When medical scientists do not have an answer, these traditional healers seem to provide the solutions for basic human needs in multi-religious and multi-ethnic societies. The author tries to provide an understanding of the work and success of traditional healers in Southeast Asia, which hopefully will spark an interest in more studies among folk practitioners in various ethnic groups.

In the first chapter, Heinze provides a framework for her discussion by defining the word 'Shaman', providing information on the historical development of Shamanism, and attempting to answer the need for Shamanism in local communities. The second chapter deals with social settings in the three countries of Southeast Asia where the author studied trance and healing, and provides details to help the reader understand the complexity of interlocking social systems.

Basic statistics on Shamans in the three countries are provided in the third chapter, and socio-psychological considerations are dealt with in the fourth chapter. The second part of the book provides cases of Shamanic practices. In each of the 21 cases, Heinze provides detailed settings, a background to the mediums, and a first-hand account of her experience observing the traditional practice. Some of the cases are quite interesting, with extensive detailed information, such as case 7 (The Nine Imperial Gods in Singapore), case 8 (Automatic Writing in Singapore), and case 17 (The Divine Sages: Pu Sawan).

In the text, Heinze describes how some of the afflicted went to the folk practitioners because modern medical science could not cure their illnesses. This book provides an insight into the situations, the experience of the author through observations, and the results of shamanic practices. What the book does not offer is an explanation of the outcome of these alternative practices. The author allows the readers to decide for themselves the reasons for the successful results.

As a person trained within the tradition of Western medical science, I attempted to explain the results using the model of cause and effect. I reasoned that those who truly believe in folk practitioners may have a mind set or mental attitude which allows them to believe that their sickness (real or not) may have disappeared. There have been instances, for example, where patients have been diagnosed by physicians as having cancer, and yet within a year, when the patients were re-examined, the cancer had disappeared. Modern psychology supports the theory that those who are optimistic tend to boost up their immune system, stimulating the process where certain kind of cells identify and eradicate abnormal or cancerous cells. Therefore, those who have a positive mental attitude may cure or prevent cancer within themselves by boosting their immune system.

The individuals described in Heinze's book who went to see traditional healers and recovered, may possess a positive mental attitude toward folk practitioners, therefore, they may have the psychological setting which assists the healing process within their own bodies. This book is quite interesting because the author effectively captures social settings, the traditional value system of traditional healers as providers for the needs of community, and the religious beliefs of the traditional healers.

Heinze has attempted to provide as much information as possible, so that readers with little or no previous knowledge of traditional medical practices can understand the work and success of traditional healers. The book provides a wealth of information about the role of faith healers in Southeast Asia, and is particularly interesting for those who are not familiar with the cultures and religions of the region.