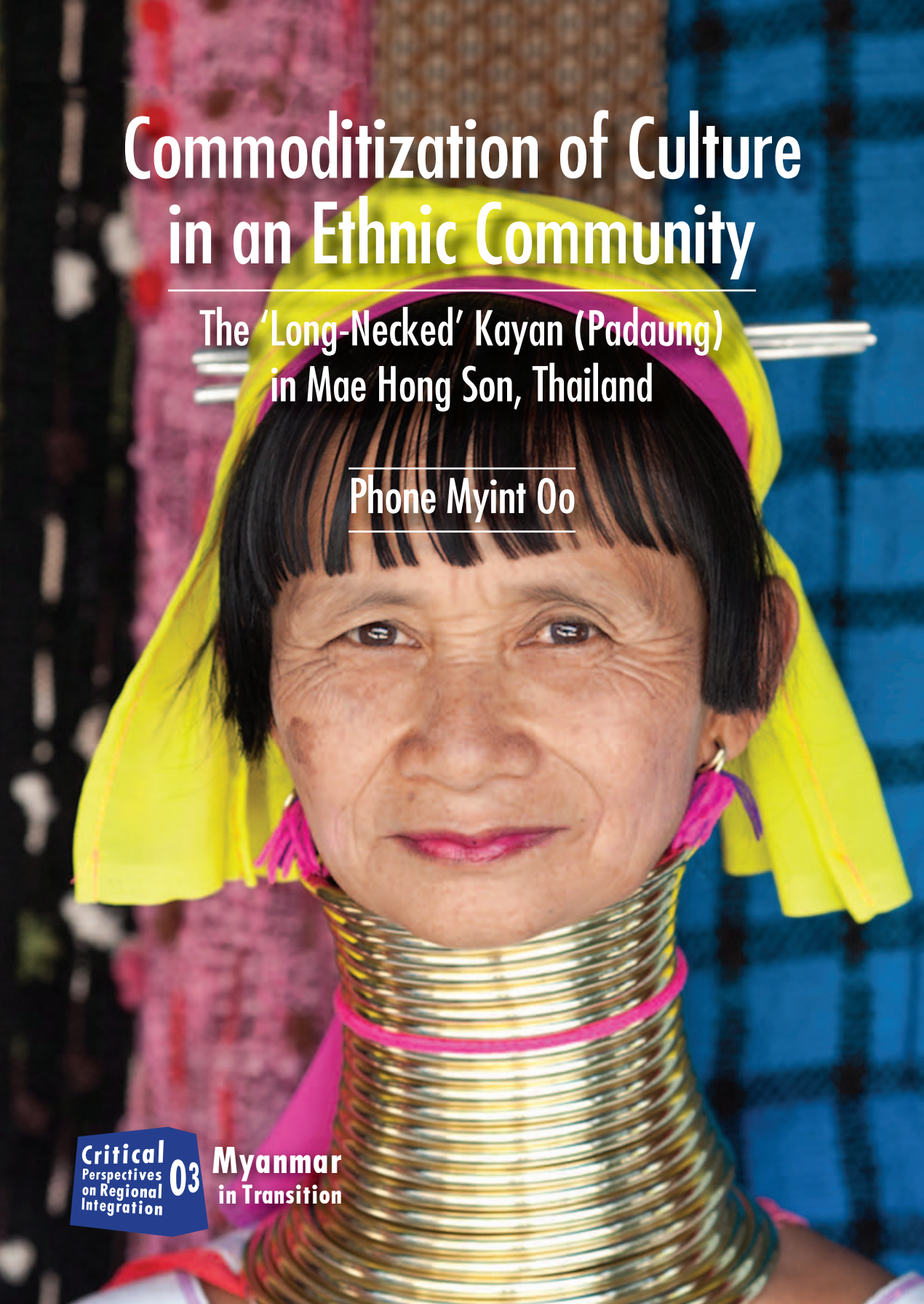

Commoditization of Culture in an Ethnic Community

The 'Long-Necked' Kayan (Padaung) in Mae Hong Son, Thailand

Phone Myint Oo

Critical Perspectives on Regional Integration 03
Myanmar in Transition

Series Foreword

The monographs that comprise the Critical Perspectives on Regional Integration series have emerged from dissertations based on original primary field research, and written as a major part of the requirements for the Master of Social Science (Development Studies) program of the Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD), in the Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University.

As Senior Editorial Adviser, I was engaged by the Center to conduct an overview of the dissertations—dating back to 2001 and now well over 100 pieces of work—and select which would best illustrate the quality of graduate student research. This was by no means an easy task, but it was decided to choose primarily those written in the past few years, given that empirical research in social science tends to date rapidly. Another consideration was that the monographs should give expression to the main theme of the series of Critical Perspectives on Regional Integration.

As the selection and editorial work proceeded it was then decided to organize the publications into sub-series focused on different parts of mainland Southeast Asia. The first several volumes focus on Myanmar, covering such subjects as livelihood strategies, changing ethnic identities, borders and boundary-crossing, and the commoditization of culture within the context of ethnic tourism. Following volumes are devoted to Thailand, Lao PDR, Vietnam, and Cambodia.

The series also illustrates the concern to bring together social science and natural science knowledge in order to further the understanding of sustainable development issues. Over some 20 years Chiang Mai University has developed considerable research expertise in such fields as resource management, environmental impact assessment, upland agricultural systems and indigenous knowledge, health, and ethnic and gender relations. Teaching and research in development issues also deploys social science concepts within the development field to address decision-making, policy and practice, and the responses and adaptations of local populations.

This current monograph series also focuses on the processes of social, cultural, economic, political and environmental change among populations and territories undergoing rapid transformations within the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) and the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC).

Victor T. King
Senior Editorial Adviser, Critical Perspectives on Regional Integration Series

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The 'Long-Necked' Kayan (Padaung) in Mae Hong Son, Thailand

Phone Myint Oo

Originally from Burma/Myanmar near the country's southeastern border with Thailand, the Kayan (Padaung) people have found themselves encumbered not only by ethnic and political strife in their homeland, but also by their own unique traditions. Their ancient custom of permanently adorning their daughters with brass rings to elongate their necks has made the Kayan a major tourist attraction, as well as a target for exploitation on both sides of the border.

This study analyzes the origins and effects of ethnic tourism on a Kayan community in Mae Hong Son, Thailand, by exploring the group's migration and resettlement along the Thai-Burma border over a period of two decades, and by considering the interactions and negotiations between tourists, the Kayan, religious organizations, and Thai authorities and businesspeople.

Phone Myint Oo's landmark study reveals rapidly evolving cultural values among the Kayan, with views about whether or not to continue wearing the rings varying between older and younger generations. While many elders have resigned themselves and consider it relatively acceptable to exist as objects of tourism in what have been described by the UN as 'human zoos' in Thailand, the majority of younger Kayan now perceive their traditional neck-rings as tools of control and oppression.

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Chapter 1

Introduction: The 'Long-Necked' Kayan (Padaung)—Trapped in Ethnic Tourism

Who are the Kayan (Padaung)?

I first developed an interest in the Padaung people after seeing several photographs of them in weekly newspapers in Yangon in the early 2000s. My curiosity was reinforced when I saw an advertising banner in Bangkok in 2004 that featured several long-necked Padaung women. A senior editor explained to me that the Padaung had migrated from Myanmar to Thailand, and that tourists must pay an entrance fee to see them in several special villages that have been established for them along the Thai-Myanmar border. Somewhat surprisingly, I had only seen them myself twice before in Yangon, both times at Shwedagon Pagoda. Under the regime of Ne Win's Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP), many people in the country tended to believe the government-inspired idea that the Padaung are cannibals (Khoo Thwe, 2002). According to a recent online survey, many Burmese people living both inside the country and abroad are unable to identify where the Padaung live inside Myanmar, and some even mistakenly identify 'Padaung' as a kind of bird rather than an ethnic group. My interest in the Padaung increased after I began researching more about their origins and cultural traditions, but I quickly realized that to understand who the Padaung are, it is also necessary to know about several other related ethnic groups, including the Karen, the Karenni, and the Kayan.

The Kayan are a subgroup of the Karen ethnic people who inhabit many areas of Burma, as well as parts of western and northern Thailand. The Karen can be divided into several subgroups, with the most numerous in Thailand being the Sgaw Karen. The Karenni[1] and Kayan, two other subgroups of the Karen, have migrated to Thailand in increasing numbers over the last two decades. The Karenni can be further differentiated into eight subgroups, while the Kayan can be divided into four subgroups, namely the Kayan Lahta, the Kayan Ka Ngan (Kayaw, or 'Big-Eared Kayan'), the Kayan Lahwi (Padaung, or 'Long-Necked Kayan'), and the Kayan Ka Khaung (Khon Eden Phan, 2005; Shin Htway Yin, 2005). Approximately 120 female Kayan Lahwi, or Padaung, adorned with brass neck-rings live along the Thai-Myanmar border and in provinces of northern Thailand. Collectively, these people are simply referred to as 'Kariang Khaw Yaaw', or 'Long-Necked Karen', by Thais (Nipa, 1993). However, in Huay Pu Keng village, this work's field study site in northern Thailand's Mae Hong Son province, I found that around twenty Padaung girls from three 'Long-Necked' villages have already removed their brass neck-rings.

In Myanmar, the Padaung live mostly in Kayah (Karenni) State and Shan State to the west of the Than Lwin (Salween) River and around the Pekon Hills near Taunggyi. Kayah, bordering Thailand's northern province of Mae Hong Son, is Myanmar's smallest state and remains largely off-limits to tourists. The region consists of rugged, mountainous terrain with difficult, steep trails, and its people primarily practice slash-and-burn (swidden) cultivation. The total Paduang population spread across the eastern part of Myanmar is around 25,600 (Shin Htway Yin, 2005), with approximately 800 'long-necked' women among them[2] (Khon Eden Phan, 2005).

Certain Padaung women traditionally have numerous bronze rings tightly and permanently fastened around their necks. The weight of these rings forces their neck and shoulder muscles deep into their shoulders, creating the illusion of a longer neck. In fact, it is the upper body which has been pushed down to create the appearance of an unusually long neck. The main coil is comprised of sixteen to twenty-two bronze loops, and the neck coils are quite

1 The Karenni, or 'Red Karen', are referred to as 'Kayah' in Myanmar.

2 This population figure is based on documents from 1993. Although Shin Htway Yin lists the population of the Kayan (Padaung), she omits the population of the brass ring-wearing women. The known 'long-necked' Padaung population has since decreased in Myanmar, but the exact number is unknown.

heavy, weighing anywhere from between five to twenty kilograms altogether. The women not only experience discomfort from the coils rubbing against their skin, but after several years of wearing the rings, the neck muscles typically atrophy beyond repair. Many Padaung women's necks would be unable to support the weight of their heads without the support of the rings. Furthermore, the tight knee coils they also traditionally wear adversely affect their lower-body circulation and can cause extreme soreness.[3]

Figure 1.1: Kayan females of different generations with neck-rings

Originally, the women were unaware that enclosing their necks in tight brass rings would eventually cause their neck muscles to lengthen and their shoulder blades to be depressed (Khon Eden Phan, 2005). Although the original custom was that only Kayan girls born on a Wednesday under a full-moon would wear the rings, in Thailand over the past twenty years almost all the females in the Kayan villages have come to wear the coils, as they have become valued as both a sign of beauty and a potential income-generating adornment.

3 Although this study focuses on the neck-rings worn by the Padaung, the women also wear coils around their knees and ankles.

Figure 1.2: A village outside of Loikaw in Karenni State

Long-Necked Karen, Kayan, or Padaung: A confusion of terms

The respected Kayan author Khon Eden Phan has explained that outsiders should not refer to the people living in Kayan villages as either Padaung or Long-Necked Karen, as the people prefer to refer to themselves as Kayan. The term 'Kayan' comes from 'Kan Yan,' with Kan meaning 'territory or region' and Yan meaning 'permanently' in the Kayan language. As a result, the name 'Kayan' has the meaning 'the people who stay continually in their region'—which now is ironically in complete contrast to their current situation as migrants in Thailand, shifted by the Thai authorities from one village to another. In the past, the Kayan rarely ventured outside of Kayah State in Myanmar, although they have had longstanding economic and social relationships with the neighboring Shan. Shan and Kayan villagers often traded with each other, and the Shan came to refer to the long-necked Kayan as 'Yan Pad Daung,' meaning 'the Karen who wear rings' in their language. As time passed, 'Yan Pad Daung' gradually evolved into the Burmese term 'Padaung.'

To distinguish the Kayan who wear rings from those who do not, the term 'kyay kwin pat' (females who wear rings) is used. Most Kayan are not

offended by the terms 'Padaung' or 'long-necked,' and indeed they themselves use the terms 'long' and 'short' to refer to themselves. In their daily conversations, the terms 'a female with a long neck' (lel pin shay) and 'a short-necked woman' (lel pin toe) are often used. However, the term 'giraffe women' is considered offensive.

Kayan men are able to distinguish themselves among the four Kayan subgroups. Although their subgroup among the Kayan has its own given name, Lahwi, this term is rarely used. While listening to and observing their conversations, I have often heard the men identify themselves as 'Padaung.' Not only the males, but sometimes the long-necked women also refer to themselves as 'Padaung,' their most commonly known name. It seems to primarily be only highly educated Kayan who know how the different names came to be constructed who reject the titles Yan Pad Daung, Padaung, and Long-Necked Karen. While the Kayan tend to follow the suggestions and ideas of the intellectual members of their group, this is not unilaterally the case. The attempt to have the group referred to exclusively as 'Kayan' is seen as a construction of the Kayan intellectuals in order to promote their cause of self-determination.

In this study, the terms 'Long-Necked Kayan,' 'Long-Necked Padaung,' and 'Padaung' are used interchangeably to differentiate this group of people from other Karen subgroups.

Political struggles of the Karenni and Kayan

The Karenni Army (KA) under the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP), to which the Kayan and Kayaw have allegiance, is one of the largest of the armed ethnic groups formed almost immediately after Burma was granted independence from Great Britain to struggle against the Burman-dominated central government for self-determination. On 23 December 1946, General Aung San, president of the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL), attempted to persuade the Karenni to accept the accession of the Karenni State into the proposed Union of Burma, while at the same time, the British were lobbying the Karenni to join the Frontier Areas. No Karenni representatives attended the landmark Panglong Conference of February 1947, during which Aung San met with Shan, Chin, and Kachin leaders to work out an agreement for a new union. A few months later, in April 1947, a meeting was held in which

Karenni leaders decided not to accept the accession of Karenni State into the Union of Burma. The resolution was adopted in order to safeguard the independence and sovereignty of Karenni State.

On 14 April 1947, a large delegation of Karenni and Mobye representatives met the Inquiry Commission of D.R. Rees William, MP, in Pyin Oo Lwin (Maymyo), near northern Shan State, at which they presented a petition containing ten statements declaring the will of the Karenni people regarding their role in an independent Burma. However, the British delegation dismissed the ethnic peoples' demands.

On 9 June 1947, the newly-independent country's legislature convened in the capital Rangoon (Yangon). Although no Karenni representatives attended the session, Karenni State was included as part of the new Union of Burma under the new constitution. Two important concessions were granted the country's ethnic people: the 1947 Constitution guaranteed the Kachin, Karenni, and Shan a certain amount of autonomy in their own ethnic areas, as well as the right to secede from the Union of Burma ten years following independence.

Upon receiving the news about the new constitution, the Karenni leaders called an emergency meeting and appointed U Sein, Sao Wonna, A Mya Lay, and Thaik Than Tin to go Rangoon to protest against the inclusion of Karenni State in the Union of Burma. The Karenni delegation reached Rangoon in September 1947; however, instead of protesting against the new constitution, they were lured by AFPFL leaders into accepting bribes and cooperating with them. Without the consent of the Karenni government or people, the delegation agreed to have Karenni State become a part of the Union of Burma, objecting only to Chapter 9, Part 4, Article 180(1) (a), which stated that Karenni State would become a special region within the planned Karen State. Receiving this news, the Karenni leaders immediately issued a statement relieving the delegation of its authority.

In November 1947, the AFPFL leaders sent military police into Karenni State to arm members of the delegation who had accepted the AFPFL's offer, in addition to their followers. The Karenni leaders sent a letter to U Nu, leader of the AFPFL following General Aung San's assassination, protesting against the presence of the military police without the permission of the Karenni government. As a result, Karenni people and students gathered in Loikaw, the capital of Karenni State, to express their objections to the Burmese military

presence. Despite the protests, four of the collaborators established a rival government.

In the same month, the Karenni National Organization was formed in order to support the United Karenni Independence State Council (UKISC) politically, and later, in 1957, the KNPP began its armed struggle against the central government. Nearly forty years later, the KNPP, Kayan New Land Party (KNLP), and Karenni National People's Liberation Front (KNLPF) agreed to a ceasefire and became allied with the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), the ruling Myanmar military regime of the time. The ceasefire held for little over a year, collapsing in 1996, with fighting resuming between the KNPP and the Myanmar military.

Throughout the 1990s, fighting between various Karenni armed groups and the Myanmar military resulted in approximately 5,000 Karenni becoming internally displaced persons (IDP). Thousands of Karenni, including many Kayan, fled to the Thai-Myanmar border and into adjoining Mae Hong Son province. Some of the Kayan men now living in Huay Pu Keng in Mae Hong Son formerly served as soldiers in the KNPP.

The geographical base of the KNPP is a mountainous area on the border between Thailand's Mae Hong Son and Kayah State in Myanmar. The base is only a few miles from Huay Pu Keng and is part of a buffer zone between Thailand and Myanmar. Soldiers from the KNPP easily avoid Thai border patrol police and checkpoints when visiting Huay Pu Keng. KNPP continues to have an influential role, not only in terms of political activities, but also in the social sector, both in Kayan Long-Necked villages and in Karenni refugee camps in Thailand.

Kayan refugees residing today in Thai camps originally hail from nine villages across Kayah State, with most from Rwan Khu and Daw Kee villages. The Kayan people from Lay Mile village in Kayah State first settled in Huay Pu Long camp on the Thai border in 1983. At that time, tourists from Mae Hong Son began making their way to the border to visit the camp. Due to the Myanmar military's offensives in 1988, six long-necked Kayan households moved permanently to Huay Pu Keng camp in 1989 (Khon Eden Phan, 2005; Nipa, 1993). This move increased their contact with the outside world and sealed their fate in terms of becoming an exotic tourist attraction.

To evade further Myanmar army offensives carried out during October 1992, additional Kayan families relocated to Kayan Tha Yar camp, and from there, in 1995, nine households moved to Huay Sua Tao. In addition, seven Kayan households who had settled for a year in Mae Ain camp in Chiang Rai province, Thailand, moved to Kayan Tha Yar camp in March 1998.

Kayan tourism in Thailand

Tourism has played an increasingly important role in Thailand in recent decades, not only earning significant amounts of foreign currency revenue, but also acting indirectly as an important stimulant for the development of infrastructure and services (Cohen, 2001). Seeking to market new attractions beyond those appealing to tourists interested in the country's islands and major urban areas, tour agencies now regularly advertise highland "ethnic tours" by using images of various ethnic people of the region in their native dress. Cohen lists some of the special illustrative terms used, including "original," "primitive," "exotic," "spectacular," and "unspoilt." At the inception of Thailand's ethnic tourism campaigns of the 1980s, images of Akha and Hmong ethnic people were used on billboards and posters to represent the exoticness of the country, and these peoples were thus promoted as objects for the tourists' gaze. "Unseen in Thailand," a promotional project of the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT), was launched in 1997, while 1998 was declared "Amazing Thailand Year." Increasingly exotic-looking members of various ethnic groups from throughout the Mekong subregion began to be featured prominently in TAT's advertising materials as simply another of the colorful attractions Thailand has to offer for tourists. Once certain ethnic groups from Myanmar such as the 'Long-Necked' Kayan and 'Big-Eared' Kayaw began migrating to border areas in the early 1990s, they also came to be featured in TAT's promotional materials.

The Thai government has invested considerable amounts of money in infrastructure developments in the highland areas of northern Thailand, especially road construction projects, in order to provide conveniences for tour operators and tourists. The roads to remote areas, such as Huay Pu Keng village in Mae Hong Son province and the group of Huai Yuak Mlabri villages in Nan province, would not have been paved if the villages had not been designated to become tourist sites (Leepreecha, 2005). Ethnic tourism has contributed to the dynamics of development, having both positive and negative impacts on the ethnic groups.

Following their great suffering during the civil war in their home country and their forced displacement at the hands of the Myanmar military regime, many Padaung people living in Mae Hong Son have now become victims of business interests, similar to members of other ethnic groups in northern Thailand. More and more community members are realizing they have become "powerless commodities in the tourism supermarket" (Alting von Geusau, 1998), manipulated by tour operators and treated as inhabitants of human zoos due to the distinct aspects of their culture. Since their arrival in Thailand, the local Thai authorities have attempted to exploit the Padaung for economic purposes through the use of a number of control mechanisms. The Padaung are often powerless in their positions, as they are living as refugees or illegal migrants, while the tourism industry provides them with the means to survive, to a certain degree. It is admirable that the Padaung remain proud of their own cultural identity, though it is this very identity that has caused them to be commoditized by authorities, businesspeople, and tourists.

Both young and old Padaung women have become an integral part of Thailand's ethnic tourism villages, where their primary daily activity is passively sitting in open areas, waiting to pose for photographs and sell trinkets to tourists. As a result, Padaung women in Thailand have become the main earners of income for their families, and many Padaung parents now encourage their daughters to help support them by wearing coils around their necks[4]. Traditionally, only a limited number of Padaung girls from each community were allowed to wear the neck-rings, but since tourism in their villages in Thailand began to be promoted, more and more youngsters have been enlisted in order to meet the demands of the market. In addition, because the traditional ring-wearing initiation process took too long for a ring-wearer to become a main attraction in a tourist village, the process has been speeded up.

Ethnic tourism in the highlands of northern Thailand has become both a political and an economic issue, as Prasit (2005) points out. Although there is obviously a contradiction in the Thai state's legal policies and its tourism strategy, as long as ethnic people, their practices, and their communities attract tourists, other legal issues are easily ignored. The Thai authorities argue that the Long-Necked Padaung are economic migrants from Burma who have chosen to settle outside the refugee camps, and who earn a good living from

4 Editorial, Standards: The International Journal of Multicultural Studies, 2001, Vol. 7, No. 2.

the tourist trade. The authorities, sensing a profit, have attempted to create a win-win situation, forming villages for the Padaung people in Thailand, and then allowing and encouraging tourists to visit them, hence promoting tourism in these remote areas of Mae Hong Son. For the Myanmar military regime, the Padaung are purely a political concern, but in Thailand they are a political as well as an economic concern. On this point, this study will explore how the Padaung have become trapped along the border within 'human zoos,' stuck between civil wars in their homeland and exploitation on Thai soil.

It is worth highlighting the ways in which the Long-Necked Padaung's culture is expressed within their critical situation. In their homeland, their unique cultural practices are slowly and steadily dying out, while in Thailand their customs have rejuvenated rapidly in the last decade. Not only has a proportion of the population started wearing the brass rings again, but some also add a greater number of rings at a younger age than in the past, out of accordance with tradition.[5] However, during the course of my research, I have found that recent dynamics have worked to encourage an increasing number of the population to begin removing their neck-rings (see Chapter V).

The single Padaung women who wear rings around their necks earn about 1,500 baht (US $50) per month, whilst the married women earn around 2,000 baht (US $65). Their salaries are administered by local Thai businesspeople—an arrangement that 'encourages' them to stay in one place and acts as an incentive for the new generations to wear the neck-rings. The way these businesspeople treat the Padaung is still a controversial subject among scholars, the mass media, and human rights advocacy groups.

During my research, I attempted to uncover the meanings behind the Padaung's cultural practices in Myanmar and compare these with the shifting meanings that have developed in Thailand in order to clarify the practice of their culture and to explore what has occurred with the cultural process. To put this another way, I sought to understand how the wearing of many rings can have different meanings, whether it be to maintain their cultural practices when away from their homeland, or to reconstruct in the context of livelihood

5 Traditionally, a five year-old girl first wore a one-kilogram ring. Two more were added at ages ten and fifteen, and another two were added before the girl turned twenty–a total of five rings. Now the first ring is added at five, the second at eight, the third at thirteen, and the final two by the time the girl is fifteen.

strategies and tourism. I examined the Padaung women's reaction to the commoditization of their unique traditions, as well as the changing process of Kayan ethnic representation.

Due to external pressures and factors, there has been a change in the views, perceptions, and ways of life inside Padaung communities, especially for the women. In other words, there have been different reactions to the peoples' current situation; some have accepted and some have resisted. Currently, an increasing dilemma for the younger Padaung generation is whether or not to seek an education and citizenship rights, or to seek resettlement in a third country. The Karenni political groups in Thailand have initiated their own education system for the younger generations with the help of NGOs, but their schools are technically illegal and unrecognized by the Thai authorities.

This study also explores the different views, backgrounds, thoughts, and experiences of the older and younger generations. To understand their survival process I focus on the daily routine of a Padaung family and their livelihood strategies, as well as the traditional practices carried out by the larger Padaung community. During my research, it was interesting to explore and compare their previous lifestyle in Myanmar with the one they currently have in Thailand. I did this by joining them during their housework, working alongside the family members in activities such as cooking and cleaning. I was also able to assess the status of the men in the families in society and in their daily lives. As Padaung women are the main tourist attractions in their villages, receiving 1,500-to-2,000 baht per month as a salary, the men receive only a rice allowance of 260 baht per month. I will explore the role of men in the family as well as in society in order to understand the status of both the men and the women, and their relations in the past and now.

It is important to study the ethnic tourism process and its impact on people in terms of development and the pressure brought to bear on culture. In this study, I wish to examine the dynamics of ethnic tourism development and its impact on one specific group of migrant ethnic people, a group with an 'exotic' culture. By looking at the intrusion of cultural commoditization and the exploitation of the Padaung, I aim to explore not only the cultural process of a new meaning, but also the power process.