

CHAPTER VI CONCLUSION

“Khlwi ba do ni hto, Ni hto ba do khlwi”,

The plantation needs the prod and
the prod is only useful only when there is a plantation.

(Kayan proverb)

“I took the rings off, because I don’t want to be treated like this any more.

I want respect. I don’t want people to stare at me as if I am strange any more.

I love my tradition, but our tradition is not about tourists.

Our tradition is to live in our villages growing our own food and being left alone to lead a free life.”

(Mu Lo, the first girl to take her brass rings off)

6.1 Main Findings of the Study; Limitations and Recommendations

In nearly twenty years of migration activity, the Padaung community in Thailand has grown to over 500, most of who still live in poverty and with no hope of a return to Myanmar. Unlike other refugees, the Padaung do not live in a sealed-off camp, due to their commercial value. In fact, the Thai authorities argue that the Padaung live in Thailand for economic reasons rather than because it is politically unsafe for them to live in Myanmar. The Padaung families are trapped in their villages - the victims of Myanmar’s civil war and exploited by the Thai tourism industry. Provincial authority controls cause them to lose any incentive to break the trap, preventing them from moving to another country and pushing to create a new village. Consequently, their future hangs in the balance. This study has explored how the Padaung have maintained their legends and beliefs, and how their tribal values have been exploited in order to perpetuate tourism, for commercial gain. In this chapter I will reflect upon my main findings in terms of the representation of Padaung female identity, the changes in cultural meaning and values, and the different views held among the older and younger generations regarding commoditization.

6.1.1 Representation of Padaung Female Identity

First, I want to analyze how Padaung female identity is represented by the Padaung themselves – both the older and younger generations – and by other actors as part of the ethnic tourism process, plus how ethnic tourism has shaped the identity of the Padaung people.

What are the two generations' opinions on the brass rings: part of their identity or a troublesome item? The older generation sees the rings as part of their identity in exile; they feel incomplete without them. On the other hand, the younger generation is moving away from the tradition. An old Padaung woman told me that she hopes the authorities and business people reduce their control; if she has the chance, she wants to see a modern city with high-rise buildings and people going about their business freely, to see many places and the sea before she leaves this world.

While the older generation has decided to maintain the traditional culture and identity in exile, the younger generation, particularly the girls, show less interest in their distinctive body modifications.

Although Mu Yan and her younger sister took off their brass rings, their youngest sister still wears them. However, she is fascinated by a modern lifestyle, and so Mu Yan told me that her youngest sister will take off her rings when she is ready to further her studies in Nai Soi camp. Mu Yan said she got bored of and disliked sitting in front of the tourists. Another Padaung girl said she had discarded her neck rings not only because they would hinder her chance to study abroad, but also because she was unhappy at receiving such low pay for being a tourist attraction.

Here, I want to mention a story that reflects the different representations of identity from the different generations – the relationship between Mu Yan and her grandmother Ma Par. Ma Par, at about 80 years old, is the oldest Padaung lady in Huay Pu Keng and has been wearing her brass rings for 70 years. Mu Yan is her favorite and closest granddaughter, and she is very proud of her. The problems between Ma Par and her beloved granddaughter began when Mu Yan decided to take

off her rings, after joining the Post-Ten class. Her grandmother scolded her, while she resisted her and felt that her grandmother did not understand her sentiments. As soon as Mu Yan started to think that the brass rings would block her future plans, she took them off (in 2007), and her grandmother has not talked to her since.



Figure 6.1: Ma Par (the Oldest Woman in Huay Pu Keng) and Her Granddaughter, Mu Yan (who Later Took Off her Neck Rings)

Padaung identity has been constructed around the meaning of the brass rings, as well as the history behind the wearing of them. Some conflicting stories exist among the Kayan elders when trying to establish the meaning of and history behind wearing the brass rings. Kayan scholars have tried to change the negative meaning of the Long-Necked tradition into a meaningful one. The Kayan (Padaung) have no written historical records up to British colonial rule in Myanmar, so it is difficult to agree on the history of the Padaung, as there are even disagreements about the narrative among Kayan scholars themselves. The name Padaung is not appreciated by Kayan scholars, but is widely used by people in general. As I pointed out in Chapter I, the Kayan (Padaung) want to create their own history and changing their name to Kayan-Padaung or Kayan Lahwi is done in order to represent their right to self-determination.

At the same time, the local authorities and tour guides have constructed the Padaung image as a provincial symbol. Denis D. Gray, the Associated Press journalist, says that Long-Necked women have become Mae Hong Son Province's unofficial symbol.¹

6.1.2 Changing Cultural Meaning and Value

Obviously, ethnic tourism has shaped the Padaung's view of their own cultural values and has encouraged human traffickers. Ethnic tourism has represented the Padaung's identity within the process and context of cultural commoditization. In the early period of tourism, the culture of wearing rings was driven by the tourism itself, but over a decade later, this situation has reversed. Views of the outside world also differ between the older and younger generations; higher education, exposure to the outside world (via tourists, movies etc.) and religious conversion, have allowed the younger generation to become easily absorbed into modern life. Only a few now follow the tradition of wearing the rings plus the full dress - most just wear the rings, but accompanied by dyed hair, modern dress and using modern products.

¹ Associated Press, March 1998

Among the young Padaung girls, as I mentioned in a previous chapter, the number of the girls taking the rings off has increased in recent years. Members of the younger generation consider the neck rings to be the cause of their becoming “objects of control” by others, and they no longer place such a high value on this tradition; they see it as a barrier to them attaining full human rights, as others do. One Padaung girl who had taken off her rings said she loved her culture, but that it imprisons the Padaung people as a whole.

Another Padaung told me they cannot tolerate this situation anymore, and that if outsiders offer them a life elsewhere, they will follow them. Human trafficking stories often appear in the media as a crime, but most cases remain undiscovered. However, as the Padaung’s key feature is very prominent (the rings), everyone who sees them knows who they are and they can be easily detained. People always blame the trafficker whenever a human trafficking incident occurs, but few pay attention to the reasons that have led the victim into this situation.



Figure 6.2: Fake Neck Rings - for Visitors to Wear While Having a Photo Taken

The Padaung feel under pressure to retain their culture, more so than other actors and other ethnic groups. All the situations they find themselves in force them to look at their traditional culture in a negative way; for example, they see the rings as an object of control. The traditional meaning of beauty, with an elongated neck, has also changed for the younger generation since making contact with the outside world. For the younger generations, they feel they have lost their freedom, so do not care about culture, and in fact cultural tourism, which has reinforced their traditional culture, has simply caused them problems. The situation does not give them the chance to maintain their exotic culture, other than as part of the tourism industry, so some have taken their rings off permanently and some only wear them seasonally.

At first, Mu Yan followed the traditional Kan Khwan beliefs, so I asked her why she took her rings off. She told me that she would like her culture to be appreciated by outsiders, but she dislikes it when visitors' are disrespectful in their curiosity, because of the neck rings.

I am proud of my traditions and culture, but I dislike it when others see me as strange. I feel discomfort when they think I am different from them. I don't think they realize the value of our culture. (Interview with a Padaung girl, September 2008)

There was a fake neck ring at the stall opposite the home I stayed in (Fig 6.2), for female visitors to wear when having their picture taken, and even the male visitors sometimes try on the rings for fun. Padaung women express a pride in their cultural identity - as popular, attractive figures, but are also aware of the fact that their identity is also negative and that they have been turned into objects of commoditization by the authorities and tourists.

The value attached to the neck rings by the Padaung has changed from an emotional and spiritual value to an economic value – as part of the commoditization process, and this is in stark contrast to their cultural values. This change has led to several problems within their community, with conflicts between the older and younger generations. The older generation sees it as an acceptable deal to be the

subject of the tourists' gaze and to earn a monthly salary, with the hope that one day they will go back to their home. Members of the younger generation want to protect their rights in Thailand, or want to find a new life in another country. In total, twenty Padaung women from across three villages took off their neck rings during 2008 in order to apply for resettlement. Ten families from Huay Pu Keng, including eight Long-Necked women, are preparing to apply for resettlement and have thus moved to a refugee camp.

6.1.3 The Padaung: Different Views on Commoditization

There is a difference in views between the older and younger Padaung generations with respect to commoditization. The Padaung below twenty years old were born in Thailand, while those over twenty were born in Myanmar. The older generation has bitter experience from the civil war and the subsequent migration. Most of the older generation think that living in the so-called villages and earning a certain amount of money each month is an acceptable deal, and it sometimes looks like quite a good deal, because the Padaung are now relatively well-off compared to other hill tribe villages in the area.

Young Padaung girls do not want to spend their lives posing for photographs, but the older women are frightened - they think they will starve if they take off the rings. If the Padaung girls or women do not wear the rings, we do not get any money and cannot find jobs." (From a Padaung girl's essay)

Most of the younger generation are educated and find it difficult to accept the old generation's views. They do not want to sit in front of tourists every day and live with an uncertain future; they believe they deserve much more than that, so they are always seeking ways to claim their rights in Thailand or continue their lives in another country. The experiences gained from their involvement in ethnic tourism have led to differing views among the Padaung community.

6.2 Limitations

One of the limitations of this study comes from the lack of information in the literature on the Padaung, plus conditions at the field site. Academic literature on the Kayan is rare, and although Kayan authors have made a record of their culture, their work is based on narratives, stories, the memories of elders and the records of neighboring ethnic groups. Kayan scholarly work focuses more on representing the group's nationalism than providing an academic analysis. Shin Htway Yin's (2005) research on the Padaung in Myanmar gives information about their narratives and cultural stories, as well as background on their lifestyle, but her work does not analyze their cultural situation under the military regime, due to censorship restrictions. However, during my literature review I collected all possible stories on the Kayan's cultural history.

The second limitation is concerned with the moving and changing situation in Huay Pu Keng and among the Padaung families during my field research. Since my field trips, some Padaung families have moved from new Huay Pu Keng to other Long-Necked villages, and some have moved from old Huay Pu Keng to refugee camps in order to apply for resettlement. Ten families from Huay Pu Keng moved to refugee camps a month after my research, and the younger Padaung girls took off their rings for this purpose. However, my study accurately reflects the situation that existed while I was at the field site.

6.3 Recommendations

6.3.1 Negotiation with the Power Framework

The traditional interpretation of cultural commodification suggests that it can lead to a disempowerment of traditional cultural practices through the integration of the relevant group with global tourism (Ateljevic and Doorne 2003). Local authorities are concerned that the Padaung's exotic culture will disappear quickly, particularly if the Padaung receive more freedom; however, the culture is starting to disappear anyway under the tight controls imposed. The local authorities managed to relocate a new village to near Huay Pu Keng with "the objective to preserve the culture and traditional living of the Padaung". However, in the era of globalization, the Padaung

should have the freedom to choose their own culture. I found that there are many Padaung families who have a desire to settle in Thailand, as citizens, if they have the right to choose this. They realize now that their culture should not be exploited by a handful of powerful people.

The Kayan elders also understand the younger generation's changing views on culture; they understand that they cannot retain the body modification culture. Kayan intellectuals want to create a small Kayan (Padaung) museum – to highlight the traditions and act as a showcase for future visitors. This can be seen as their way of accepting that this part of their culture is changing and slowly disappearing, and that they should move on from being a subject of the tourists' gaze. Khon Eden Phan believes that when visitors come, they should not just be shown the Long-Necked people, but be exposed to traditional arts such as weaving, traditional music and dance. In this way, they hope to negotiate with the problem that has arisen from people-centered tourism.

The tight controls imposed on the Padaung have led them to take off their rings and seek a way to break through, such as applying for resettlement in other countries. One Padaung girl wrote of her dreams in an essay, as follows:

Some people in my village, especially the older people, are content with their life in Thailand. They feel safer than they were in Myanmar and are happy to spend their life in one place and do not want other opportunities. The reason I want to go to New Zealand is because I hear that the women there are very free; they can do jobs. I want the chance to learn more and change my life. I already speak English, so I think it would be easy for me to study in New Zealand.

In Mae Hong Son, the UNHCR began registering 50,000 refugees for a country resettlement program during 2005. Some Padaung families have since shown a desire to resettle in another country. Kitty McKinsey, a spokeswoman for the UNHCR, said that some 20,000 Myanmar refugees have recently been allowed to

move to other countries, but that Thailand will not let a group of twenty Kayan leave, though they have been accepted as refugees by both New Zealand and Finland².

At the beginning of 2008, the New Zealand Foreign Ministry asked the Thai authorities to explain why they had refused to let Long-Necked refugee families leave the country; the Padaung families needed the then Governor Direk Kornkleep to give approval for an exit permit. He would not sign the permits, reportedly drawing the analogy that the Padaung are “an endangered species on the verge of extinction which needs protection” when in discussions with non-government organizations³. Waricha Chotirosseranee, the Deputy District Officer and refugee camp commander from Mae Hong Son, insists that the Long-Necked Kayan will never be allowed to leave Thailand while classified as refugees, because, according to Interior Ministry data, they are registered as one of the Thai hill tribes⁴.

In April 2007, the US Campaign for Burma, a Washington-based activist group, said in a statement that the Thai Government has “upped the ante on callousness and its disregard for human dignity by prohibiting the Kayan to seek new lives”.

At the beginning of 2009, one hot issue among the international media and NGOs was Zember, a Long-Necked girl who had successfully moved to another country and who had previously stripped off her rings in anger after having been denied resettlement by the local authorities, seeing her rings as a tool of exploitation used by the powerful Thai authorities. This reveals a kind of politics of body modification; however, from the point of view of the elderly Long-Necked women, who have little hope of ever returning to Myanmar, earning 1500 baht a month to be stared at by tourists is still an acceptable deal.

² Bangkok Post Newspaper, January 30th 2008

³ The Age Newspaper, Australia: January 12th 2008

⁴ Ibid.

Members of the younger generation want to move to other countries, while members of the older generation do not; however, parents often consider moving to another country for the sake of their children's future.

By giving freedom of choice to the younger generation in terms of following tradition, but at the same time allowing them to see their culture from a traditional perspective and in line with traditional values, may help to reduce the decline in brass ring wearing, particularly as Padaung women reveal a desire to be able to resettle in other countries whilst still wearing the brass rings.

6.4 Sustainability

What is meant by sustainable development? Answering this question has been one of the major challenges for tourism industry operators, policy-makers and academics alike over recent years (Dunn 2007). Here is sustainable tourism as understood from an ethnic, cultural respect.

After Governor Direk Kornkleep blocked the Padaung's departure, he also announced a plan to consolidate all three Long-Necked villages, to preserve their culture and develop one tourist center. This merged Long-Necked village was to be used as a method of control by the local authorities, with the village itself a dead object or tourist commodity.

During September 2007, eight families from Huay Sua Thao moved willingly to Huay Pu Keng community, and nine families from Nai Soi also moved to the same village in response to the local authority's plan.⁵ In an early announcement made by the local authority, those who did not want to move to the designated place had to move to a Karenni refugee camp.

⁵ The Nation Newspaper, September 12th 2007

Later, 89 Kayan moved to the new Huay Pu Keng, and as an incentive, the new village project at Huay Pu Keng offered the Kayan houses, plus the possibility of gaining Thai citizenship in the future. In so doing, the provincial authorities and tour agencies turned them into tourist objects, certainly in terms of the Long-Necked women, revealing a discourse created around exotic and alien people.

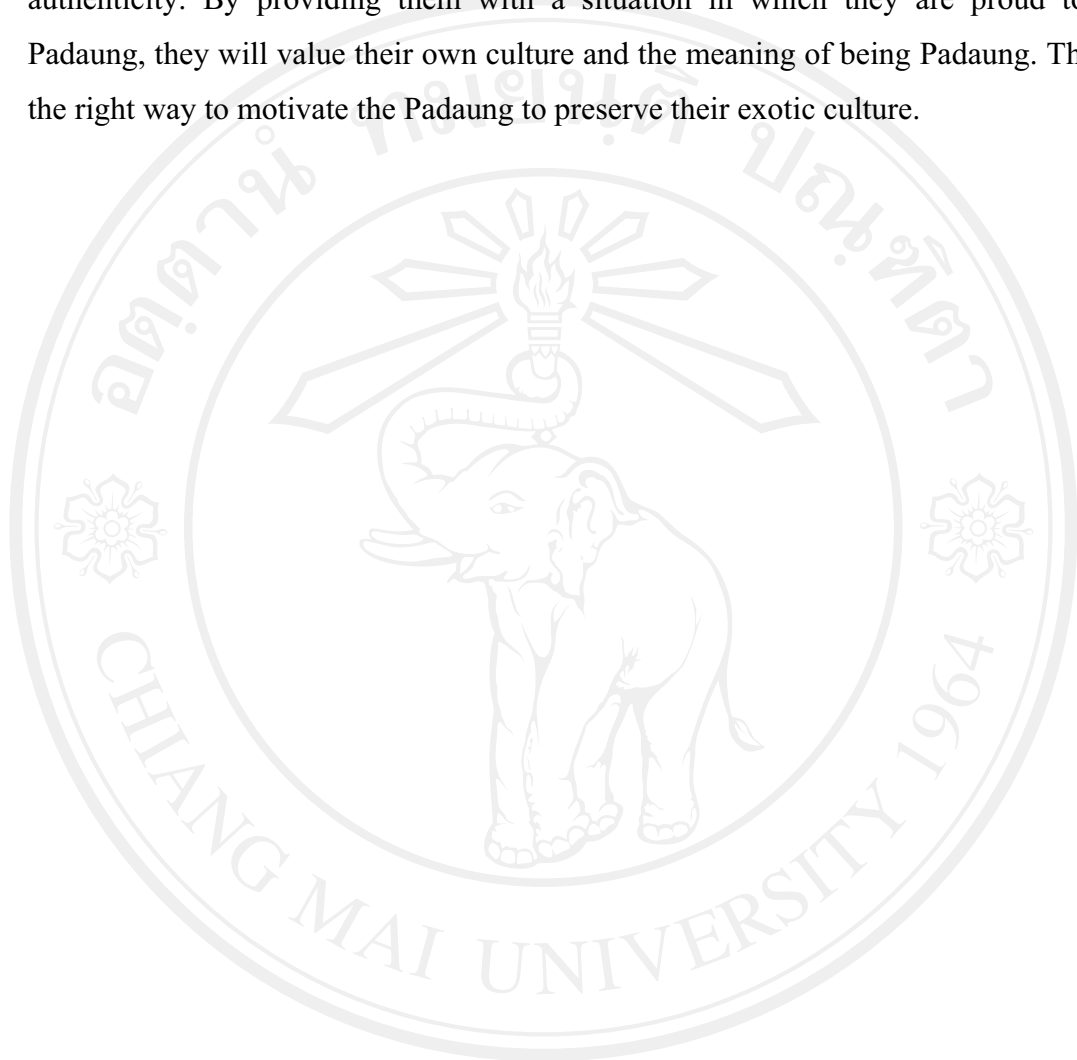
When I was at the field site, some families moved from the new village as it was difficult to survive there, and most of the eleven Padaung who disappeared were from the new village. Visitors rarely continue to the new village from the old one, Huay Pu Keng, and there is only one gate to the new village. After one unsuccessful resettlement year, the promises of the local authorities were not kept. In February 2009, I received information via a mobile phone contact that some families had moved back from the new village to the main refugee camp:

We are sorry to have thrown away our own culture, but we have been forced to do this because of our situation. (Zember)

Concerning Thai policies, if the local authorities continue to control the Padaung in this way, their culture will disappear over time, since the new Padaung generations see their Long- Necked culture being used purely to generate money. The Thai local authorities should therefore consider changing the human zoo into a proper village, to remove the strong controls in place and amend the business framework - allowing the Padaung to manage themselves; it is time to allow the Padaung women to experience the outside world and to consider the future of their children. In my interviews, the Padaung said that if they receive their basic rights on Thai soil, they see it as a fair trade in return for cooperating with the tourism industry. The local authorities do not even allow them to arrange short trips to see the outside world, because they think that once the Padaung have seen the outside world, they will wish to change their culture.

The culture of an ethnic people should not bring profits for a handful of business men and women alone. Nowadays, every culture is changing, and the

Padaung culture should be allowed to evolve in its own way. Control and enforcement will simply force Padaung culture to change its values, after which it will lack authenticity. By providing them with a situation in which they are proud to be Padaung, they will value their own culture and the meaning of being Padaung. This is the right way to motivate the Padaung to preserve their exotic culture.



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