

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1.1 Background

In the modern history of Burma/Myanmar¹, 1988 is commonly referred to as a turning point in the country. The failures in economic development from Ne Win's regime, the Burmese way to Socialism, eventually led to a coup by the then State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), who have since been in power, ruling Burma for more than two decades. About a year after that, in May 1989, the SLORC officially changed the country's name from Burma to be Myanmar, and since then, what Gustaaf Houtman calls, 'the Myanmar fiction of Burma', policed by the junta, had begun (Lintner 2011: 109). Although it came to power successfully by brutal force, the SLORC had to face a set of interlocking economic and political problems. The need for political legitimacy was fundamental, but the economic improvements, which would be a contribution to that junta's political legitimacy were multi-fold reforms: funds with which to implement them: incentives of savings; a skilled work force; an improved administration; better articulated institutions of management, finance, and planning; vastly renovated and expended infrastructure; good planning and knowledge of international markets; and a set of rationally run state economic enterprises to replace those that were a growing economic drain on the poor regime. (see for more details in Steinberg 2001).

Globally speaking, it is undeniable that with the force of the global market and changes in global politics since the 1990's, particularly after the Berlin Wall collapse which is commonly referred to as a landmark of the post-cold war period, Burma must

¹ In this thesis the terms Burma and Myanmar will be used interchangeably. Burma was officially changed to be Myanmar in May 1989 by the junta.

change herself. However, these changes would lead to many unpredictable directions in the emerging modern Myanmar. Although, during Ne Win's regime, there were strict restrictions on foreign investment in the country, when the SLORC, now called the SPDC (State Peace and Development Council), assumed power, Myanmar entered into the world economy through its 'open half-door' policy in regional trade, investment and collaboration with her neighbours'. Moreover, because of her prosperity in natural resources and the multi-nation's political development, the world has since turned their eyes to Myanmar again. These changes in modern Myanmar, mentioned above, in terms of economic development in particular, can probably be divided into two significant periods. Namely, first, the post-Ne Win period when the socialist system under the General Nay Win administration was restricted and moved to a new form of economic policy under the SLORC/SPDC control. This period covered about two decades, from 1989 to 2009. Subsequently, the Neo-liberalist period in Myanmar from 2010 onwards, after the country had had her first general election. Although organized by the SPDC (State Peace and Development Council), this was an election that people in Myanmar had not experienced since the 1990s.

In July 1997, Myanmar made the move to integrate with her neighbouring countries in the region by joining the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Since then, the country has diplomatically and economically become a participant in Southeast Asian policies. In regard to this significant change at the regional level Mya Than suggests, "Myanmar can enjoy greater trade and investment links within the region, increased attractiveness to feign investors from outside the region, and more secure access to larger ASEAN markets." (Mya Than, 2000).

With these changes since the 1990's, the SPDC aimed to modernize Burma. Although people's lives under the SPDC military state have not been without hardships, the people's ways of life in Myanmar has become an integral part in the worlds of marketing and consumerism.

Since the time of its open half-door policy on economic development and regional trade and collaboration with the outside world, a general election was held in

2010, and became a political landmark for the changes taking place in Myanmar. This political transformation more or less came from the demand of democratization, pushed by the neo-liberalist nations. Myanmar had been asked to take part in the capitalist world. The general election that took place in 2009, and the new constitution that has been implemented is also more likely to move Myanmar forward. These significant changes in Myanmar's political landscape, though only partially, are the outcome of the global forces and regional diplomacies in the name of democracy and humanitarianism. Not to mention, the internal conflict among the Central government led by the Burman and other minorities was another influence that pushed changing Myanmar forward to the present era.

None of the modern nation states established today can exist alone. And this is also applied to Myanmar per se, a newly re-established country, if we accept the fact that after the liberation from British Burma, the country was first established as a new nation called 'Union of Burma' (from 1948-1962). The general election in 2009, which eventually led to the emergence of the new parliament, the new president, the foreign affairs policy, and economic development plans, was in a sense a turning point in modern Myanmar. Unlike the previous decades, commonly known as the Socialist Period from 1960's -1980's, most of the economic sectors once belonging to the state have now been initially privatized. The legal system and other related institutions have been structurally and significantly reformed. Politically, the parties and politicians are supposedly able to participate in and debate on national development issues in the new parliament, and so on. In the media sphere, since Myanmar has become an ASEAN member, the people in this country have been more engaged in various kinds of media and information technology consumption. And since 2010, they also have more rights to access news and information particularly from the outside world, than in the former decades. The investment in telecommunication significantly began since Myanmar became an ASEAN member, in particular during the regime of ousted Prime Minister Thaksin Sinawathra in Thailand. The state control on mass media and news reporting in the country has also become more flexible though the dissemination of political news even though minority stories are still seriously monitored by the intelligence. Satellite TV channels can now be broadcast in the country via the state-run media channels or a

co-operated media company. With all of these changes in Myanmar, in central Myanmar in particular, where the majority of the people are Burman, the way of life of these people and their consuming activities in media and material culture has gradually transformed. The daily life of the Burman, in the cities particularly, has increasingly been integrated with their neighbors and into a global community. As I will show and argue in the thesis, this change of global and regional integration in Myanmar is manifested and can be observed through the emergence and the popularities of modern gambling, such as soccer game betting and lotteries, both run by the government and the underground. Modern gambling, which is operated through various kinds of transnational media; in other words, the flows and the uses of information or media consuming activities, has become part of people's way of life in the main cities in Myanmar, Yangon, Pyay, Mandalay, and Nay Pyi Daw.

1.2 Research Problem

Hna Lone Htee or the gambling on two digits by using the Thai stock's market index which is broadcast on the TV screen daily is a kind of locally created lottery gambling system which involves the use of transnational TV channels, the Thai MCOT channel 9 in this case, a satellite dish company, local runners, and various groups of players. Most of these players are women. The rule of game is to bet on the Thai stock market's index last two numbers, which is shown on the Thai TV channel at midday and late afternoon daily. Presently, the TV channel from Thailand broadcasts transnationally to Myanmar everyday via a media company such as Sky Net TV Channel and is locally transmitted to the audiences through a satellite dish subscribed to by the customers. The gambling on the Thai stock's market index lottery, or *Hna Lone Htee* from now on, which I will investigate and argue about in this thesis, is a kind of risk taking and can be interpreted as a reflection of modernity in Myanmar, particularly since the country became integrated into the outside world, regionally and globally.

In Myanmar today, the state permits only the government lottery to be operated and casinos are often found in the ethnic minority regions along the borders, where the real control is still under the minority forces in those regions such as along Sino-Burma

border and the Golden Triangle. However, since the 1990's, particularly after Myanmar became an ASEAN member in 1997, various kinds of gambling have become extremely popular among the urban dwellers. Besides the government lottery which has been legalized by the state, ordinary people, most of them young men in the main cities in central Myanmar, popularly gamble on the international soccer games such as the English Premier League. The underground lotteries, of which there are two types, are more popular among the middle age groups. One is the three digits gambling, locally called "*Chae*", and the other is two digits gambling or what is known as *Hna Lone Htee*, which is the most popular and played by many of the housewives. Playing the *Hna Lone Htee* is a social phenomenon in modern Myanmar. This is a kind of modern gambling where the gamblers create and operate their game through the use and consumption of transnational flows of media and information. And in this case, the gambling on *Hna Lone Htee* is played by using and watching for two numbers (from the Thai stock market index), screened on a Thai TV channel which is trans-nationally transmitted to Myanmar via a satellite dish.

Since the year 2000, this gambling has become popular and integrated into the daily life of city dwellers in modern Myanmar. Before that, most people preferred to play on '*Chae*' and the government lottery. The popularity of *Hna Lone Htee* is that this type of gambling can be played three times a day, except on weekends when the stock market is closed. Since it was introduced in Myanmar cities, this modern gambling venue has spread quickly. Recently, the spread of *Hna Lone Htee* has not been limited simply to the urban areas, but has also gained popularity in the rural villages.

Here I will describe briefly how the people in Pyay play *Hna Lone Htee*. Before I came to Chiang Mai, Thailand for my study, I worked at a part time job in the evening at a private clinic in Yangon. The clinic was situated about two bus stops from my home. Every day I left my home to go to my workplace at around 4.00 p.m. or 4.30 p.m. And I witnessed at that time along the road many people rushing to a teashop where other groups of crowded people had already gathered. They sat in front of the only television which at that time broadcasted the Thai stock market channel. Their eyes were focused on the digits of the stock market index, which was shown in the corner of

TV screen. Some of them shouted loudly that the first number was now stable, but another was still rolling, and then at 4:30 p.m. sharp the stock market closed and the final index was shown. In the teashop, the dealers reported that the numbers were used as a tool for operating two digits gambling. Some players said they could have played the right number. While the others expressed to their friends that their prediction was not correct, but they claimed to the others how much they won and how much they lost. Moreover, other groups of players, who lived upstairs in a townhouse or an apartment, came out from their windows shouting for the winning numbers from their friends who had just returned from the teashop.

The gambling on *Hna Lone Htee* was originally adopted from the Burmese government's two digits lottery. In the past, to play *Hna Lone Htee*, the dealers and the players used the last two digits of the first winning number of the government's lottery. The government ran the lottery monthly for seven consecutive days and the winning number was announced every day. The underground lottery dealers however used the last two digits of the first winning prize of the day, the two numbers which later became the winning number for the underground two digits lottery gambling that same day. However, the government attempted to de-popularize and eradicate this underground lottery by changing the lottery playing system. Now, all the numbers in the government lottery are chosen in a single day. This made it impossible for the underground two digits lottery dealers to use the official number to gamble. Nevertheless, since the people have become more integrated into the outside world, as reflected in the flows of transnational media in the country mentioned earlier, using this new found media source, the Hna-Lone dealers found a way to continue the underground gambling. They improvised a brilliant way to prolong the life of their underground business by utilizing a number on the Thai TV channel 9, which was transitionally broadcasted to their site via a subscribed satellite dish every day. The story of *Hna Lone Htee* or the Thai stock market's index lottery thus began. In the underground lottery the dealers chose the SET index (of Stock Exchange of Thailand) to provide the winning number in their new underground lottery. So, it is now possible for the gamblers to play on the two digits every day.

As it is commonly perceived, most of the people in Myanmar are at the poverty line. This means that their income is less than two US\$ per day. With the downward trend in economic and social development in Myanmar, ordinary people have had to face hardships in their daily life. And huge numbers of people are migrating to neighbouring countries such as Thailand and China, looking for jobs and the chance to gain a better life and income. Within this context, Burman people nevertheless still enjoy playing *Hna-Lone-Htee*. In the context of modernizing Myanmar, this underground gambling is really a social phenomenon. Moreover, this kind of underground gambling is transnational in nature. It was created by the local runners using the Thai Stock Exchange Market's SET index to operate the gambling. This modern gambling therefore can be seen as a social phenomenon reflecting what has changed in the country in the context of regionalization, after Myanmar became an ASEAN member in 1997. Interestingly, the *Hna Lone Htee* is more popular among women than men, the middle age group or housewives especially. While the male group prefers to play on soccer game betting, the Burman women, particularly the housewives, experience enjoyment in this underground lottery gambling.

In Myanmar today being a housewife dictates the need for a lot of responsibility to their family members. Most of the Burman housewives are struggling to survive their days on the family income. Nowadays, playing *Hna Lone Htee* has become a daily activity and a kind of business that is practiced by these housewives in the city. The popularity of *Hna Lone Htee* in Myanmar cities is increasing as we speak, and this tends to lead to specific social consequences on the housewife's gender roles and family life. In this thesis, I will thus focus the study on *Hna Lone Htee* that is played among the group of housewives in Pyay city. The study is aimed to investigate the social consequences of this gambling, conceptually seen as a kind of risk taking in their daily life and family, within the contexts of modern Myanmar. The study will explore social activities, practiced by these female gamblers that are related to this popular gambling, the uses of media, a belief in luck and their group life as such. Also the study will investigate the social processes and networks that operate through this modern gambling. The study of this modern gambling will not only show a changing daily life of ordinary Burman women, who struggle for their life in a city, but is also reflect what

has changed in central Myanmar after the country has become more integrated with the outside world.

1.3 Research Questions

1. How is Hna Lone Htee gambling operated and played by a group of housewives in urban Pyay? And how is this modern gambling related to the uses of media in the contexts of regionalizing Myanmar?
2. In what ways do the housewives, experience, interpret, and practice this modern gambling, seen as a kind of risk taking, within the contexts of urbanizing Pyay?
3. What is the social meaning of *Hna Lone Htee gambling* in the daily life of the housewives in Pyay, in the contexts of regionalizing Myanmar?

1.4 Research Objectives

1. To investigate the operation of Hna Lone Htee gambling and the uses of media that are related to this modern gambling, played by Pyay housewives.
2. To investigate the experiences of Pyay housewives' and their social practices in *Hna Lone Htee gambling* in the contexts of urbanizing Pyay.
3. To interpret and explain the social meaning of *Hna Lone Htee gambling* and its consequences on the daily life of Pyay housewives in the contexts of regionalizing Myanmar.

1.5 Research Methodology

1.5.1 Research Site

The research site “Pyay” is a town situated in the Western part of Bago Division, nearly 280 kilometres northwest from the city of Yangon and 365 kilometres south from Mandalay, the city of Upper Myanmar. It is situated on the eastern bank of the

Ayeyarwaddy River (Irrawaddy River)², the main river of the country. In the east is the Bago-Yoma Mountain range and in the west is the Rakhine-Yoma Mountain range surrounding the town. So, the town itself is a junction point to Rakhine state. And in the year 2000, it became the official city of Western Bago Division. And the Pyay city itself is 34.41 square miles in area with a total population of 212,534 according to the local administrative official status. The city can be distinguished into two parts; one is the centre of the city and the other eastern part is called the new quarter which is an extended area of the city.

Historically, the Pyu ancient city (Srikshestra) was established eight kilometres southwest of the current city, Pyay (Donovan, 2008). And the British Irrawaddy Flottilla company established the current town, which they used to call “Prome” in the late 19th century on the Ayeyarwaddy River (Irrawaddy River) as a transshipment point for cargo between upper and lower Myanmar. In addition, the very first railroad for Myanmar was constructed from Yangon to Pyay during the British colonial period. And one of the major bridges, “Nawadday Bridge”, was constructed across the Ayeyarwaddy River in Pyay and so the city became the junction of Western Bago Region and Rakhine Region.

The main business of the city is trading seasonal crops especially from the nearby small towns and villages, from the Rakhine state, from the Magwe Division, and from the villages on the western bank of the Ayeyarwaddy River. Moreover, some Pyay merchants traded products with other merchants from Yangon and Mandalay, and then from Pyay to nearby towns. Most of the citizens have migrated from the small towns and villages. Pyay had been recognized as the official city for the Western Bago Division in September 2003, and in accordance with the changing of the new parliament government, it has been transformed from Bago Division to Bago Region. Being a city of the western part of the Bago Region, most of the government offices are established in the city. So, some of the ethnic minority groups of the citizens are also working as different kinds of government staff.

² The name of the river has been used both as Ayeyarwaddy and Irrawaddy. But in this thesis, I will use Ayeyarwaddy.

In addition, most of the universities like Pyay Technological University, Pyay Computer University, Pyay University, Pyay Teachers' Training College, and the Nursing College are situated in the city area, and so the city is always busy with students from the entire western part of Bago Region. Being in the central administration of Myanmar, the main religion of the city is Buddhism, and Pyay is a tourist site especially for local religious tourists. But we can also see churches and mosques in the city.

Being a metropolitan area, the social phenomenon of Thai stock market index lottery gambling is quite widespread throughout the whole city. In every quarter, we can find the dealers and gamblers. Even though this gambling is illegal in this urban area (and in Myanmar), people try to work out their own way of subverting the authorities. And the networking of this gambling operation is quite large. What makes thing a lot easier is that the Thai stock market index lottery gambling is accepted as a normal daily activity in the society.

For the research, I focused on groups of women who played *Hna Lone Htee*. Most of them were housewives: some that worked as government staff, and some self-employed by selling things in the market or operating a small shop. In the urban context, how they deal with Thai stock market index lottery gambling and their responses to and interactions with this popular phenomenon will be determined in the study. Furthermore, the Thai stock market index lottery gambling dealers and local police authorities will also be part of this conducted research.



Figure 1.1 Research Site (Source: Internet)

ลิขสิทธิ์มหาวิทยาลัยเชียงใหม่
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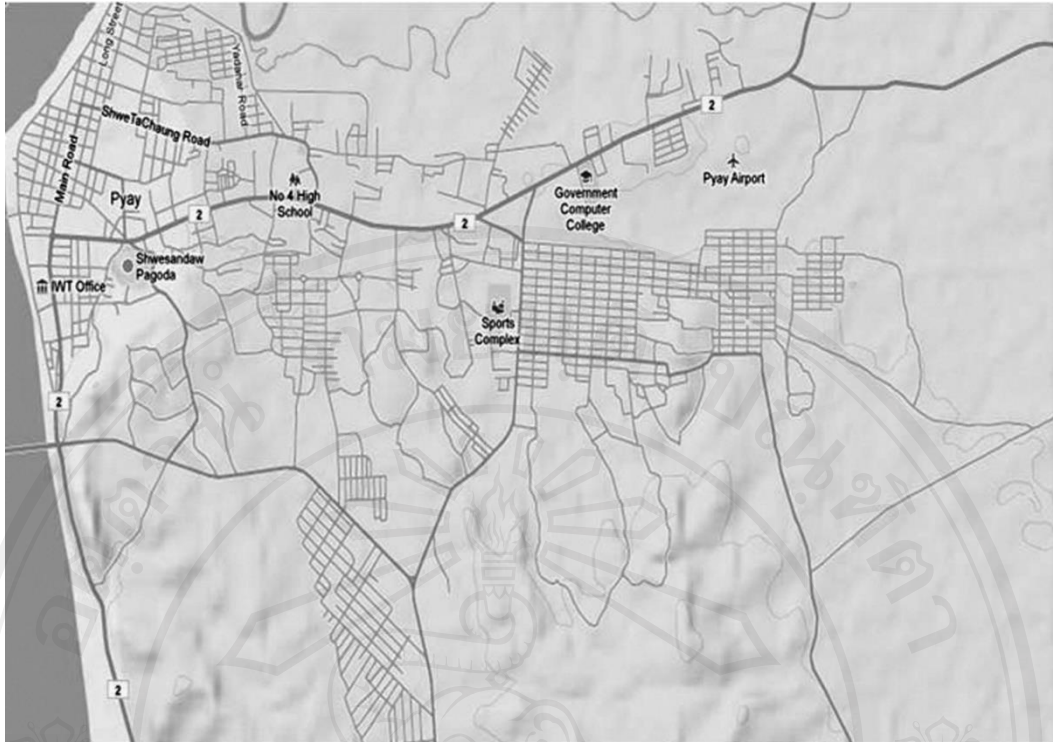


Figure1.2 Map of Urban Pyay (Source: Internet)



Figure 1.3 Downtown Pyay (Source: Mi Mi Cho)

1.5.2 Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis in this study is focused on the gambling activities of women gamblers and their group activities between gamblers and dealers, and local authorities and dealers. Also, I will focus on their daily social activities so as to provide an insight or understanding of how *Hna Lone Htee* or playing on lottery gambling affects their lives.

1.5.3 Fieldwork and Data Collecting Methods

Hna Lone Htee gambling itself is an illegal business and the entire business is running in a concealed form; therefore, my research was conducted very carefully to not create any inconvenience for the digit dealers, *Hna Lone Htee* gamblers and for the local authority themselves. Overall, people were hesitant to discuss this gambling in order to prevent themselves from being discovered by the authorities. It does take time to enter the group of *Hna Lone Htee* players. Mostly, I conducted the research with an open format; informal chatting with the dealers and digits players and by participating in their daily activities.

1.5.3.1 Ethnographic Research

Throughout the participant observation, I tried to identify how the women gamblers play Thai stock market index lottery gambling as a daily activity, how their community and their family responded to this gambling and how the gambling activity was formed and connected in the society. How these women view gambling and their network system can be understood by participant observation, especially in the urban context. According to Peter Adler and Patricia A. Adler (1987), there are three kinds of participant observation: peripheral membership, active membership and complete membership. Peripheral membership refers to the researcher as an outsider, who does not become involved in the setting and from the outsider point of view; he will try to conduct the research. As an active membership role, the researcher will become involved in the society and their daily life, but he is recognized as a researcher and will

become involved in their daily activities and try to conduct the research as an outsider within the society. Complete membership role is when the researcher is totally absorbed in the society and works as a member of that society.

So, in my participant observation, I played a role in these three types of membership alternatively, so I could understand the whole process of the *Hna Lone Htee* gambling society in the urban context. The interview was conducted with at least two dealers as based key informants. From this interaction, as an observing participant and also as an outsider, I observed the activities of the women gamblers; how they played the two digits gambling and experienced their social space, networking and daily lives.

1.5.3.2 A Life Story Method

A life story method, though the conduct of the in-depth interviews, helps to comprehend people's insights, thoughts, behaviours and feelings on specific issues and are one of the most effective tools for observation. In my research, I divided the women gamblers according to their age and status. Furthermore, I tried to conduct both structured interviews and unstructured interviews to find out their background information and their life story, so that their interpretation of the Thai stock market index lottery gambling within the urban context could be understood. In this kind of conversation, in order to clearly understand their general background information, the following questions were asked to the housewives; where do they come from, what is their role and main responsibilities in the family, how do they and their family deal with this gambling, what are the consequences of dealing with this gambling and what is their view upon this gambling and the social meaning regarding this form of gambling.

1.5.2.3 Documentary Research

I also did documentary research in order to understand various views upon the popularity of Thai stock market index lottery gambling in Myanmar. Secondary sources and data from local newspapers and local weekly journals were collected and analyzed to explore related stories, and the state policy on media, information technology, and

gambling were also researched. Other social issues relating to gambling pointed out by the media were also monitored. Furthermore, online media pages were also collected.

1.6 Organizing of Thesis

This thesis is organized in six chapters, including the introduction. In the first chapter, the research problematization, the background of Myanmar after 1997 and the policy changes, economic integration into the regional market and the entrance of Myanmar as a member of ASEAN has been described. Through this general background, the socioeconomic conditions of Myanmar can be understood. Also, the gradually changing of the media landscape, especially the broadcasting media and its policy, has been explored because *Hna Lone Htee* gambling is mainly based on transnational media. From this point, the emergence of *Hna Lone Htee* gambling, and its influence on people's life in general has been described. Moreover, the research questions and research objectives of this thesis have been described in Chapter 1.

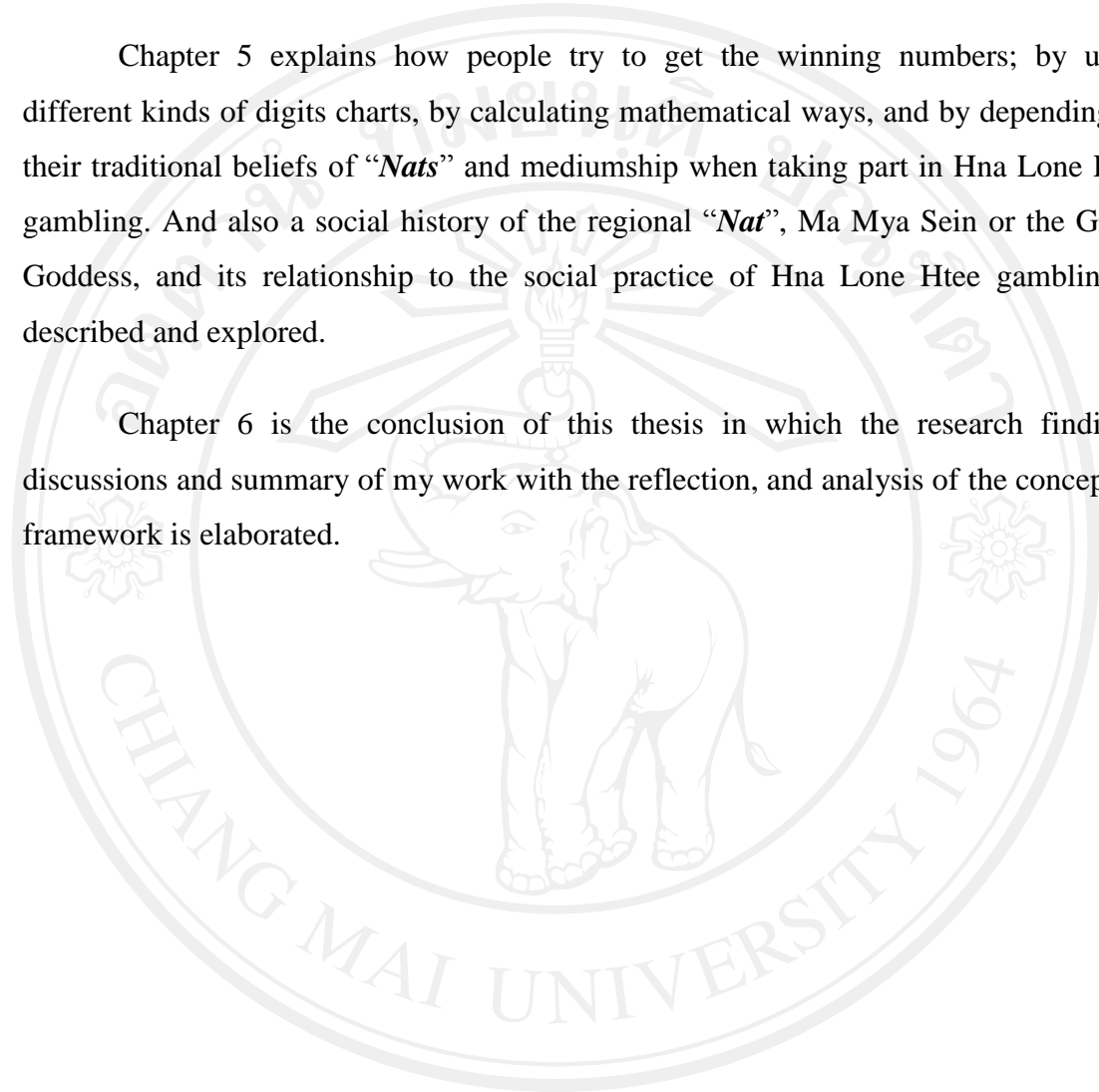
Chapter 2 introduces the theoretical ideas of gambling as a social practice. In the first section, the previous studies of gambling from different perspectives and the basic concepts of gambling are described. In doing so, the practice of a specific group of women in Pyay participating in *Hna Lone Htee* can be understood. Secondly, the concept on 'practice in everyday life' which is explained mainly by Michel de Certeau's work, "strategy and tactic", is applied to interpret the operation of *Hna Lone Htee* and people's media consumption, in modern Myanmar society. And in the third part, the role of women in modern Myanmar is explored. From this chapter, how female gamblers in the specific space of Pyay have been struggling and trying to resist the things they in real life cannot resist such as the effects of modernization of Myanmar in general and economic hardships can be understood.

In the first section of Chapter 3, the historical background of the research site Pyay is described so as to understand the context of the local people and their general background and daily life in Pyay. After that, why *Hna Lone Htee* gambling is popular in Pyay, how this gambling is operated within the social structure of Pyay, and how they run this gambling context is illustrated. In Chapter 4, the life history of the female

gamblers, especially the older female gamblers is described together with their way of conducting Hna Lone Htee gambling. Following this is a depiction of the social structure of Hna Lone Htee gambling and the young female gamblers and their social life who participate in this gambling.

Chapter 5 explains how people try to get the winning numbers; by using different kinds of digits charts, by calculating mathematical ways, and by depending on their traditional beliefs of “*Nats*” and mediumship when taking part in Hna Lone Htee gambling. And also a social history of the regional “*Nat*”, Ma Mya Sein or the Green Goddess, and its relationship to the social practice of Hna Lone Htee gambling is described and explored.

Chapter 6 is the conclusion of this thesis in which the research findings, discussions and summary of my work with the reflection, and analysis of the conceptual framework is elaborated.



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