

CHAPTER IV

THE ETHNIC TOURISM PROCESS AND INTERACTION AMONG THE ACTORS

“Yu Lai Yu son, swe ku swe ou.”

A rat will go its path; a crab will enter its hole.

(Kayan Proverb)

4.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on the cultural commoditization process that exists in Thailand in terms of the promotion of ‘Long-Necked’ tourism, analyzing the human trafficking in Padaung people that takes place in support of tribal tourism. This has created conflict between the authorities and business people when wishing to create Padaung images for their own interests. How the three actors: the tourists, tourist objects and middlemen interact under the process of ‘touristification’ will be explored in this chapter, and in my study of the commoditization of migrant ethnic people, I have found that NGOs and religious organizations play an important role, so I take account of them as a fourth actor in the process and review the interactions that take place between them and the other actors.

In terms of the tourists as the first actor, I will explore their behavior in Huay Pu Keng and their awareness or otherwise of the exploitation of the Long-Necked people. Second, with respect to the Padaung as objects of tourism, I will investigate their feelings at being gazed upon and their interactions with and reactions to outsiders. The local authorities and business people are the middlemen in this study, the third group of actors, so I will investigate the control mechanisms used by the local authorities, how the business people manage Huay Pu Keng and what are the interactions among them. The involvement of NGOs and religious organizations in Huay Pu Keng will also be explained - as they are the fourth group of actors in the process.

4.2 Cultural Commoditization Process

About two decades ago, a Thai tour operator came into contact with the Padaung by chance, and immediately realized they could be of commercial potential (Nipa 1993). After this, an agreement was reached to have the Padaung settled in Mae Hong Son, in exchange for their cooperation in allowing tourists to enter their villages; however, they hardly had any choice other than to become involved in tourism.

Prasit Leepreecha (2005) highlights the contradictory policies of the authorities in terms of citizenship and exploiting ethnic people for the tourism industry. Due to the fact that the Long-Necked Kayan in Mae Hong Son and Chiang Rai are recently arrived illegal immigrants, their lack of citizenship status is simply ignored by the authorities. As illegal immigrants, they are often intimidated by local government officials in Mae Hong Son and Chiang Rai, who stress their illegal status when threatening them with relocation for tourism purposes. This situation has also occurred with the Mlabri ethnic group (also known as the 'Yellow Leaf' people or *Phi Tong Luang*), as the provincial governments in Nan and Phrae Provinces (also in Thailand) have tried to persuade them to settle there in order to attract tourists. In this respect, both the Long-Necked Kayan and the Mlabri people are perceived as objects to be used for tourism purposes - to be manipulated by different state agencies (Prasit 2005).

The Padaung's suffering can be traced back to 1997, the year labeled 'Unseen in Thailand' year by the Tourism Authority of Thailand, and which was followed by 'Amazing Thailand' year in 1998. In the news reports from Mae Hong Son in 1997, Poonsak Sunthornpanitkit, President of the Mae Hong Son Provincial Chamber of Commerce, stressed that the use of the Long-Necked Kayan as a method to attract tourists for revenue purposes was tantamount to a human rights violation. Mr. Poonsak said that the Karen inhabited a 'human zoo' and that their rights were being

abused by enterprising opportunists who were using the villagers to cash in on tourism¹.

In 1998, Dhana Nakluang, a businessman from Chiang Mai, was accused of holding 32 Long-Necked Padaung women together as a tourist attraction. He was charged with holding the ‘exotic tribal people’ as virtual prisoners, but at the time he said “Mae Hong Son provincial authorities are upset that I have some Padaung here in Chiang Mai. They made up the story to condemn me as they want to be the only province where Padaung exist.”²

Two Padaung families, including four Padaung women, disappeared from Huay Pu Keng in October 2007. They had not received any supplies from the business people, so villagers assumed that they had been taken away to another province by human traffickers. In November 2007, six Long-Necked women from Huay Pu Keng village were allegedly kidnapped by a private tour company. They had been given refugee status by the United Nations Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), but the tour company forced them to display themselves for tourists in a resort in Mae Tang District, Chiang Mai Province. A kidnapped girl called her relatives at the time, having borrowed a cell-phone from a tourist who went to the resort. The victims were being forced to show themselves to tourists at the resort in return for a salary of 4,000 Baht per month. The girl said they had been threatened with death if they tried to escape³.

As mentioned in Chapter III, during my field research eleven Padaung (seven adults and four children) disappeared from the village⁴ - on 3rd July 2008. The evening before that day, Uncle La Ham and I talked with two Padaung women and a

¹ Straits Times, November 18th 1997

² The Associated Press, April 9th 1998

³ The Nation Newspaper, November 13th 2007

⁴ This group was sent back to Mae Hong Son in August, after smugglers came under pressure from the media and the legal services

Padaung man at Uncle La ham's home. It was raining that evening, and they played guitars and sang when I arrived - and started to drink. Their dresses were old and dirty, but the brass rings of the two women lit up the dark room. Their song was heart-rending.

One of the Padaung men started to talk about their difficult situation in terms of survival. He remembered having a logging job from which he earned 100 to 200 Baht per day two years before, but he said that now there were no jobs for the men. He told me that he had no money and could not even drink a glass of rice wine when he wanted to. A Padaung woman agreed with what he said, and the other Padaung man joked, but I knew they were being serious, and that if I could help them to leave, they were ready to go. One of the men said:

Here we have no hope; the situation is getting worse and worse. If someone takes us to another province, we will follow them. Some tourists told me they had seen Long-Necked in other provinces and they are ok there. Unlike in the past, the Padaung see themselves as willing participants in human trafficking. You know why? Because the situation here is deteriorating, and even when I want to drink a glass of alcohol, I have nothing, so I cannot." (a Padaung man)

All of them confessed that if someone provided them with an incentive, they would follow him or her; they believed that they would have an easier life in another location. After this, I began to realize why human trafficking occurs so easily among the Padaung community. While I was in the village I also noticed they had not received a salary for three or four months, and Mu Yan told me that their rice supply was about to run out - in the next two months.

The next day I went back to Mae Hong Son and heard that eleven Padaung had disappeared from the village. That evening Uncle La Ham phoned to inform me that two of the Padaung women and one of the Padaung men I had met were in the group who had disappeared, saying that even he had not known they would take this course of action.

I also went to meet one Padaung man who had been left with his two children after eleven Padaung had disappeared - including his wife. He confessed that his wife had not said anything about being trafficked before she disappeared.

She didn't tell me what she was going to do. I think that another Padaung family, one which is in contact with a human trafficker, persuaded her to go along with them to find a better life. She often grumbled about having insufficient income and expressed her desire to go away to find money. She learned that some Padaung who arrived in other province had received a good income, because in that province there are only a few Padaung and there is no competition in terms of selling souvenirs, so tourists who do not travel as far as Mae Hong Son are very interested to see the Long-Necked. At first, no one in the village noticed that eleven Padaung had disappeared.

At first I thought she had gone to the forest to collect vegetables with her friends. I think they ran away in the early morning and I only noticed in the evening that she was missing when the children told me they hadn't had lunch yet. I cannot sell souvenirs without my Long-Necked wife at home - I have only a little rice left and I cannot feed my two children. I want her to come back to her family. If she does not come back, I am thinking of moving to the refugee camp." (Interview with a Padaung man, July 2008)

Villagers asked me to help them find their fellow Padaung when I returned to Chiang Mai, as they had received news that the missing Padaung were near there. It was difficult for me to explain how big Chiang Mai is, as most of the Padaung have never been to a city in Myanmar, let alone Thailand. Even the former headmaster of the Middle School and my host, Ko Law, has never been to Chiang Mai.



Figure 4.1: Items on Sale at Padaung Villages - Produced by Local Thai People

Actors within the Ethnic Tourism Market

4.3 Tourist Gaze

On average, 600 tourists visit Huay Pu Keng each month. The village earns an income of 250 baht from the admission fees for international tourists, but receives nothing for the Thais. Most tourists are not particularly interested in the traditions and legends behind the wearing of the metal rings; it is simply their exotic appearance that attracts their attention. In the opinion of most people, the village is a human zoo where people can go to gawp at the villagers and have photographs taken with these Long-Necked 'creatures'. The Long-Necked women are the main subject of the tourists' photographs, and as Cohen (2001) points out, ethnic tourism can undermine the self-image and sense of personal dignity of the people involved. However the female tourists are often interested in the brass rings and whether they are painful or not - they show some sympathy towards the Padaung women.

Table 4.1: Total Number of Visitors to Mae Hong Son - 2003 to 2007

Year	Visitors		Total
	Thais	Foreigners	
2003	270,549	286,474	557,023
2004	325,990	296,070	622,060
2005	143,663	135,978	279,641
2006	308,250	188,674	496,924
2007	164,859	79,911	244,770

Source: Tourism Authority of Thailand

When I visited the village I noticed that tour guides are important in shaping the tourists' thinking. I saw many tour guides, some of whom were sympathetic towards the Padaung; however, some looked down on them. Some tourists came with presents like toys, books and pencils, or snacks for the Kayan children. They brought these things upon the suggestion of the guides.

The Kayan are naturally sociable and accommodating, with an honest, frank and forgiving nature. They are content with their belongings, are hard-working and curious about things which are new and strange to them. As Mu Yan told me:

Some tour guides tell the tourists that the Padaung wear the rings for money and that they are not poor, right in front of me; however, they do not know that I understand very well what they are saying."

Mu Yan is very good at speaking Thai, as well as English, and she said that the tour guides do not like it if the young Padaung girls talk directly to the tourists in English. If they do this, the tour guides tell the tourists to avoid going to their shop.

We like to speak to them (the tourists) and explain about our lives. I do not get angry, even when the tourists called me a 'Long-Necked' person, but we are not allowed to tell them the

truth about anything. If we say something, the guides complain and shout at us - they just want us to smile at all times.” (from a Padaung girl’s essay)

Most tourists pay only a quick visit to the villages, take photos and then leave, without trying to get to know more about the villagers, such as why they have to live as refugees, how they survive, why they wear the rings, what remains of their traditional culture and beliefs, and what their hopes are for the future.

4.3.1 To Gaze or Not To Gaze: Tourists Awareness of the Padaung

Some of the younger tourists learn about the Padaung’s tough life in the village before they come and gaze. I had one conversation with a Belgium woman on the way to Mae Hong Son, during time which I asked her opinion of the visit to the Long-Necked village. She said:

I learned from the media and other travelers’ experiences before I started this trip. I hate to see them as a human zoo and was not sure whether I should go to see them or not, until I arrived in Mae Hong Son.” (Interview with a Belgium woman, July 2008)

I also talked with a group of Canadian students in Mae Hong Son and they told me they could also not make up their mind whether to see the Padaung or not, having learned that they are exploited. Whether or not to visit the Long-Necked villages is often discussed among the tourists.

Denis D. Gray⁵ points out the some of the factors that tourists should take into account in deciding whether to visit the Long-Necked villages or not, but concludes that ultimately it is their decision. Here are a few key points he suggests tourists should consider, and he places both a positive and negative spin on each.

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Associated Press, March 1998

“(1) If you go, it could be argued that you are encouraging the indiscriminate mutilation of young woman. However, this assumes that all the women see these neck rings as mutilation, but [I am] not convinced they all do.

(2) If you go, you are encouraging the women to make tourist attractions of themselves, as opposed to seeking better, more sustainable opportunities. But these are refugees and their choices are significantly limited as to what they can do. They are truly stuck between the proverbial rock and a hard place. And there is the issue of their right to self-determination.

(3) If you go, you are encouraging the exploitation of a group of people who have refugee status and by UNHCR regulations should not be seen by the public.

(4) If you go, the ultimate profiteers are not the villagers but the Thais, through the overall increase in tourism to the Mae Hong Son region [that] the Padaung bring; just witness the proliferation of postcards and tourist literature extolling the Padaung as if they were Thailand's own. There are still many other attractions in Mae Hong Son, so it could be argued that the Padaung have a right to get their hands in the pie as well.”

One travel agency provides its customers with a list of the pros and cons in terms of visiting the Long-Necked villages⁶, and some of the more interesting points they raise are:

Pros:

- Although the villages have been set up on purpose, it is where the Padaung women and their families live.
- The Padaung in Thailand are either refugees or economic migrants, so they need all the help they can get.

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Chiang Dao (<http://www.chiangdao.com/>)

- The Padaung's traditional practices are enhanced, as it is a culturally based practice.
- To take photographs.

Cons:

- All the Long-Necked villages were set up for tourists and are not necessarily managed by the Padaung themselves.
- There have been allegations of imprisonment and ill-treatment.
- The Long-Necked Padaung live illegally on Thai soil and are vulnerable to exploitation.
- They see many people and are constantly photographed, so it is difficult for some to look anything other than bored.
- There is an entrance fee, which by its very nature means visitors are paying to look at the Long-Necked Padaung, as if in a human zoo.

Tourists who are aware of the situation receive negative information from the mass media and articles based on experiences people have had in the Long-Necked villages. Most opinions express concern regarding the violation of human rights, and NGOs in Mae Hong Son encourage visitors to contribute to the Padaung people.

We welcome visitors and urge them to bring books or things for the children. The Padaung still rely on ethnic tourism for their survival, since they have no choice. If less visitors come, their monthly salaries will also fall; NGOs cannot provide sufficient amounts all the time. This kind of situation means the Padaung become victims of human trafficking.” (Interview with an NGO worker, July 2008)

4.4 Representation, Changes of Meaning and the Value of Padaung Women's Identity

I asked Ma Naw, Mu Sa's mother, how she feels about her bright brass rings. She smiled while chewing her betel nut and gave me short answer: “This is our culture. We follow our mothers and grandmas.” She has no desire to move to another location as part of a resettlement, and explained to me that she does not want to move

anymore because of language difficulties and her old age. She neither speaks Burmese nor Thai.

I learned that many old women have the same kind of desire, but some Padaung women occasionally go to Yangon or Chiang Mai, as they are often invited to cultural shows, or sometimes are misled by human traffickers. An old Padaung woman told me she last went to Yangon fifteen years ago - she was in a group of dancers at a cultural show. At that time the Myanmar military regime was copying Thailand's tourism strategy and had in 1996 started to advertise a 'visit Myanmar Year'. As a result, oppressed ethnic people appeared in cultural shows to attract more tourists to the country.

Sometimes when I visited Mu Yan's home, she and other girls from the neighborhood were enjoying famous music albums from Thailand. Mu Yan's is one of the households that owns an old television and a VCD player, which they enjoy watching when they can get hold of a VCD. Sometimes young girls gather and enjoy listening to music, and Mu Yan's parents and elderly people often enjoy Hollywood movies. I was surprised when I heard young Padaung girls aged twelve to twenty singing many popular Thai songs, one of which was by a famous Thai girls' band called 'Show Girls'. Padaung girls learn about modern dress styles and the freedom of some women's lifestyles from the outside world - from TV and VCDs. I saw one of them wearing brass rings, but with golden-brown dyed hair, and sometimes I saw them in jeans.

Uncle Phan grumbled that they cannot control the new generations in this kind of situation. Young girls do not dress traditionally, except for wearing the neck rings, and their way of thinking style is very different from the older generation also. Tourism is helping to modify and reshape culture (Hiwasaki 2000).

4.5 Middlemen: Provincial Authorities and Business People

4.5.1 State and Local Authorities

In Myanmar, the Padaung suffered from political oppression in the past and in Thailand, where they currently reside, they suffer from social exploitation. According to the news in July 2007, Myanmar authorities asked their Thai counterparts to send back the Padaung who had previously left the country⁷. The Padaung themselves did not want to go back at the time, without peace and stability in their homeland, though in Thailand they lack citizenship rights, social security and even the rights of migrants.

Local officials in the past have declared that they will consider giving identity cards to Huay Pu Keng villagers, but so far this has not happened. The official asked for money from the villagers three times – the first time 200 baht per head, and the second and third times, 300 baht per head – promising they would issue the villagers cards, but their hopes faded after no response was forthcoming. After that, they no longer believed the officials' stories and most of them have now given up on their dream of receiving identity cards. Some have not even applied for the card, as they have already been prevented from leaving the area, even though they were holding another type of card.

One Kayan elder told me that the Government allocated funds for the new Huay Pu Keng village, but the local authorities did not manage the changes very well - the houses were built badly, using poor materials. These small bamboo huts did not last, and the local authorities claimed that the huts were designed by the Department of Public Construction and City Planning (for details, see Chapter V). The head and senior members of the new Huay Pu Keng wanted to take their complaints to the Thai Government in Bangkok, but lacked the relevant facts and information. The only information they could get hold of was from the NGOs, and by the time I visited the field site, many families had left the new Huay Pu Keng.

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Mizzima News, July 2007

Referring to the authorities' control of the Padaung, Merante (1990) calls them “hostages to tourism” in her article. Kitty McKinsey, a spokeswoman for UNHCR, has also remarked that the village is definitely a human zoo, due to the denial of requests to resettle in third countries⁸. Small ethnic groups are thus defenseless against outside forces (ibid).

4.5.2 Business People

After the Karenni (Kayan) rebel camp was taken by the Myanmar army in 1989, its fleeing inhabitants became refugees on the Thai side of the border. The Padaung Long-Necked women quickly became an important economic focus for the area, since a large number of tourists came to gaze upon them. The exploitation of Kayan women has continued in the refugee settlement, as can be seen on the plaques written in English, which say: ‘Long-Necked Village’. In the settlement the Padaung are separated from the other Myanmar ethnic migrants and business people. With the co-operation of the local authorities, a village has been created for them, but UNHCR calls the village another kind of refugee camp.



Figure 4.2: An Advertisement in Mae Hong Son

A hotel in Mae Hong Son has an advertisement which says ‘Padaung Hilltribes now available, on special arrangement in advance.’ Edith Merante (2006) says that this adds a new freak-show element to the ‘human zoo’ syndrome in

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Bangkok Post, January 30th 2008.

Thailand. Tour agencies send parties of foreign trekkers off to remote ethnic villages to gawk at increasingly objectified and commodified ethnic people, with their 'primitive' nature a surefire advertising pitch. Ethnic culture can be commoditized by anyone, without the consent of the people being commoditized, Greenwood (1977) concludes. Every day, anywhere from 50 to 200 tourists spend between 250 to 500 Thai baht (US \$7.72 to 15.45) for the opportunity to see the Padaung Long-Necked women in Mae Hong Son Province, according to the US Campaign for Burma.



Figure 4.3: A Coffee Mix Advertisement in a Weekly Journal Published in Yangon.

4.6 The Fourth Actor: NGOs and Religious Organizations

NGOs and religious organizations act as a counter-balance to the business people and local authorities. encouraging the Padaung people to claim their rights from the local authorities (for details see Chapter V, section 5.4).

Other factors in the relationship between these actors and the villagers are their religious conversion and their changing lifestyles. Western missionaries arrived

in the Kayan region of Myanmar in 1850, after which the Kayan gradually dropped their traditional customs and converted to Christianity, the first converts being the villagers in Mound Blo (Khon Eden Phan 2005). In terms of their changing lifestyles, the decline in wearing the brass rings in Myanmar is in line with current social trends. The new generations do not want to follow the brass ring wearing tradition; Padaung girls want to go to school the same as other ethnic children - some even continue to college and university. In other words, they do not want to be different from others. According to recent research, the brass wearing culture has almost disappeared in Myanmar (U Kyaw Than 2010).



Figure 4.4: A Church in Huay Pu Keng

In Thailand, the ability of a young Padaung to get a job and to work for an organization is often linked to religious conversion, and this situation leads to the young Padaung giving up their traditions and changing their lifestyles. Religious organizations discourage the new generations from following the neck wearing culture, referring to this kind of practice as self-torture. To make up for the loss of income due to not wearing the neck rings, they support themselves in appropriate ways such as working part-time with their religious-based organization or becoming teachers. However, from my observations, this choice is only available to Post-Ten Padaung girls. The following table shows the Post-Ten programs which are equivalent to diplomas.

Table 4.2: Post-Ten Programs

School	Programs	Length	Place
Post-Ten School	Social and Development Program	Two Years	Nai Soi Refugee Camp
	Teacher Training Program		
	Women's Studies Program		
	Leadership Program		

Note: These programs are equal to a Diploma.