Footsteps of food, festivals and fun!

Muang Pon, Khun Yuam, Mae Hong Son

[Image of colorful festival scene with cartoon characters]
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Welcome to Muang Pon

“A Living Tapestry” with “Faith, Art and Agriculture”

Welcome to Muang Pon, where life revolves around the seasons and the traditional Buddhist calendar. Work, worship, and astonishingly beautiful arts and performance have been passed faithfully between generations, and are still practiced by local people. For those with a taste for food, Muang Pon also offers the perfect introduction to the healthy, herbal Thai Yai kitchen.

We are Thai Yai!

Thai Yai or Shan people are an ethnic Tai group living in Myanmar, southern China and northern Thailand. The Thai Yai inhabit river-basins, mountain valleys and plains. Thai Yai people in Mae Hong Son province migrated from Shan State, in north-eastern Myanmar. Records show that Thai Yai people have been living in the area of Mae Hong Son since 1831, during the reign of Thailand’s Rama III.

Thai Yai people living in Mae Hong Son have successfully maintained their unique culture, language, dress and food. They have also maintained kinship and relations with family members in Myanmar, often travelling between the two countries to trade, meet and participate in important Buddhist festivals and events.

The Thai Yai way of life follows the seasons. Thai Yai people traditionally farm rice and soya beans, and grow seasonal vegetables, tobacco, and fruits. In Muang Pon, sweet corn is also an important crop. Important occasions in the agricultural calendar are marked by vibrant Buddhist festivals and ceremonies.

Brief History of Muang Pon community

Traditionally, the Buddhist temple is the first building to be constructed in a Thai Yai village. Judging from the age of the temple pavilion, as well as oral histories, Muang Pon was established over 160 years ago. Muang Pon temple was constructed by the first village leaders, Mr. Paisan and Mr. Ruedee, working alongside members of forty founding families. They built the chapel and sermon hall in 1854.

Situated on the route between Mae Sariang and Chiang Mai, Muang Pon became an important community, with a history of trade and welcoming guests. In the past, goods were transported along the Pon river. People in Muang Pon traded with the Northern Thais and the Burmese. Important products which villagers needed from Chiang Mai included mackerel, dried fish, and tea. Mae Sariang was an important source of salt. Community members also traded rice with the Burmese, in return for sesame oil and shrimp paste.
Architecture in Muang Pon is simple and charming. The classic Thai Yai home is raised from the ground, with two gables, which cover the living area of the home, including a structure for sleeping, a terrace (haan), and a separate kitchen / dining area. Thai Yai people are sociable. They can often be seen welcoming guests in spacious, open areas under their homes. Homes are still being constructed in this traditional style.

In the past, Thai Yai homes were completely raised above the ground. The area under the home was used to work, relax and store rice, agricultural equipment and house ware. This design also provided some protection against wild animals which occasionally entered the village from the surrounding forest.

Gradually, life has become more secure in Muang Pon. Income has increased and families have grown bigger. Most families have now moved their kitchens down to ground level, and built additional rooms in the area under the house.

Thai Yai homes in Muang Pon also indicate the social status and wealth of the inhabitants. As in the past, wealthier families will build a home with two or more gables. The culture of gables is epitomised by the Thai Yai saying, “If you want to know what a family is worth, count the number of gables!” Wealthier families also build more permanent, solid structures, using hard woods such as teak. Roofs are made from wood, and intricate, carved wooden designs are used to decorate their homes.

Poorer families, or newlywed couples who are starting a new family, will build a small home, with a single gable, constructed from simpler and less robust materials. For example, leaves may be used as roofing material, or bamboo used for walls.

Local architecture has evolved slowly. Although there have been changes in materials (such as using wooden roofing tiles rather than leaves), community members in Muang Pon share a common pride in their style of architecture and encourage one another to continue to build in traditional Thai Yai style.

Unfortunately, an area which is being less enthusiastically supported among the younger generation is learning the specific craft skills used for home decoration, as well as the details of various ceremonies which are used to accompany construction, and local beliefs about using specific materials. Elders who posses this knowledge are gradually passing away.

Local Insight: How many gables can you see on local homes? What is the cultural significance of gables for the Thai Yai?
Thai Yai dress is elegant and distinctive. While there are many similarities between Thai Yai dress in Myanmar and Thailand, there are also significant differences. Differences depend on the availability of raw materials, access to technology and equipment, how local beliefs have been passed between generations, local creativity, as well as the socio-economic status of specific villages.

**Dress for Thai Yai women . . .**

Traditional dress for women is a Thai Yai sarong and blouse. Thai Yai women wear sarongs which have been stitched into tubes; long strips of cloth wrapped tightly around the body and secured with pins; or sarongs which have been cut into shorter skirts.

Thai Yai blouses are round-necked and waist-length with short or long sleeves. Nowadays, cotton is rarely used to make blouses. Women prefer cloth with a glossy finish. Blouses are embroidered and laced, or plain coloured. They are fastened diagonally across the chest with buttons, which are made from the same materials as the blouses. Buttons are stitched in a line or a flower design.

Elders usually wear a white coloured Thai Yai shirt, with a dark coloured sarong. In the past, local women used to wear narrow slippers, known as ‘Kaeb din’, but now prefer to wear modern shoes. Similarly, few young women now wear their hair in a traditional ‘klao jok’ bun. Most women have shoulder-length hair, which is more comfortable when wearing a conical Thai Yai hat!

According to the Thai Yai clothing group, in the past, most women in Muang Pon wore round-necked blouses, with diagonal buttoning. Sleeves and shoulders were part of a single piece of fabric, with a long seam running down the back of the blouse.

**Dress for Thai Yai men . . .**

In general, day to day life, Thai Yai men wear a western style shirt and slacks. On special occasions, such as festivals and ceremonies, men wear traditional Thai Yai dress. Men’s trousers are loose fitting, cotton trousers (known as Gon Tai in local language). They also wear collared or round-necked shirts, with an overcoat known as ‘sua dek bong.’ Sometimes, men wear just the overcoat, buttoned to the neck. Men’s overcoat buttons are also made from cloth, woven into flower shapes.

In Muang Pon, ‘Sua saek’ shirts are also popular. These are long sleeved, round-necked shirts, made from thick cotton, with a long row of buttons. Elder men (above 45 years old) often wear a headscarf, known as ‘pa kaen ho.’ If the weather is hot, men will also wear ‘kup tai’, the traditional Thai Yai bamboo hat.

**Local Insight:** consider visiting the Thai Yai clothing group to get measured for a local shirt. This is inexpensive and great fun.
Although metal and plastic equipment from the town is becoming more popular, local men still produce and use many types of painstakingly hand-woven bamboo equipment. Most famous are the eye-catching bamboo hats, rice containers and sieves, and mats. These hats are produced in Muang Pon, for sale as souvenirs in Mae Hong Son and further afield. Mr. Ongboon Chaiwittu is a renowned local expert at bamboo weaving. He collects bamboo from the forests around Muang Pon, and works with his family to produce exquisitely crafted, brightly coloured Kup Tai.

Thai Yai clothing is considered to be an appropriate symbol of Mae Hong Son, blending beauty, natural simplicity and attention to detail. This style and adaptability has attracted other ethnic groups in Mae Hong Son to also wear Thai Yai dress from time to time.

In every home in Muang Pon, at least one woman can produce Thai Yai clothing, or at least help with tasks such as fitting, stitching, and embroidery. Thus, many local women in Muang Pon are able to earn significant additional income by producing and selling Thai Yai clothing for Mae Hong Son citizens to wear on special occasions, such as the beginning and end of Buddhist Lent and Thai New Year.

In Muang Pon, local women produce Thai Yai cloths individually and in artisan groups. Members of the ‘Thai Yai Dressmaking Group’, share work: designing, cutting and stitching different sections of clothing and helping to finish final dresses. Some work can be done at home, such as stitching buttons and embroidery.

The dressmaking group is quite successful. The group is already well known in the province. They receive orders and people even travel to Muang Pon from Mae Hong Son to have dresses made.

Local Insight: consider visiting the Thai Yai clothing group to get measured for a local shirt, or search for the perfect Kup Tai hat to take home as a souvenir. This is inexpensive and great fun.
‘Tong Lai’ refers to elaborate designs, carved into materials such as paper, metal and wood. Carved Tong Lai decorations are used to decorate shrines and homes. Preparing Tong Lai decorations is a highlight of Muang Pon’s diverse festivals and ceremonies, which has helped these arts and crafts to survive. Most villagers are able to make paper decorations themselves, usually while referring to a traditional design. Making wooden decorations for the home is becoming less common, because many villagers now buy ready-made gable decorations from the town. However, local artisans are still requested to decorate Muang Pon’s temples using traditional motifs.

There is some demand for carved, metal decorations from outside Muang Pon. This has helped local artisans to keep their knowledge alive, and to pass on skills to the next generation. However, demand for this work, combined with low payment makes it almost impossible for artisans to survive from art alone. This is a challenge for the sustainability of their crafts.

Several local, male and female artisans can carve Tong Lai into metal. A well-known carver is Mr. Mayka Raksuksamran. He is now passing on this skill to his son. Mr. Maeng Jing and Mrs. Kin Wararat are also well known for their carving expertise.

Paper decorations are still commonplace in Muang Pon, partly because it is cheap for local people to make these themselves. With luck, inspired new generation artists will step forward to maintain the tradition of carving Tong Lai in metal and wood.

During the Haen Som Ko Ja festival, Dum Kon are offered to the spirits of the dead to help them to find a safe passage to Heaven. There are two types of Dum Kon. The most beautiful are intricate, large structures, made from carved metal and wood. Simpler Dum Kon are made from paper and bamboo.

Dum Kon are decorated with symbols which refer to the characters of Thai Yai legends, such as the legend of Mother Raven. Although Dum Kon are very beautiful, Community members do not keep them after the ceremony, because it is not considered to be auspicious. Separate pieces can be stored, but must not be assembled, or it is feared a death will occur.

Local Insight: Although local people do not keep Dum Kon in their homes, they can be found in a certain place in the village. See if you can find out where the Dum Kon are displayed?
Jong Para, Buddha Castles

‘Jong’ means ‘temple’ or ‘castle’ in Thai Yai language, and ‘Para’ means ‘Buddha statue’ or ‘Buddha.’ Jong Para welcome the spirit of the Lord Buddha, traveling from Heaven to earth, followed by an entourage of sacred animals. Paying respect to the Jong Para ‘Buddha Castles’ is well known among Thais.

For the Boi Lem Sip Et, festival Community members build and decorate Jong Para, and display them in homes and the temple. Worship takes place at the end of the Buddhist Lent, for two full days. Thai Yai people also craft Jong Para to decorate the Sermon Hall of the temple during the ‘Boi Mang Ka Pa’ festival.

There are two types of Jong Para castles. Permanent Jong Para castles are used to enshrine Buddha images in the sermon hall or temple chapel. Temporary Jong Para are only used to pay homage to the Buddha at the end of Buddhist Lent. Temporary Jong Para must be made each year. Old Jong Para are discarded on ‘Ong Jot’ day. They are not stored in the home or reused.

The Jong Para are displayed at the front of people’s homes, usually on the second floor, raised above the ground. Some families place their castles in front of an upstairs window, to pay respect. Other villagers make an elevated base to raise their Jong Para above the ground, from banana or sugar cane trunks. Sometimes, Jong Para are illuminated with tiny lights.

The Village Shrine

The shrine for the village guardian spirit is located outside the temple wall, to the east of the temple. According to local history, the shrine was built at the same time as the village pillar shrine and the ‘5 Pillars.’ Community members believe that the village pillar shrine and 5 pillars protect the community from danger, and they are essential for a happy and healthy village.

Community members wash and clean the shrine and the surrounding area in April, after the New Year, to bring good fortune to the whole community. Only men are allowed to enter and clean the village guardian shrine. Before taking long journeys, or taking tests, community members will visit the shrine to pay respect to the spirit and request safe and successful passage. It is considered auspicious to take a little earth from the shrine area.

Local Insight: Thai Yai people build many kinds of Jong Para, such as Jong Yard Jong Kor, Jong Bee Dan and Jong Pa San. How many kinds of Jong Para are common in Muang Pon?

After a home-owner has erected a Jong Para, they will hang a variety of sweets, cakes, fruits and vegetables under its base. It is believed that the Buddha’s entourage of heavenly creatures, such as angels, garuda birds, serpents and giants will join the Buddha on His journey to earth. These foods are prepared to welcome this entourage. The food and sacred objects placed inside the main Jong Para structure are only for the Buddha.
June: The ‘Lern Jet’ ceremony is held. Lay people discuss Dharma and ask questions to the Monks. Farmers begin to scatter their rice seeds and prepare the earth for planting rice. The village’s guardian spirit is invited back to the village shrine.

July: Farmers re-plant their rice shoots in the paddy fields. In the middle of the lunar month, ‘Khao Pansa’, the Buddhist Lent begins. Village elders stay in the temple overnight on Buddha Days. Children and grandchildren take care of their food and collect them every day until the final day, known as ‘Boi Jah Ka.’

August: Farmers must finish planting and tend to their crops.

September: During the ‘Tang Som Daw Long’ festival. Community members bring rice, vegetables and fruits to the temple in the evening. They work together to carve fruit into beautiful shapes. A highlight of the festival is to cook 49 balls of glutinous sticky rice to offer at the temple in the morning.

October: Marks the end of the Buddhist Lent. The villagers prepare intricately crafted ‘Jong Para’ shrines made from woven bamboo and decorated with carvings paper. These are to welcome the Buddha from Heaven. Following this, the ‘Haen Som Ko Ja’ festival makes merit for the souls of the deceased. Towers decorated with flags, known as ‘Dum Kon’ are made to help dead souls find safe passage to Heaven. A special ceremony is held for people who have died in Muang Pon in the past year. On the 14th day of the lunar month, villagers celebrate ‘Boi Ong Jot’ by crafting a huge candle from bundles of twig. They organize a colourful parade around the village, and return to the temple to light the candle and pay respect to the Lord Buddha.

November: There is a ceremony to offer candles to the Monks, and release fire lanterns into the sky.
The villagers in Muang Pon have zoned and utilised community forest, in cooperation with the Forestry Department since 2010. An area of 270 hectares in Mae Yuam National Forest is utilised and conserved by Muang Pon village no. 1. A further area of 392 hectares is conserved by Muang Pon village no. 2.

No-one is allowed to encroach on or clear the forest. Villagers must plant trees to replant those which have been cut. Hunting is forbidden in the community forest. There are serious punishments for disobeying the rules.

Villagers utilise the community forest in many ways, such as searching for seasonal wild foods and cutting small amounts of wood for public events, such as temple fairs and merit making. They have also developed an orchid conservation area and nurseries for birds, squirrels and frogs. When animals grow and leave the community forest area, they can be caught for food.

There is a natural well, Por Nam Thip, which has water all year-round, and is believed to be sacred by community members. Water from this spring is collected and used for various religious and spiritual ceremonies in Muang Pon. Herbal medicines can also be collected in the community forest.

Community forest conservation activities include tree planting on Thai Mother’s Day (12th August); building small dams in the forest for irrigation; forest ordination ceremonies (the trees are ordained as sacred beings); maintaining the area around the sacred well and monitoring to protect the area from bush fires.

Agriculture

Agricultural production in Muang Pon is largely self-sufficient:

- Villagers forage for wild foods in the community forest, such as wild fruits, mushrooms, bamboo shoots, edible ferns and herbal medicines. The amount of wild food which can be harvested from year to year is inconsistent, depending on the weather and soil quality. Community members have learned from experience that conservation and natural resource management leads to higher availability of wild foods.

- Villagers plant crops in their fields. Rice is the most important staple food in the village, and the foundation of food security. Villagers also have home gardens, where they plant herbs and vegetables for the Thai Yai kitchen, such as lemon grass, chilli, eggplant, galanga and long green beans. Many families also raise animals such as chickens, frogs and fish. The most important cash crops are sweet corn, garlic and soybeans.

Local Insight: Visit the community forest with a local guide, to learn how community members utilize and conserve the area.
Seasonal foods . . . and menus

Summer - The Dry Season

Seasonal foods gathered inside the community forest include tamarind shoots, edible fern and star gooseberries, wasp and bee larvae. Outside the community forest, villagers forage for Asiatic pennywort, red ant eggs, frogs, snails and fish! In their fields and orchards, villagers grow jackfruit, soy bean, cabbage, green beans and mango shoots. They raise pork, fish, frog and chicken.

Seasonal menus include tasty local curries made from jackfruit, edible fern, kale, fish, frog and chicken; roasted fish and frogs; fried ferns and long beans; tamarind and mango shoot salads; steamed fish; and boiled jackfruit, pork, frog chicken and fish!

Monsoon - The Rainy Season

Seasonal foods gathered inside the community forest include bamboo, mushrooms, baby eggplant, banana heart, edible ferns, and edible grubs. Outside the community forest, villagers forage for mushrooms, bamboo, baby eggplant and edible fern, as well as frogs, fish, snails, freshwater prawns and edible grubs. In their fields and orchards, villagers harvest papaya, pumpkin, long beans, cucumber, egg plant, cabbage, zucchini, kale, peanuts, sweet corn and chili. They raise pork, fish, duck and chicken!

Seasonal menus include local curries made from bamboo, edible fern, pumpkin, mushrooms, banana heart, morning glory and eggplant; roasted water monitor, frogs, fish and freshwater prawns; fried fish and edible grubs; bamboo and sour mushroom salads; steamed fish; grilled banana heart and boiled vegetables.

Winter

Seasonal foods from the community forest include local horseradish, Asiatic pennyworth, Stanley’s water tub and other edible plants with no translation! Outside the community forest, villagers forage for mango shoots, rosella and other edible vegetables. In the fields and orchards, villagers grow eggplant, cauliflower, cucumber, beans and kale. They raise pork, fish, frog and chicken!

Seasonal menus include tasty curries made from local horseradish, eggplant, cabbage and sweet potatoes; roasted frog, chicken, cabbage and eggplant; fried lettuce, eggplant, cauliflower, broad beans and cucumber; mango shoot, Lyonia Foliase, and Moringa oleifera salads; steamed fish and chicken; grilled fish and frog; and boiled fish, pork, chicken, wild rosella and cauliflower.
‘Must’ Try Thai Yai Dishes

- **Oop curry (gaeng oop):** This is a delicious, sweet and slightly spicy local curry, usually served with chicken, pork, fish, frog or jackfruit.
- **Jin Loong:** These are meatballs flavoured with herbs and spices.
- **Nam Prik Tua Nao:** This is a chile dip made with fermented, refried soya beans. It is a little pungent, but absolutely delicious!

**Local Insight:** There are special foods to try every month in Muang Pon, but you need to be there at the right time, during festivals and ceremonies. Most special dishes are made from rice. Most dishes don’t have English translation... so just enjoy the adventure and see what you can track down and taste!

- January / February: ‘Ya Ku’ - sticky rice fried with sugar and coconut
- March: ‘Hinkiaw’, ‘Kawpong taw’ or ‘Kaw teekpan’ at Boi Sang Long festival
- April / May: try ‘kawmonjokgar’ at the end of Buddhist New Year
- July / September: try ‘Kawlouangnerlung’ at the start of Buddhist Lent
- November Try ‘Kaw munson’ or ‘kaw munkoorye’
- December: try ‘Kaw puk’ at the new rice festival!

**Preserved foods**

Thai Yai cuisine includes particularly delicious preserved foods. Preserved, dried, pickled and marinated foods are prepared by the villagers according to traditional recipes. Examples of popular, preserved foods include mushrooms, bamboo, various kinds of fermented soy beans and fermented fish. Fermented soya bean is one of the most popular dishes, used to make various curries and chilli dips, and should be tried at least once!
A = village pillar shrine
B = village shrine
C = Muang Pon temple
D = Dhamma Jedi temple
E = Kong Moo Nua Temple
F = morning market
G = food processing group
H = Home Stay
I = local sugar cane crushing mill
J = bamboo weaving
K = Jong Para artisan
L = ‘Tong Lai’ - carving artisan
M = Thai Yai clothing group
N = elder broom making group
O = local Thai Yai home
P = olden police station
Q = Muang Pon cultural center
R = Muang Pon school
S = Muang Pon district administrations
T = Muang Pon hospital health district.
U = Muang Pon community ICT center
V = community hall
W = Community Based Tourism group center
Every day, community members sell local foods which they have farmed and cooked at Muang Pon’s Morning Market. This is a great place to visit, early in the morning from 5-6 a.m.

Villagers usually set up a table and sell just a few vegetables or snacks, as a supplement to their household economies. The market is both supply and demand driven. Villagers sell crops which exceed their needs at home, before the food spoils.

Meats in the market have an interesting journey. Middlemen from Muang Pon buy live pigs and chickens from the villagers and take them to the slaughterhouse in Khun Yuam district town, because this is a hygienic place to slaughter the animals. Then, they take the meat back to the village for sale in the market. The middlemen rotate around the community, buying animals as they mature. In this sense, animal raising is still undertaken as a practically self-sufficient activity, because the villagers raise the animals, sell them and then buy them back!

Some food is brought in from outside Muang Pon and sold in the market. This is usually food which cannot be grown or raised in the community. E.g.: mackerel, coconut deserts, dried, tinned and packaged foods. Condiments brought from outside include fish sauce, vinegar, vegetable oil, lemon, different kinds of chillies to those grown in Muang Pon and some flavourings!
The United Nations Joint Project

This publication is an output of the ‘Community Based Ecotourism Development in Mae Hong Son Project,’ funded by the United Nations Joint Program on Integrated Highland Livelihood Development in Mae Hong Son (UNJP). The overall goal of this program was to improve the quality of life and to reduce poverty among vulnerable groups in underserved areas of Mae Hong Son province, northern Thailand, through protection and empowerment measures. Ecotourism and community-based tourism were developed as tools to foster socio-economic development and contribute to sustainable cultural and natural resource management. The project was lead by Mae Hong Son provincial office for tourism and sports; funded by FAO, UNDP and UNESCO; and implemented by Thailand Community Based Tourism Institute (CBT-I).

Thailand Community Based Tourism Institute

CBT-I was established in 2006 to “Provide support and facilitate cooperation among stakeholders from grassroots to international levels, in order to strengthen the capacity of Thai communities to manage tourism sustainably.” Since 2006, CBT-I have assisted over 40 communities to conduct simple research projects to explore their potentials for tourism. CBT-I have trained over 1000 people from over 100 communities in areas like CBT product development, marketing, operation, and monitoring. CBT-I have facilitated peer-learning networks across Thailand, allowing communities to meet, discuss, share experience and resources and advocate for government support. Recognizing that success relies on partnerships with business, CBT-I provide regular training for tour operators, guides, responsible government and NGO staff. CBT-I were a finalist in the WTTC 2012 Tourism for Tomorrow Awards for Community Benefit.

Community members in Muang Pon helped to collect the information in this book, and to check its accuracy during cultural mapping activities.