

CHAPTER 6

Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

This final chapter is divided in two main parts. The first part discusses the empirical findings of this research by linking with the conceptual framework presented in Chapter 2. The second part narrates the methodological approach and the limitations of the study.

6.2 Research Findings: Linking Conceptual and Empirical Perspectives

As proposed in Chapter 2, the conceptual framework of this study is significantly shaped by the concept of family change and gender discourse, which this paper has understood as a key space for negotiating the roles of women in interfamily relationships. Bride price has been presented as a key site of gender power relations within family change. This paper has placed family change and bride price in their specific contexts and simultaneously shown how both of them result from and are affected by changing historical conditions. Historical conditions are particularly important in understanding the changing meaning of bride price. I will answer the key findings in directly linking with three of my research questions:

- (1) How and due to what historical conditions has the meaning of traditional bride price shifted among the Chin, and how has this become politicized, particularly in the context of Burmanization?
- (2) How have modernization and Christianization impacted the roles of women in family, and how have such changes affected the practices of bride price among the Khumi Chin?
- (3) How have Chin women of different socio-economic strata tactically negotiated, re-negotiated and contested their bride price both economically and culturally?

6.2.1 Multiple Meanings of the Bride Price in the Context of Chin

This study has suggested that Chin bride price is practiced dynamically as well as inconsistently in its changing socio-political context. By reviewing its historical background, it is apparent that the meaning of bride price, as well as its ways and patterns of practice have changed over time. *Ka tawi* on the other hand has not changed so much and was historically paid less, making its practice more consistent and also less dynamic than the bride price.

In pre-colonial times, the Chin mainly practiced the bride price symbolically and ritually for solidarity, kinship network, collective identity and class stratification. As the class mechanism is closely related to its political organization, wealthy people from the middle class competed to conduct more sacrificial feasts to highlight their class status, which was a way to access political power.

However, Christianity was introduced to the Chin by Western missionaries together with colonialism. This not only changed their way of life but also changed the economic and political spectrums. The Chin who first associated with colonial and missionary systems were able to adjust and broke the traditional structural system with the new resources they have gained. These new resources varied from cash or coins to trading skills to employment in the colonial system. The result for the bride price was that many Chin started viewing it as un-modern, old-fashioned, unjust, and even a burden of social welfare in colonial times so pushed to renegotiate its meaning. Although trends of bride price practice seemingly reclined the dowry did not. It still remained as a means of showing personal care and love to the bride as well as being a rite of marriage for women.

After independence from British colonization, the meaning of bride price changed and part of its meaning shifted from a socio-economic context entered the more political realm. This occurred as the Chin started becoming affected by the process modern nation state building. In this process, the discourse of bride price became strategic for the State's hegemonic unification efforts vis-à-vis ethnic politics. This study has shown how by continuing with bride price in this changing environment, the collective practice became a useful cultural tool packed with symbolic power useful for the Chin to resist Burmanization.

The State on the other hand has been attempting to exercise its hegemonic power by pushing the Chin to enjoy a modern nation state with a specific ideology – Burmanization. To implement such an unofficial written policy the marrying of ethnic women becomes instrumental in a long term ethnic assertion. In this vein institutions like the Ministry of Religious Affairs has been set up, and the Tatmadaw and state sponsored monks implement this ideological and socio-cultural project on the ground. Within such a project, a lesser known governmental agenda exists to invite Burman soldiers to marry ethnic Chin women. That is purportedly being a more sustainable way to approach the so-called periphery ethnic groups such as the Chin. This study has highlighted the need to look at the different existing marriage payment customs between the Burman and the Chin that many audience of Burmanization quickly come to conclusion with human rights and popular democracy. Aside from the personal preference some may have with regards to marrying Burman soldiers, Chin women also found this a useful and strategic way to solve their economic hardship and enjoy domestic freedom.

This study has contended that the contentious historical and cultural relations between the Rakhine ethnic group and the Khumi Chin in Paletwa is the most relevant variable to look at when trying to understand the reason why the Paletwa Chin highly and collectively continue to demand to practice the bride price and dowry. It is the Khumi Chin in Paletwa who practice the bride price and dowry the most among other Chin groups. In this context, although the practice of and the meaning of *vang* (bride price) is changing from its traditional meaning and function, the common thing is that it serves class stratification. Traditionally, it has served as wealth and status exchange but now it symbolically represents cultural resistance. I have argued that they do so because they find it useful to employ its cultural practice as a way to resist Burmanization, in a context where Christianity has struggled (unlike in other more religiously diverse parts of Chin State) to provide effective elements to use towards identity demarcation for the Khumi.

6.2.2 Family Change as Negotiating the Roles of Women in Interfamily Relationships

As the study of family cannot be universalized, the concept of family change was contextualized in the setting of Paletwa. To do so, this study has found it useful to understand and employ notions of education, employment and attitudes on reproduction. These three elements are also commonly understood as measures of modernization (interchangeably also for Christianization in this context). This study found that women's education has directly affected their roles in the family through employment and changing economic status. Either way, the employment of women is a means to contest and negotiate their roles in the family.

The majority of Chin women in Paletwa are at a disadvantage to attain formal education but acquire informal education through Christianization. However, the element of education does not dictate the attitude of women on reproduction. We should be aware that the teaching of missionaries or churches over reproduction hardly encourages having lesser numbers of children, as having numerous generations is seen as extremely valuable. This is reflected for example in the custom of bride and groom drinking *uh'm* in their marriage ceremony.

Christianization in the context of Paletwa plays a crucial role in the re-conceptualization, the making and re-making of family issues. As the patriarchal system and structures do not provide women enough assistance when facing family decay and fragmentation, several organizations and institutions of different churches provide alternative ways of serving family welfare and rehabilitation. All these processes are unofficial but largely effective and useful for families in needs of rescue, support and rehabilitation. The most useful and frequently utilized resource from churches and missionaries from different denominations are their networks, their human resources and social mobilization. In this sense, it should be noted that the mandate of Christianization to abolish some cultural practices like bride price is not compromised, but neither is it discarded completely.

Although the roles of Chin women are changing as their work shifts into a modern era through Christianization, this study has shown that it does not determine the magnitude of their bride price. In some cases, outsiders feel that the bride family is asking too much bride price, but such accounts often miss the personal tactics of the

agents actively involved in these practices. In some cases for example, it could indicate that a father wants to delay the marriage in order to benefit from better financial returns from his daughter since the whole family has supported her education with a lot of different kinds of commitment. A common generalization which can be made is that most community members accept and agree to practice the bride price, but individual practice varies greatly, and depends on the financial status. At this individual level, women are actively adjusting their bride price through their economic power. This paper has shown thus that bride price is often contested, manipulated and exploited by women who use it according to their personal interests.

As the roles of women changed, they have become more capable to dictate the terms of bride price negotiation. Sometimes, women are the ones who manipulate this bride price practice. Chin women of different financial background have all played active roles in decision making on the magnitude of their bride price. They further engaged in their new generation's bride price. Further, these women's personal backgrounds, experiences and emotions are also importantly entwined in the discussion of bride price, and the rationality behind decision-making is complex, not predictable, and not to be judged.

6.2.3 Bride Price as a Sphere of Gender Power Relations

Women are customarily barred access to property inheritance from parents in the context of Chin largely because of bride price and dowry practices. Traditionally, differentiation between men and women was based the world view that there is always dichotomous characters, sense and meaning. But the male oral culture has posited that men are more powerful and women are less powerful naturally, for instance numbers of strings worn on the wrist by men and women. Additionally, this study put forward the question what makes the men protect more with spirit guidance if they are stronger. However, this narrative largely represents its male perspective but lacks that of many women. Customary inheritance law and property relations are mainly based on the male lineage system, and women are sometimes seen as the property of men and objects of male culture.

With the advent of modernization, the economic activities and positions of Chin women are shifting. This is resulting in challenges to the male property and hierarchical inheritance system. Aside from this, outside factors such as scarcity of resources due to

outside factors should be noted. The State's political activities (such as increasing the number of army camps and outposts in Paletwa area) are found to not only represent human rights concerns but also to contributed to competition for resource among local residents and outside traders. This brings challenges to maintaining in place old property systems based on land. When land is confiscated by the Tatmadaw and communal land is transformed into private commercial plantation zones by Rakhine traders, the inheritance system for the Chin males becomes hopeless. This also links in with the mass migration of Chin women and men to within and beyond the State's boundaries.

Women, who are leading their household economics, play crucial roles as agents in the re-conceptualization of property. Through their economic power they manage to buy land and even transfer it to their new generations. The magnitude and the form of bride price practice directly reflect these women's economic power. However, generalizations cannot be made as in the end any adjustment is very much dependent on women's personal choice and conscience. A simple conclusion can be drawn that as women become more economically powerful, the practices of *vang* and *ka tawi* become more diversified.

Although patterns of *vang* practice are changing, *ka tawi* has changed less; retaining more stable meaning, as well as being consistently less paid attention to by actors. It should not be forgotten that *ka tawi* plays an institutional and central role for women. In some cases, although *ka tawi* represents the personal connection of mothers and daughters, the representation of 'woman-ness', and a symbol of ethnic identity, it is becomes commercial when women in the margins are in need of economic solutions.

This study has found that the flexibility of the *vang* practice can benefit divorced women who were excused from bride price as they entered interethnic marriage, as they could easily come back and refresh their social interaction in the natal society. In the beginning, it is the act of unjust or even more look like a manner of favoring a groom from outside ethnicity when excuse the bride price. When it comes to the end of the marriage, it can be interpret as, *vang* excuse or assists a divorced Chin woman as least economically handicap as possible or as less stigmatize as it can as untold cultural logic.

It is undeniable that the old customary law is benefiting neither men nor women in this resource-scarce time. Both Chin men and women need to review, revise, and redraft an alternative customary law and inheritance law.

6.3 Methodological Approach and Limitations of the Study

This section will highlight the methodological limitations of this study. The first is a personal psychological constraint I encountered. Conducting research on such a cultural topic like bride price in the Khumi Chin context intimidated me during initial time in the field as I am the daughter of a Mara father, and often feared that the respondents might not be answering openly and revealing what they really think. That is partly because the time I spent in the field was not adequate to deeply engage with people and gain their trust completely. Therefore there may have been limitations with regards to my learning throughout my ethnographic experience, preventing me from having a deep insider's perspective, understanding all meanings and implications, especially the local Khumi dialect. It is almost important to note that my first entry into the field occurred right after the communal violence between the Rakhine and Rohingya so there were concerns about personal security making me at times afraid of doing research in particular places, and limiting my ability and desire to move.

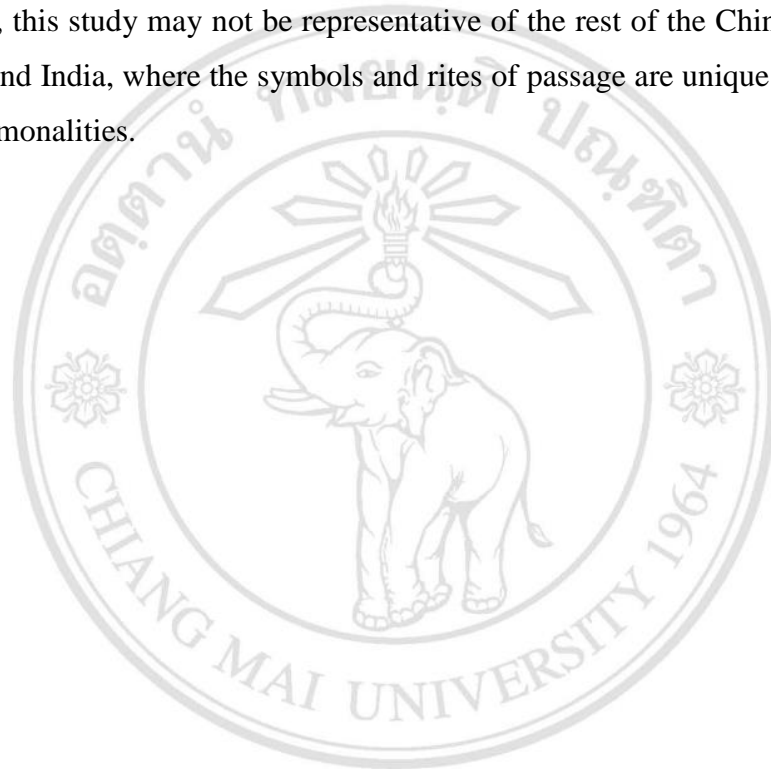
The second challenge is that literature on Khumi issues is extremely limited, as are also secular studies on the Chin. Although making reference to Human Rights Organizations and NGO reports provide plenty of information and facts to investigate further, it sometimes can lead us to neglect the deeper social meanings, implications and reflections. On top of this, some of this data is already outdated and far away from the reality on the ground. Furthermore, as I am not qualified to read in Khumi dialect I can only access material published and circulated in Burmese, which is clearly a major challenge. Sometimes, I needed to spend quite long time on a single word clarification.

Thirdly and most importantly, another challenge for this research is that not being able to speak or understand Khumi meant I had to work with the aid of interpreters. Whilst utmost care was taken in selecting them, of course this impacted both the researcher-interviewee relationship as well as added another layer of communications, potentially bringing about the risk of misunderstandings, particularly

when subtle meaning of particular words or thoughts may have changes slightly in translation.

Not least but large, another major challenge is that I have used human rights reports and taken their claims regarding the Tatmadaw, Ministry of Religious Affairs and Ministry of Border Affairs for granted without contacting the responsible officers and departments to counter check my facts and offer a right of reply which may have enriched my research.

Lastly, this study may not be representative of the rest of the Chin in Myanmar, Bangladesh, and India, where the symbols and rites of passage are unique although they maintain commonalities.



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