

**“WE ALWAYS FIND A WAY”:
A PORTRAIT OF INDIGENOUS WOMEN’S ACTIVISM AND
INTERSECTIONAL BRILLIANCE IN CHIANG MAI, THAILAND**

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to all the women activists in Chiang Mai and across Asia who continue in the work for justice. Thank you for your leadership, friendship, and the example you set for myself and others.

I also dedicate this work to Crystal Lane Greene. Before passing away from cancer in August 2022, my sister-in-law was a grant writer, leader and advocate for educational justice and equity in Oregon. Remembering her passion for education has inspired me to keep going in this last year of graduate studies and the writing of this dissertation. Crystal's legacy lives on in her family, her children, the programs she raised funds for, and the memory of her kindness and commitment to education and justice.

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation highlights the work of Indigenous women activists in Chiang Mai, Thailand who work transnationally in Northern Thailand and Shan State, Burma at the intersection of issues related to militarism, patriarchy, and land rights. It affirms and demonstrates that Indigenous women's activist movements in this region of Southeast Asia are continuing to adapt and grow despite increasingly challenging conditions of authoritarianism.

Using the Lawrence-Lightfoot method of portraiture, this thesis seeks to portray the multifaceted experience of Indigenous women's lives as activists in Chiang Mai in the early twenty first century. Drawing upon community-engaged, Indigenous and feminist methods, my research here is based on individual and group interviews, a collaborative storytelling project, and participation in the work of a transnational women's organization based in Chiang Mai.

As well as considering the intersectional forms of oppression that Indigenous women in this region experience, I also draw attention to acts of *intersectional brilliance*, which are the strategies that women and people experiencing multiple forms of marginalization use to navigate and transform intersectional oppression. These strategies in Chiang Mai include leading educational and training programs, gaining strength from personal relationships, building transnational alliances, and learning how to quickly adapt to constantly changing political conditions. Further, in order to show a deeper portrait of the lived experiences of this community, I also recount here some of the emotional experiences, including my own, of trauma, healing, disconnection and connection that come with activism under authoritarian conditions. Overall, this dissertation contributes to a richer understanding of Indigenous women's leadership and activism in Asia in the current time of authoritarianism, neoliberalism and neo-colonialism.

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INTRODUCTION

Indigenous women activists in Northern Thailand and Shan State are at the forefront of challenging colonialism and heteropatriarchy and are thus visioning and creating new futures in the process. In highlighting these stories of resistance, this work presents a “counternarrative” (Goodyear-Ka’ōpua 2013, 44) to dominant stories which have portrayed Asian and Indigenous women as passive or victims (Silva 2004; Tuck and Yang 2014).

Locating ourselves in place, this dissertation takes place in Chiang Mai, Thailand, with Indigenous women activists from Northern Thailand and Shan State, Burma. It portrays a community of women who are NGO workers, peacebuilders and former resistance fighters, mothers and childfree women, and students and teachers who are all using multiple strategies in their work for justice. The women in this research project are not “tragic” figures in need of rescue by anybody (Vizenor 1998, 93), but instead complex people who have chosen to engage themselves in political struggle, and who have rich and full lives beyond their identities as activists.

As someone who has worked with Indigenous activist groups in Northern Thailand for over a decade prior to starting my PhD studies, I planned for a long time to conduct my research together with this community. Choosing to pursue my doctoral studies at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, I was sure that this would be the right place to study both Indigenous and Asian politics. I was surprised, however, during my first year of studies to find a disconnect between these two fields. I found few classes offered or academics that focused on both Indigenous and Asian politics, and even fewer Indigenous Asian women academics. I realized

with time that this issue was not unique to the University of Hawai‘i but instead reflects broader issues in academia related to Asian women and Indigenous women from Asia.

For those who study Asian politics, the field has been lacking in representation even by people from Asia and there is a strong need to “Asianize” Asian studies (Leong 2011). Not only are Indigenous women from Asia under-represented, but Asian women and even Asian people in general are under-represented in the writings about our own continent. Within the field of Indigenous politics, Asian women are also under-represented, although this is starting to change with the work of scholars such as Ellen Rae Cachola (Cachola et al. 2010), Megumi Chibana (2018b; 2018a) and Pasang Yangjee Sherpa (Eubanks and Sherpa 2018), while more representation is needed especially from mainland Southeast Asia.

For these reasons, a topic which seems absolutely central and well-known to me in the real world—it is common knowledge among many activists in Asia that Chiang Mai is a regional hub of Indigenous peoples’ and women’s activism—became relegated to the margins within academia. In the first two years of my research, I struggled to find literature written about, and especially by, the Indigenous women in Northern Thailand and across the border in Shan State who I already knew were doing strategic and brilliant work to fight against authoritarianism and patriarchy.

As a result, the purpose of my research became to show how Indigenous women in Northern Thailand and Shan State are leading transnational and trans-Indigenous efforts for healing, justice and empowerment for themselves and their communities. In this way, my research refutes the “myth of passivity” as well as invisibility often surrounding Indigenous and Asian women-led activism (Silva, 2004) as well as the general deficiency in literature on Asian social movements, particularly those led by women and Indigenous peoples in Asia.

Another important purpose of this research is to show the multi-dimensional, complex, messy and ultimately very human experience of what it means to be an activist in today's world, and in particular in Chiang Mai, Thailand. A great deal of the research on activism and social movements¹ in the Global South² is oriented towards understanding their goals, strategies, political opportunities and other exterior factors (e.g., Falk 2010; Lambert, Pickering, and Alder 2003). While there is nothing inherently wrong with this type of focus, I hope that by also showing more about the *interior* world of activists, including our daily lived experiences, emotional struggles, and moments of connection and relationships will allow for a richer understanding of what early 21st century women's activism under authoritarianism looks and *feels* like.

Finally, this dissertation uses the “portraiture” (Goodyear-Ka‘ōpua 2013; Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 1997) method to focus on the strengths inherent in Indigenous women's activism in Chiang Mai. I do not take a blindly positive approach, and am realistic about the very real challenges and dangers that women face in the region. At the same time, I also seek to advance more strengths-based frameworks for understanding Indigenous women's activism. Therefore, I focus in this research on identifying acts of *intersectional brilliance*, which are strategies that women and people experiencing multiple forms of oppression use to challenge

¹ I use the terms social movements and activism in this thesis, as well as NGOs when referring to activist work that occurs within organizations. I do not use the term “civil society” in this dissertation. As Noenoe Silva states, “for IP [Indigenous Peoples], civilization is a weaponized term, posed against savagery; it is a goal to be accomplished via eradication of Indigenous practices that are replaced with Western/haole practices” (2019). Jai Sen urges us to “break free” from the term “civil society”; writing, “the rules of civility that prevail are always set by individuals and institutions that consider themselves to be civil and civilised, and where the primary aim of the rules is to ‘civilise’ everything and everyone” (2018, 14).

² As Vijay Prashad writes, the “Global South is not a place” but rather a constellation of communities across the world impacted by colonialism, neoliberalism and inequality; we can also find the “South within the North” in Indigenous, minority and immigrant communities in the North (2018). Therefore, when I write about “the South” or “Global South” I refer to marginalized Indigenous and minority communities united by similar struggles, regardless of exact geographic location.

intersectional discrimination and build power. These strategies include relationships of decolonial love and solidarity, education and training as forms of resistance, adaptive forms of political activism under authoritarianism, and trans-Indigenous and transnational alliances. Through these methods, the activists in this research project are able to find ways to express and strengthen their power as Indigenous women even under authoritarian and neo-colonial rule.

Throughout this dissertation, I weave together portraits and stories from Indigenous women activists in Chiang Mai, my own story, and the lessons I have learned from the fields of Indigenous and women of color feminisms as well as interdisciplinary fields including transnational social movement theory, trauma healing, and Asian studies. As an activist myself who has been working with the social movements discussed here since 2009, I have often had to struggle and work through the issues I have raised throughout this dissertation including identity, trauma, relationship building, and tensions with both neo-colonial and authoritarian regimes. Therefore, this dissertation is not abstract to me, but is my way of addressing and seeking to understand very real questions that have often come up in my life and in the work of the women with whom I work in solidarity.

Where and With Whom this Research Takes Place

For this dissertation, I conducted collaborative research with Indigenous women activists based in Chiang Mai, Northern Thailand who have been engaged in activist training programs and transnational activism at the intersection of militarism, patriarchy and Indigenous land rights in Northern Thailand and Shan State, Burma. As Chiang Mai is a regional and international hub of activist groups, the groups there consist of many multi-ethnic and international coalitions. These especially include activists from various communities in Northern Thailand, Northern and Eastern Burma. In addition, many activists from around the world work here, including people

from various ethnic groups across Thailand, Burma, Southeast, South, and East Asia, Global North countries and Colombia.

As someone with long standing ties with an organization which will be referred to throughout this dissertation as *Mekong Women for Peace*,³ which is a transnational women's organization based in Chiang Mai, it made the most sense for me to conduct my research primarily in partnership with this organization and my existing network. For the purposes of this research, I focused on Indigenous women activists from Northern Thailand and Shan State among our network and partner organizations who are (or were at the time of research) based in Chiang Mai. The stories and experiences recounted here are trans-Indigenous, transborder and transnational, with many of the women having crossed the Thai-Burma border multiple times throughout their lives for work, study, or activism.

³ *Mekong Women for Peace* is not the real name of the organization. For security purposes, due to increasing surveillance and informants in Thailand and Burma, the members of this network and I made the decision to use a pseudonym throughout this dissertation for safety reasons. The pseudonym was chosen together with members of the organization.



Figure 1. Map of the location of this research, Chiang Mai, Northern Thailand and Shan State, Burma. Courtesy of Mackenzie Greene-Powell.

This research is primarily based on interviews that I conducted both online and in person, observations from my work with *Mekong⁴ Women for Peace*, and my participation in a collaborative storytelling project led by *Mekong Women for Peace* from March 2021 to August 2022. In addition, I also used some secondary sources from NGO websites, reports, newspaper and magazine articles from local, regional and international sources, and social media posts from Facebook and Twitter.

⁴ The word Mekong used here refers to the Mekong region of mainland Southeast Asia, which comprises Thailand, Burma, Laos, Cambodia, China/Tibet and Vietnam, all connected by the Mekong River.

As I chose to conduct research primarily within my own community of activists and among friends and people I already knew, there are some characteristics of this community that I will mention here. Most of the Indigenous women activists interviewed for this dissertation, with a few exceptions, are either in their twenties or thirties. They are from a number of different ethnic groups in Northern Thailand and Shan State including Tai,⁵ Karen, Kayah, Lisu, Akha and Hmong communities, although there are more interviews with Tai women than any other group. This is both due to the nature of *Mekong Women for Peace*'s existing network (several key members are Tai) and the fact that Tai people are among the largest Indigenous or ethnic minority groups in both Shan State and Northern Thailand.

The women interviewed here are predominantly (at least currently) urban-based activists. They all speak multiple languages and most speak English when working in trans-border/regional groups, as well as Thai, Burmese, and/or Indigenous languages including Tai, S'gaw, Akha and Hmong⁶ depending on the context and situation. While most of the women interviewed here do not come from privileged backgrounds, many have developed a certain amount of status as women leaders in their communities due to their activism and/or attending formal or non-formal education. All of the women that I interviewed have experience working in trans-Indigenous and transnational settings and in a way work as "bridges" between the communities they come from, other communities of resistance, and local, national and global sites of power such as governments and international organizations.

⁵ As you will see in the interviews, quotations and names of organizations, the term Shan is commonly used in English to refer to people of the Tai ethnic group. However, I use the term Tai in my writing to refer to Tai people, as it is the name by which Tai people call themselves, and that several of my interviewees expressed their preference for. I do use the term Shan State to describe the ancestral homelands of the Tai people as it is how the region is referred to by those who I interviewed. There are also a number of organizations that use the name Shan, such as Shan Women's Action Network, which I have kept the same.

⁶ There are many dialects and sub-language groups within these languages also.

Scope and Limits of this Research

Due to the nature of conducting research within an already formed community of activists, there are also limits to this research which I want to comment upon here. The majority (although not all) of the Indigenous women interviewed here are Buddhist or Christian, cisgender, do not have visible disabilities, and do not identify openly as LGBTQ. While I have included some interviews with Muslim (or from Muslim backgrounds) and LGBTQ activists, during my fieldwork I was not able to connect with many Indigenous women in our network who identify openly as LGBTQ or Muslim. This is due to a combination of geographic location, broader social conditions and discrimination, and positionality. First, the majority of Muslim Indigenous activists in a Thai/Burma context would be based in the South of Thailand, Central and Western Burma, and transnationally in Bangladesh. At the same time, it is also an undeniable fact that anti-Muslim and anti-Rohingya discrimination has been a real issue among Northern Thai and Shan State activists, certainly at least until very recently. There are signs that this has been changing since the military coup in Burma in 2021; for example, in one *Mekong Women for Peace* workshop in July 2022, one activist from Shan State stated that “before, people said Burma is a Buddhist country, but now we found they oppress every religion, so we found a common enemy, we are united and we understand it’s wrong to oppress others” (Anonymous 2022b). Several activists in this workshop also identified that a future democratic Burma should accept all religions and no longer list religion on people’s ID cards (Anonymous 2022b).

Particularly since the coup in Burma, it has been very dangerous to identify as openly LGBTQ due to the increased risk of torture and assault. There are few Indigenous women activists I know personally that are openly LGBTQ. This is primarily a security issue for

Indigenous LGBTQ women and also a positionality issue. As someone who isn't known to LGBTQ Indigenous women communities in this region, I don't have the network or trust of these communities to conduct ethical research under the current security situation. For activists with disabilities, there are also very few Indigenous women activists with visible disabilities in our network. Again, this is likely in part due to our network's positionality being predominantly people without current visible disabilities. In addition, lack of accessibility and societal attitudes towards disability in both Thailand and Burma continue to be barriers for people with disabilities to take up leadership roles in Indigenous activist movements (Burma News International 2022; Vongkiatkajorn 2011). More work is needed to be done by groups such as *Mekong Women for Peace* to reach out to these communities to be more inclusive.

The experiences of Indigenous LGBTQ, trans, Muslim and disabled activists in Thailand and Burma also deserve to be centered and highlighted, and I see these as important directions for future research in this area. In addition, I also see these as areas where our network and the community of activists that I am a part of in Chiang Mai should work on being more proactively inclusive in the future to be more truly intersectional.

Finally, one point I should note about this research is that while I state it has taken place in Chiang Mai, Thailand, I also want to be clear about the pandemic's effect on this research. I had originally planned to conduct 18 months of research in Thailand from April 2021 to September 2022, including intensive language study. However, due to the pandemic, the majority of this research was conducted online from my father-in-law's house in Northern California while self-isolating. This deeply affected my research during this time, including not being able to do the intensive in-person language study that I had planned to do, and the effect on my mental health of trying (and not always particularly succeeding) to do research online and

connect with people through black screens on video calls, experiencing existential fears and anxiety due to the pandemic, and dealing with the crisis in Burma after the military coup. The University of Hawai'i started allowing in-person research again by the summer of 2022, when I was able to travel to Thailand, which ended up being limited to a three-month period due to the circumstances explained here. Therefore, I see this dissertation as the start of a research project which I plan to further enhance and develop upon, ideally as a post-doctoral project.

Methods of this Research

In this research project, I used activist and Indigenous feminist research methods to conduct interviews and group discussions both online and in person with members of *Mekong Women for Peace* and our partner and network organizations. Along with primary sources of interviews and group discussions, I also relied on secondary sources, including publicly available NGO reports, websites, social media posts, and magazine and newspaper articles.

When conducting interviews, I tried to find ways to make these interviews as relaxed, friendly, and collaborative as possible. I found even among people I already knew and including for myself as the “interviewer” that the word “interview” brought up feelings of anxiety and discomfort. I preferred instead to call these “coffee shop chats” and I spent a lot of time chatting informally and buying people coffee and snacks to put everyone more at ease. I also gave each interviewee a small gift to thank them, which is customary in Chiang Mai, and bought their coffee or meal to show appreciation for their time spent in the interview. Finally, I sent each person I had interviewed their quotes for them to review before publishing this thesis, except in a few cases of people who are now in situations in Burma where it could compromise their security for me to contact them. In group interviews, I used collaborative methods such as creating space for participants to ask each other questions, choose which types of questions or

topics they would like to focus on, and also ask me questions so that the conversations felt more like an exchange rather than an extraction of knowledge (Glesne 2016).

The majority of these interviews were conducted in English, which is the primary language used in many regional and trans-national groups in Chiang Mai. This is a limitation of this research but I also see some strengths. On the one hand, it portrays a transnational Indigenous activist culture which uses its own dialect and form of English for communication. English is used in everyday work and communication, so it makes sense to show this. For this reason, I transcribed people's speech written as is, following the convention in Indigenous politics, except in a few cases where people chose to edit their own speech in the transcript.⁷ However, there are also many aspects of Indigeneity that this dissertation cannot portray without using Indigenous languages, and because I myself am not Indigenous nor from the region. For this reason, it is very important to have more Indigenous researchers from the region represented in this field of research.

In addition to English-language interviews, a few interviews were conducted in a mix of English and Thai, English and Tai, or English and Burmese. Most people reviewed their transcripts in English, but I also sent a dual language transcript to one interviewee for their review with the support of a translator, Mueda Nawanat. While I conducted many of the English language interviews alone, several of the multiple language interviews were conducted with the consultation and support of local activists, especially Hseng and Siphoung.⁸ This consultation

⁷ This is in contrast to much of Southeast Asian studies, where researchers normally edit English interviews.

⁸ All names throughout this dissertation, except Mueda Nawanat, P'Miju and P'Noraerii, are pseudonyms that activists have chosen themselves to use for security reasons.

often looked like asking additional questions, providing translation support, and in a few cases helping set up or arrange the interviews.⁹

To conduct participant observation for my dissertation, or what I prefer to call “observant participation” (Seim 2021), I supported the *Mekong Women for Peace* team in grant-writing, staff transitions and responding to the pandemic and military coup in Burma throughout my research. In line with a community-led approach, I also supported the team to apply for funding in order to conduct their own community-led storytelling project that would produce results more directly beneficial to the community involved than a doctoral thesis. As a result, the *Mekong Women for Peace* team has been conducting a feminist participatory research and storytelling project recounting women’s experiences with militarism and patriarchy in Burma which I have supported. The stories of the women who participated in this community research project were compiled by the team and can be read here:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/18yIgpK_ehIWa7OqexaBJHdM2IF1Fwan/view?usp=sharing

⁹ Due to Institutional Review Board (IRB) regulations I was not able to list them as co-interviewers unless they undertook the online research training that IRB requires. This is a significant barrier to conducting community-led research, given how technical and time consuming the training is, and the lack of options to complete the training in local languages.

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Figure 2. Table of contents from the *Voices of Women* storytelling project by *Mekong Women for Peace*. Available to read here:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/18yIgpK_ehIWa7OqexaBJHdM2IF1Fwan/view?usp=sharing

The women in the Voices of Women project are also engaged in an ongoing advocacy project related to militarism in Burma, including producing a documentary which has not yet been made public. I supported this storytelling and research project as an “observant participant” by helping organize workshops on research methods and story writing, but the work was led by the *Mekong Women for Peace* team. In sum, in order to fill my “dual loyalties” (Hale 2006, 100) to both the academy and community, I conducted one research project which was primarily led by me with community engagement (the interviews and discussions cited as primary sources in this dissertation) and supported another community-led storytelling and research project (the Voices of Women project). While this entailed more work, it makes me happy to know that the research for this thesis has included many people and has produced work both inside and outside of the academy.

Finally, after I finished the research for this dissertation, during the write-up phase of the dissertation I used the portraiture method (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 1997). As I will explain more in the following section, this method combines artistic and creative writing with empirical research to create an “aesthetic whole” portrait of a community (Goodyear-Ka‘ōpua 2013, 44). In the spirit of including “lived experience” including “pain and grief and hope,” I will also share a little here about the emotional experience of this dissertation writing process (Million 2009, 54). As Chapter Three illustrates, the experience of this research and writing process included many moments of trauma and anxiety due to the COVID-19 pandemic and military coup in Burma, but also moments of hope and re-connection after and even during the pandemic. Furthermore, I wrote this dissertation while grieving; for the collapse of the life I had built pre-pandemic, for the disruption of the lives of a whole generation of activist friends in Burma, and most especially for my sister-in-law, who passed away unexpectedly during my field

work and right before I started writing this dissertation. This grief shaped the words in this dissertation. This includes the sadness and pain, but also a sense of need to show the beauty in life and how people find meaning and purpose even in circumstances of extreme hardship. While this dissertation focuses on strengths and wholeheartedly celebrates Indigenous women's activism, at the same time it would not show reality if I were not honest about the layers that life brings—of those moments of sadness, hope, tragedy and resilience. That is what I tried to convey throughout the writing of this dissertation. In the next section, I will explain in more detail the various methods used in this research, as well as some of the ethical considerations I have navigated and considered.

Decolonizing Research Methods

Of all the academic terminology in the world, there are none that struck more anxiety and dispiritedness into my heart as a first year PhD student than the terms “research methods” and “research methodologies.” Every time I tried to write about these topics, I found that my chest would constrict, and I would feel a sense of anxiety and inadequacy rising up. Having learned from feminist analyses that “tackle the separation between mind and matter” and “bring the body ‘in’ to political analyses in material and discursive ways” (Wiebe 2016b, 28), I realized that my physical and emotional responses to the word “research” were just as important as my intellectual response. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith writes, “the term ‘research’ is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism” (2012, 1). For Indigenous and colonized peoples, research “stirs up silence, conjures up bad memories, it raises a smile that is knowing and distrustful” (L. T. Smith 2012, 1). Given the colonial history of research, it is not surprising that simply attempting to grapple with the term research would cause deep fear and anxiety for women of color such as myself.

Coming into my doctoral studies, I was already carrying bad memories and feelings of distrust towards researchers and the academy in general. Prior to starting my PhD, I had spent a decade working in Northern Thailand and regionally across Southeast Asia with activist groups and had been contacted a number of times by researchers seeking interviews. At first, I had been happy to oblige, thinking that perhaps something useful would come of the connections or their writing. But after too many exasperating experiences, I no longer found it worth my time. At worst, the researchers argued with our answers to their questions, criticized our work, and asked questions we considered rude and intrusive such as lists of the names of our donors. At best, they were polite but disappeared into the ether after the interview, never to be heard from again. Eventually, I was advised to simply ignore emails from researchers requesting interviews, my colleagues stating that there was “no point” in meeting with such people. And almost everyone I knew in the activist community had a story of researchers behaving badly in Southeast Asia; of treating the location as their own playground, of insulting local people by not knowing basic protocols, and (seemingly) getting large amounts of funding to do nothing but go on holiday to the beach.

Yet despite these experiences (which, while unpleasant for me, were not equivalent to actively harmful or violent experiences of research that many Indigenous groups have experienced), as well as a long history of feeling disempowered and alienated in academia as a woman of color, I still had an interest in doing research myself. I had also seen enough examples along the way of what I considered good research, including researchers who made long-term commitments to communities, provided scholarship and training opportunities for community members, and did research that directly supported social movements. These examples convinced

me that there could be value in research. And I hoped that taking the time to reflect and learn more about the activism I had engaged in would lead to better insights and new knowledge.

However, I knew that I had no desire to conduct research using mainstream methods which would expect me to objectify, quantify and distance myself from the people I was conducting research with—to turn them into the “researched.” In Indigenous Politics, I was relieved to find a space in academia where I would not only be allowed, but actively expected to conduct research that felt ethical and appropriate. Learning from methodologies commonly used in Indigenous politics, I will now explain here some of the main approaches I used in my dissertation, including activist research, decolonial approaches to feminist ethnography, community-led and engaged research, and portraiture. Finally, I will discuss how I approached these methods as a non-Indigenous person and while navigating my own identity and positionality.

Activist Research

While the term ‘activist’ often conjures to mind dramatic, front-line acts of resistance such as rallies, blockades or publicly speaking for a cause, I would argue that it is also the more low-key, less celebrated acts of commitment and care that should determine whether one’s approach to research is ‘activist.’ Charles Hale defines activist research first as that which has “a political alignment with an organized group of people in struggle” (2006, 96). Second, activist research should “allow dialogue...[with the community] to shape each phase of the process, from conception of the research topic to data collection to verification and dissemination of the results” (Hale 2006, 96). An important characteristic of activist research is the *dual commitment* that activist researchers make to both communities in struggle and the academy. Similarly, Shannon Speed defines ‘activist research’ as “the overt commitment to an engagement with our

research subjects that is directed toward some form of shared political goals” (2008, 230).

Therefore, working from Hale and Speed’s definitions, we can say that activist research starts by making a *commitment to community* as foundational to the research project. For this reason, I conducted research with a community that I am a long-standing member of and am committed to.

While Hale and Speed both mention “political alignment” (Hale 2006, 96) or “shared political goals” (Speed 2008, 230) as essential to an activist approach to research, it is important to note that this does not always mean the researcher should engage in *overt* political activism, especially considering the local context. In authoritarian contexts such as Burma and Thailand where my research takes place, depending on the context and issue, openly political activism may be more dangerous and less effective at times than other forms of intervention. As Sandra Smeltzer notes, “while front-line activism is incredibly powerful under optimal conditions, in other contexts it can jeopardize the safety and welfare of both researchers and research participants” (2012, 255). For example, social movements in Myanmar have previously been accused by the government of being instigated by foreigners as a way of delegitimizing their work. An outside researcher publicly taking up the cause could therefore do more harm than good in certain circumstances.

For these reasons, in authoritarian contexts “front-line activism is not always appropriate or safe for both researchers and research participants” (Smeltzer 2012, 263). One way that academics can also provide support in such contexts is through the “back-office labour of academics” (Smeltzer 2012, 256) such as grant writing, administrative support, placing interns and volunteers, or research training. Much of the way that I have demonstrated my political support or alignment throughout this research project has come through these types of less

exciting sounding acts of “back-office labour,” including grant writing, research training, and simply just showing up to lend a hand with whatever needs to be done.

Decolonial Approaches to Feminist Ethnography

Ethnographic methods can be defined as those which do research “with living people” and that take into account “cultural and political dynamics” of communities and societies (Goodyear-Ka‘ōpua 2015, 15). Ethnography is further defined by Suzanne Finney, Mary Mostafanezhad, Guido Carlo Pigliascio, and Forrest Wade as “a research method used by social scientists to examine how everyday and local practices are reflective of broader cultural, economic, environmental, and political trends” (Finney et al. 2015, 1). As a research method, ethnography commonly includes the use of interviews, participant observation, as well as participatory methods such as action research or photovoice (Lassiter 2005).

While my research uses and adapts methods commonly described as ethnographic such as interviews, participant observation and participatory methods, I find myself reluctant to embrace describing this research as ethnographic. My reticence comes from ethnography’s colonial history and present. As Audra Simpson demonstrates, “colonialism and anthropology...are means through which Indigenous people have been known and sometimes are still known” (A. Simpson 2014, 95). While scientific research in particular produced research which was directly in support of the genocide of Indigenous peoples, social sciences and ethnographic forms of research were by no means innocent, including through “the effect of travellers’ tales” (L. T. Smith 2012, 2). Ethnography has been used by white researchers to categorize Indigenous and Global South peoples, to “desire, extract and claim ownership” and to appropriate the knowledge of people of color (L. T. Smith 2012, 1). It has been and is still employed as a research method in support of “colonial governance” (Buch and Staller 2014, 110; A. Simpson 2014).

Despite these facts, many Indigenous scholars have found ways to decolonize and Indigenize ethnographic methods. Indigenous ethnographers center Indigenous epistemologies in their work by putting “forth other ways of knowing, being, doing, and writing from other, non-Euro American spaces of power and agency” (Teaiwa 2015, 2014). This approach can also be seen in the works of Noelani Goodyear-Ka‘ōpua who centers Kānaka Maoli epistemologies as theory and method, including the concept of *ea* (Goodyear-Ka‘ōpua, Hussey, and Wright 2014). In addition, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson’s work also centers Indigenous epistemologies and advances the concept of “grounded normativity” to consider how her experiences are “anchored to and generated through Nishnaabeg intelligence” and lived experiences rather than the “individual knowledge” prioritized by academia (L. B. Simpson 2017, 30).

In turning to feminist ethnography specifically, feminist ethnography as a method “contextualizes ethnographic writing within a broader consciousness of the ‘herstorical’ trajectories of feminist texts” (Lassiter 2005, 59). However, feminist ethnography is by no means a solution to the colonialism inherent in ethnography. Female ethnographers such as Alice Fletcher, who is considered one of the earliest and most well-known female ethnographers, were at the forefront of the use of ethnography as a tool of colonial violence. Fletcher was an anthropologist and ethnographer who helped write the Dawes Act of 1887; this act forced the system of private land ownership upon Indigenous nations (Grande 2015). Despite this genocidal history, some white feminist ethnographers to this day do not seem to acknowledge the colonial violence of ethnography. For example, in an article on feminist ethnography, Fletcher’s work is only euphemistically described as involving “highly controversial land reform policies” (Buch and Staller 2014, 110).

However, there are aspects of feminist ethnography that are useful when employing an activist praxis in research. Identity, gender, and *similarity and divergence* of our gendered experiences is at the heart of feminist ethnographic research, and also this research project (Lassiter 2005; Hesse-Biber 2014). Feminist ethnographers reject false claims of objectivity and the “eye of God approach” (Teaiwa 2015, xvi) and accept the “intersubjectivity of knowledge production” (Buch and Staller 2014, 115). As a fundamentally relationship-based methodology, feminist ethnography requires “empathy, imagination and open-mindedness” and “a sense of skepticism about ... culturally conditioned common sense” (Buch and Staller 2014). Feminist ethnographers are also expected to “attend to the ways in which his or her position in the world might impact what and from whom he or she is able to learn” (Buch and Staller 2014, 108) and consider their own identities and forms of privilege. Finally, a feminist approach is important for activist researchers to ensure that we are paying careful attention to “gendered power relations at all levels,” that we recognize the validity and importance of women’s experiences, and that we consider how to ensure that our research is practical and accessible for women to participate in (Bakashova et al. 2014, 6).

There are useful lessons to learn from feminist ethnography for activist researchers, and many Indigenous feminists are finding ways to decolonize feminist ethnography. Indigenous feminist ethnographers often focus on telling the stories of Indigenous women; they also may focus on aspects of gender and sexuality as lived experiences for Indigenous women and peoples. One example of Indigenous feminist ethnography in activist research, without explicitly using those terms, is *Nā Wāhine Koa*. In this work, which shares the stories of four wāhine activists in Hawai’i, Goodyear-Ka’ōpua collaborated with the women as co-authors to write their oral histories. The women edited their stories until they reached a version they felt happy with.

Goodyear-Ka'ōpua also explains that focusing on women's stories is about *restoring balance*. While many of her students could name the male leaders of the Hawaiian sovereignty movement, few knew the names of the wāhine who were also there leading the movement. Goodyear-Ka'ōpua explains that focusing on women's stories is not about women being better than men as leaders, but making sure women's experiences are also remembered in the movement (Akaka et al. 2018).

In terms of practical ways that I have taken a decolonial approach to adapting feminist ethnographic methods in this research project, here I have learned from Indigenous and allied scholars, and made my own adaptations for the local context. For example, Ty P. Kāwika Tengan's work uses Kānaka Maoli methods to conduct interviews as it "extends and modifies talk story styles of speaking by eliciting narratives of personal and collective histories through nondirective interviewing techniques" (2008, 19). In my own research, I have also adapted the interview technique to try to de-formalize and de-colonize the interview. I called and thought of these interviews as "coffee shop chats" and conducted most of them in Chiang Mai's numerous coffee shops, which are places where activists commonly gather, relax and spend time with friends.

I also used "nondirective" interview (Tengan 2008, 19) techniques, which included chatting informally with friends and trying to limit the questions asked, moving often times between semi-structured and unstructured interview approaches. My goal was to have more of a free-flowing and mutual exchange of ideas (what most people call a conversation) rather than an "interview" with a set list of questions. I also used my phone (with permission) to record so that I could focus on the person I was talking with rather than taking notes, which has always made me feel "researched" when other people do this. However, despite all my efforts, I still felt

uncomfortable at times asking people for interviews, which despite whatever I called them, people still thought of and knew as an interview, and often treated as such accordingly.

During interviews, I tried to be relaxed and informal, but I realized there was no way for these “coffee shop chats” to be exactly the same as an everyday chat with friends. Due to the fact that I was interviewing people that I already knew, it was easy for me to see that the awareness that I would be publishing their words shifted the dynamic of the conversation. The knowledge that they would later be published, I noticed, made some people speak and present themselves differently from an informal chat. While that is not necessarily a bad thing, it is worth noting. I also worried that the interview would create distance between myself and my friends and colleagues, in that it put me in a disliked category of “researcher” rather than the more comfortable and accepted category of “activist.” While I don’t have any clear solutions to any of these problems and none of these turned out to be significant barriers, I tried my best to navigate these issues as best as I could throughout this research, and to be aware of these dynamics.

As well as using non-directive and informal interview methods, I also tried to decolonize the interview method by conducting group interviews. Here, I learned from Corrine Glesne who conducted collaborative, group-based interviews, group research analysis, and used field notes as a public document for the research group to comment on in her research (Glesne 2016). Adapting some of Glesne’s techniques, when conducting group interviews, I invited other women to join as co-interviewers, invited research participants to interview each other and come up with questions, and also discussed with participants which topics or questions they wanted to talk about. These techniques helped de-formalize the interview technique and shed some of the “false power” that my position as a researcher could have given me (L. B. Simpson 2017, 13).

Finally, in engaging with community activities as part of my research, I learned from Sandy Grande's method of "Red Pedagogy," which rejects "the distinction between participant/observer" that ethnography tries to create and instead practices ongoing reflexivity where "the gaze is always shifting inward, outward, and throughout the spaces in between" (2016, 134). Rather than participant observation, I conducted "observant participation" (Seim 2021) and tried to practice ongoing reflexivity and reflection while joining in organizational events and trainings. When engaging in events, I tried to be actively present and involved, yet also reflexive, writing observations sometimes during and also after meetings and events. Yet, in reality, it was not easy to do both jobs well—to be an actively participating member of a group, and to also be writing reflections and observations about the group that I could put in this dissertation. If I took time to write observations during a meeting, for example, it meant time taken away from me being fully present with the group. If I didn't write anything, I found it difficult to recount the details of the event and produce a rich and layered description afterwards. I tried to strike a balance between the two as best as I could in this research. Again, I am not sure of the best solution here other than that it would be helpful to have a photographic memory, but I hope that being honest about my experiences will provide a more realistic account of what it actually looks like to conduct activist research or research using Indigenous feminist methods for others.

Community-Led v. Community-Engaged Research

As Leanne Betasamosake Simpson writes, the first and most important step in research with Indigenous communities is that the researcher needs to divest themselves "of the false power the academy bestow[s]" to ensure it is a community-led, rather than researcher-led process

(2017, 13). For this reason, I conducted the research in this dissertation using both community-led and community-engaged methods.

While I started my PhD studies with a plan to conduct community-led research, I would say that what I have ended up with is a community-engaged dissertation which involved conducting *both* community-led and community-engaged research. While I would say that it is absolutely possible for academics to conduct fully community-led research, this is much harder for PhD students to achieve due to the requirements of a PhD degree. First, there is no way at this time that I know of to submit a collaboratively written doctoral dissertation. Furthermore, a doctoral thesis must at least to some degree engage with the relevant literature in its field to pass; the arguments and discussions that take place in academia are quite frankly not always relevant to the on-the-ground needs and interests of activist communities. To ask the people I was conducting research with to engage with all the fields that I needed to cover in my dissertation such as transnational feminisms or social movement theory would only have distanced me further and put me in the position of a jargon-fuelled academic. Finally, the IRB requires all members of the research team to complete several online training certificates which are written in technical English without translation options, which is a barrier to community leadership in research projects. It was not realistic for me to ask busy members of the activist community to complete these certifications which would have little benefit to them in order to be listed as co-researchers on this project.

Despite this situation, I did not want to give up on conducting community-led research, so my solution was to facilitate community-led research to occur at least as *part* of my dissertation research process. As detailed already, I supported the *Mekong Women for Peace* team to conduct community-led research with Indigenous women activists from Burma, thus

producing the *Voices of Women* publication (Mekong Women for Peace 2022). This research project *was* completely community-led and directed, meaning I only played a supporting role in helping organize workshops and securing the necessary funding, while the stories were written, edited and compiled entirely by the team. In my dissertation, when these stories are cited, they are done so as secondary sources.

I also conducted my own interviews or primary research in addition to this report which was both collaborative and *community-engaged* in that I invited participants to be collaborators in the interview process and to ask each other questions. In addition, two community activists, Hseng and Siphoung, supported several of the interviews as consultants. However, I would not say that these interviews were community-led because, by necessity and according to the IRB requirements, I was the person mainly responsible for the interviews, they happened on the timeline of my PhD requirements, and I often asked people questions related to things I specifically wanted to understand related to my dissertation topics. I asked participants to review and approve their quotes, but I did not ask them to co-write or edit any of this dissertation, because that would have been in violation of university ethics procedures and also unfair, given that I am the only person who gets a doctoral degree at the end of this process.

Of course, I could have done much of this differently if I was doing research for say, a journal article as opposed to a dissertation; in that case, the community members and I could have written our findings together and been listed as co-authors. While this wasn't a perfect solution, it was the best I could come up with to fulfil my own commitment towards conducting community research and the university and institutional requirements involved in obtaining a PhD.

Finally, a community- engaged process ideally means engaging the community at all stages of research, including before, during, and after the project's completion. Smith writes that "sharing knowledge is...a long-term commitment" (2012, 53). Once we become part of a community, we do not abandon the community once we have finished our research and gotten the information we needed. As Goodyear-Ka'ōpua writes, "one does not just build an ahu or restore a lo'i kalo and then abandon it" (2015, 16). This is a process far deeper than simply sending our dissertation or giving a presentation to the community, although those are not bad first steps; "reporting back to the people is never a one-off exercise" (L.T. Smith 2012, 15). Being a long-term member of a community involves participating in community events, developing friendships, and showing up to contribute and be of service whenever possible.

In terms of how I applied this to my own research project, I conducted research only with communities and people that I have long term relationships with, and where my presence felt wanted. Before beginning my PhD, I was in communication with colleagues in Thailand about how to develop a research project that would be useful for others as well. In December 2019, I visited Chiang Mai, Thailand and met with the team of *Mekong Women for Peace* to discuss and develop this research project in partnership together before defending my proposal. As well as shaping the proposal, an important outcome of that meeting was the need to produce materials beyond the thesis for a wider audience, which is how we ended up producing the *Voices of Women* publication as well as an ongoing documentary project. I checked in and engaged with members of the *Mekong Women for Peace* team throughout the years of this research process, participated in events, and helped with other community needs such as fundraising as well. Finally, I will share the results of this research with this community of activists in Chiang Mai

after I graduate, and I plan to continue to stay engaged and active in this community in the long term.

Navigating Positionality and Research Methods for Non-Indigenous, Settler, Global North and Outsider Researchers

As well as the methods discussed above, an important part of research methods for me has been navigating my own positionality. In the region where this research takes place, as someone who is not of Southeast Asian heritage and who grew up in England and the U.S., I am not an insider, and have certain privileges as a fluent English speaker with a Western passport. At the same time, I am also not a total outsider as someone of mixed Asian heritage with long standing connections, friendships and responsibilities to the social movements I have been connected to over the past fourteen years. I am also not Indigenous and I have tried to carefully think through my own positionality, privilege and experiences and not use theories such as transnationalism or Third World feminism to gloss over settler identities and other identities of privilege throughout this dissertation (Tuck and Yang 2012). In my years of experience working with both Indigenous and minority groups, I have often found overlaps in our shared experiences of state violence, militarism and discrimination, particularly in my experiences as an Arab-American, but that does not mean that our experiences as Indigenous and non-Indigenous people are the same, nor our experiences as peoples raised in the Global North and South.

As well as an awareness of our positionality, outsider researchers such as myself also need to take concrete steps to address our own privileges and biases that our positionality entails. First, outsider researchers have to un-learn the assumptions that we have been taught in the academia that all “knowledge is up for grabs” (Tuck and Yang 2014, 225) and that we have the right to such knowledge. As Marie Battiste discusses, Indigenous knowledges have local and

specific contexts and may include responsibilities for possessing such knowledge (2016, 117). Outside researchers should learn to anticipate and look for limits on research, knowing that refusal often does not look like a hard ‘no.’ Goodyear-Ka‘ōpua writes that we should take the time to “establish or nurture the appropriate relationships and to be affirmed that ‘yes, indeed, I am the one who is supposed to undertake this inquiry’” (2015, 14).

The question of “Am I the right person to do this research?” is an especially pertinent question that outsider researchers should spend a long time thinking about. As I have learned during this research project, the answer to that question is probably not, if you do not at a minimum have long standing ties, connections, and a commitment to that community. In my case, I had originally thought of doing a comparative study for my dissertation, focusing on Indigenous transnational activism in both Thailand and Hawai‘i. I came to understand during my studies that I would not be the right person to do such research, given that I do not have long term ties or connections to communities in Hawai‘i, and was living in Hawai‘i in the short term as a settler. For this reason, my research takes place in Southeast Asia only, where I am known to and plan to be in long-term relationship with the people I conducted research with.

Second, as a non-Indigenous researcher, being aware of *ethnographic refusal* during the research process is also very important. Audra Simpson explains ethnographic refusal as setting limits on knowledge, knowing when it is time to stop recording, and refusing to share certain stories or knowledge with the academy (A. Simpson 2014). Simpson reached their own limit by asking questions such as, “Can I do this and still come home; what am I revealing here and why? Where will this get us?” (A. Simpson 2014, 111). For Simpson, who is Indigenous and a part of the community where the research was being conducted, this meant refusing to include data that “would not contribute to Iroquois sovereignty or complicate the deeply simplified, atrophied

representations that Iroquois and other Indigenous peoples have been mired in anthropologically” (A. Simpson 2014, 113). Tuck and Yang, in discussing Simpson’s work, assert that refusal is generative and productive as it places “limits on conquest and the colonization of knowledge by marking what is off limits, what is not up for grabs or discussion, what is sacred, and what can’t be known” (2014, 225).

Refusal is not always based on a hard no from an interviewee, but on understanding how to read between the lines, notice people shutting down, becoming disengaged from a conversation, or showing lack of enthusiasm. As Simpson writes, “‘enough’ was when my interviewees shut down (or told me to turn off the recorder), or told me outright funny things like, ‘nobody seems to know’, when everybody does know and talks about it all the time” (A. Simpson 2014, 111). For non-Indigenous or Global North researchers, these sorts of subtle cues are often either difficult to notice or are deliberately ignored by those with the desire to extract knowledge from interviewees. However, respecting refusal in all its forms is an essential part of ethical research with Indigenous communities. Refusal pushes back on the all-consuming insistence of anthropology and ethnography to know *everything*; it also allows for intellectual and representational sovereignty as “researcher and researched refuse to fulfil the ethnographic want for a speaking subaltern” (Tuck and Yang 2014, 239).

In this way, refusal goes beyond the standard ethical practices of social science researchers such as informed consent which only require explicit approval or refusal; it requires sensitivity, care for others’ feelings, and an ability to read body language. For researchers such as myself who might be part of the extended community but are not insiders, questions to ask ourselves may include “can I still do this and maintain good relationships with this community? Will I hurt or embarrass anyone by writing this? Will it create benefit for the community? Do I

have the explicit consent *and* enthusiasm of the people involved in the research to publish this?”

During the research process for this dissertation, refusal meant leaving out information that would either be embarrassing for people to see published, or that had no purpose in fulfilling the goals of this research other than that it might have been intellectually interesting to the academy. Refusal also meant not writing about certain topics that could endanger, create risks for, or compromise the security of the women who participated in this research.

Portraiture and Avoiding Deficit-Based Research

Social scientists have a “tendency to focus on what is wrong rather than search for what is right, to describe pathology rather than health” (Lawrence-Lightfoot 1983, 10). In the field of activist research, this often means looking for stories of oppression, victimization, and tragedy. As Tuck and Yang observe, “much of the work of the academy is to reproduce stories of oppression in its own voice” (2014, 227). Activist researchers should be careful to avoid narratives which depict “communities in need of salvation” by researchers (Tuck and Yang 2014, 245) as well as “eliciting pain stories” (Tuck and Yang 2014, 227).

Participatory and activist research methods are by no means immune to this problem. As Tuck and Yang state, “it is a misconception that by simply building participation into a project...[that] ethical issues of representation, voice, consumption, and voyeurism are resolved” (2014, 230). In fact, action research as it is commonly employed is designed in a way likely to focus on deficit and damage. Bagele Chilisa notes that action research is “problem focused, aiming at discovering communities’...deficiencies, and unmet needs. Problem-focused modes of inquiry work with deficit questions...the end result is that people may see their communities as places full of problems and needs that can be solved only with the help of outsiders” (Chilisa 2012, 244).

I have tried to avoid deficit-based research in this research by employing methods that focus on community strengths, especially through the use of portraiture. Portraiture is a method developed by Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot that combines “systemic empirical description with aesthetic expression, blending art and science, humanistic sensibilities and scientific rigor” (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 1997, 3). Portraiture brings the creative arts into the social sciences by taking the perspective of a portraitist while conducting research. The goal in portraiture, as Lawrence-Lightfoot explains, is to create a text “as close as possible to painting with words” (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 1997, 4). There are five elements to a portraiture approach: first, paying attention to the context and situation that those portrayed are working and living in; second, finding the balance between the voice of the writer and those portrayed; third, building meaningful relationships; fourth, conducting the filtering and sorting process of “key themes, patterns and metaphors,” and lastly, “creating an authentic and evocative, aesthetic whole” (Goodyear-Ka‘ōpua 2013, 44).

Most importantly, portraiture is a “generous and eclectic process that begins by searching for what is good and healthy and assumes that the expression of goodness will always be laced with imperfections” (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 1997, 9). As Goodyear-Ka‘ōpua writes about the experience of using this method, “portraiture calls the portraitist to focus on...what is working—without ignoring the challenges, struggles and imperfections that make humanity beautiful, rich and worth studying” (2013, 44). This is in contrast to the case study method where even in qualitative methods researchers are expected to focus on “neutrality” and objective distance and observation and reject non-empirical forms of knowledge (Hawkesworth 2006). In particular for marginalized communities, the focus on what is good, what is healthy, and what is

working well, is a powerful antidote to deficit and damage-based research (Goodyear-Ka'ōpua 2013).

Portraiture appealed to me personally because it employs beauty, creative writing, and aesthetics; I also appreciated its focus on strengths and the call to look for what is working well even under difficult circumstances. In addition, as someone who has struggled with feeling unsure about my position as an insider/outsider in the community, portraiture gave me an identity and a role as the portraitist. While Lawrence-Lightfoot sees the portraitist as primarily an outsider and I see myself somewhere in the middle, it was still helpful to have someone articulate the ways being an outsider could be positive in any way.

Lawrence-Lightfoot writes about their own experience of having their portrait drawn, sharing that the portraitist “somehow managed to reveal” an essence about themselves, “a perspective that they had not considered before” (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 1997, 4). In developing the portraiture methodology, Lawrence-Lightfoot sought to create a method that similarly captured the experience of having one’s portrait drawn, stating, “I wanted the subjects to feel seen as I had felt seen—fully attended to, recognized, appreciated, respected, scrutinized” (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 1997, 5). This meant as a portraitist using “empathetic regard, full and critical attention and a discerning gaze” while engaging with communities (Lawrence-Lightfoot 1983, 6).

The portraiture method is a positive example for me of how someone could write about a community that is not fully their own with respect, thoughtfulness, deep attention, and an awareness of their positionality. Taking on the role of outsider that being a researcher necessitates allowed Lawrence-Lightfoot to take a step back and look for themes, patterns, perspectives that might sometimes be harder to see from the inside, and to create a more holistic

picture of a community. In this project, I used portraiture as a research method in its focus on context, balancing my own voice and those portrayed, and in building (or sustaining) meaningful relationships. While writing the dissertation itself, portraiture guided me in looking for themes and patterns, weaving portraits of people, places, and organizations throughout the dissertation, and trying to create a final result that came as close as I could to an “evocative” picture of the community (Goodyear-Ka‘ōpua 2013, 44).

Chapter Guide

Here I will map what lies ahead in the following chapters for the readers of this dissertation. Chapter One starts by asserting the presence and significance of Indigenous women’s activism and Indigenous feminisms in Chiang Mai. I do this by portraying the scene of Indigenous women’s activism in Chiang Mai and the groups involved in these movements. In addition, I discuss the literature on Indigenous and Asian feminisms and the gap of research on Indigenous Asian feminisms.

Chapter Two continues laying the foundation for understanding Indigenous women’s activism in Northern Thailand by outlining the intersectional, *exterior* challenges and context that activists in Chiang Mai and Shan State face, in particular the confluence of authoritarianism, heteropatriarchy and colonialism. In contrast, Chapter Three of this dissertation focuses on the *interior* lives of activists in Chiang Mai and navigating trauma, love, loss, healing, and solidarity as part of activist work. In this chapter, I bring myself further into the dissertation, sharing my own emotional and *felt* (Million 2009) experiences working in collaboration with Indigenous women’s movements and with *Mekong Women for Peace* in particular.

One of the goals of this research has always been to highlight strengths rather than deficits (Chilisa 2012; Tuck 2009). I do this in Chapter Four by focusing on acts of intersectional

brilliance, which are strengths and strategies in Indigenous women's activism in Chiang Mai and Shan State. In this chapter, I discuss several examples of these acts of intersectional brilliance, including education-based resistance, adaptive protest strategies, and covert forms of resistance including *strategic accommodation* and *covert communications* (Silva 2004).

Furthermore, much of the literature on activism and social movements, particularly transnational movements, tends to focus on advocacy led by or aimed towards the Global North (see Bob, 2005; Keck and Sikkink, 1998). However, there is a thriving movement of Indigenous women activists working in Chiang Mai in cross-border and transnational coalitions that has been less written about in academic literature. In Chapter Five, I discuss Indigenous women's participation in trans-Indigenous and transnational coalitions at the Thai-Burma border, in regional campaigns against the Mekong and Salween dams, and in anti-authoritarian protests. Finally, between the chapters there are portraits of Indigenous women activists and places in Chiang Mai, as well as more personal pieces of reflection and writing. I have used these throughout this dissertation with the aim of creating an emotionally layered picture of Indigenous women's activism in Chiang Mai.

A Self-Portrait: My Story

Here I start by turning the portraitist's gaze on myself to describe who I am and how I came to be involved with *Mekong Women for Peace* and do this research project. I try to use the portraitist's method of "empathetic regard" and "full and critical attention" (Lawrence-Lightfoot 1983, 6) to depict myself as honestly as I can. By including a self-portrait in this dissertation, I bring myself into this research and blur the distinction between "researcher" and "researched."

Looking at myself in this "encounter," let me introduce myself as Hannah Osama El-Silimy. Today, I am wearing dark blue jeans and a black sleeveless top. I also wear the

trademark of practically every female PhD student I know, oversized round pink glasses, which in my case are superglued together as I haven't had time to buy a new pair. I have dark, shoulder length curly hair; I am a woman in her late thirties and mother to a young child (hence the broken glasses).

I was born in Nottingham, England to a mother from Japan and father from Egypt. My mother comes from Kitakyushu, Japan, while my father is from Port Said, Egypt. Growing up in this mixed-race Japanese and Egyptian family, we moved every few years between England, Saudi Arabia, and North America/Turtle Island first as immigrants and then as settlers while I was a child. As an adult, I have continued this life of movement, connection and disconnection, living across North America, Thailand, and Hawai'i and now, finally, completing the cycle back in England. This life of uprootedness as well as global connection has meant that I have always been interested in borders, spaces of belonging and exclusion, and transnational places where cultures and peoples are bridged.

Personally, having never felt quite at home in any place, my journey has been to understand myself as a person who works to bridge peoples and foster solidarity. I used to see my mixed background and lack of historical roots in one place as something deeply deficient in myself. However, I have come to believe that there is also great value in being able to see things from many different perspectives, to be at home and comfortable in diverse environments, and to be able to bridge understandings between peoples. Thus, my personal background has led me to view transnational and trans-border spaces such as the community of activists in Chiang Mai that I am a part of as ones of opportunity, where new ways of thinking, relationships and alliances can emerge from.

My interest and passion for working transnationally with women who have experienced various forms of marginalization comes from my own experiences of oppression as a woman of color. When the events of September 11, 2001 occurred, I was seventeen years old and living on the East Coast. In the years that followed, my family's lives went from being relatively privileged as settlers and free of violence and oppression to seeing members of my immediate family investigated, wiretapped, harassed, arrested, sent to prison and threatened with deportation for the crime of being Arab and Muslim. These conditions of structural violence as well as everyday experiences of harassment and humiliation including being treated as a potential terrorist every time I entered an airport or dealt with immigration officials challenged my sense of self and security in the world as a young woman (Yoder 2015).

I felt fear, shame, confusion, frustration and anger. While at first I felt completely alone, I realized with age that thousands of Arab and Muslim families in the post 9-11 environment were experiencing similar investigations as well as deportations and conditions of "slow violence" (Nixon 2011), i.e. "chronic violence [that] takes place over time and is often state-sanctioned, invisible and not considered to be violence at all" (Wiebe 2016b, 17).

What helped me most over those years were acts of solidarity that I experienced particularly from Indigenous, Black and Latinx friends and colleagues. Upon reflection, I can see that they may have wanted to support me because many of them also understood what it was like to be treated as a terrorist or criminalized by the state. Our shared experiences of oppression and violence helped us to develop both intimacy with each other and solidarity. Furthermore, because I was a young person of color, they felt a sense of responsibility to support, guide, and take care of me throughout this time. As a result, they also fostered in me a strong sense of responsibility to want to support other young women facing discrimination and state violence.

My own transnational experiences also helped me in my healing process. Moving away from the U.S. six years later helped me regain my sense of safety and reduce my fear. It was not until I moved to Chiang Mai, Thailand to start working with an activist organization located there that I was able to begin my healing process from this trauma. It is difficult for anyone who has not experienced wiretapping and surveillance to know how impossible it is to ever feel at ease in your own life. Away from the overwhelmingly anti-Muslim and anti-Arab environment in the U.S., working with colleagues from across Asia, Latin America, the U.S., and Europe, I finally felt seen and recognized as an equal to others in a way I had never felt in the continental U.S. It was there that my experience of the political deepened from what had been trapped in fear to an empowered advocate.

Working with young people from across Asia who were fighting for their communities' rights, who had been fighting against dictatorship regimes for over fifty years, and who were passionately committed to improving their societies made me understand my own experiences of oppression in a global context. This also made me want to use my own experiences to support others going through similar circumstances. I met other people from Thailand and around the world who had experienced marginalization because of their identity, whether they were Tai in Burma, or Muslim in Thailand, who too had been called terrorists by their government, and who too were finding ways to keep their strength and belief in themselves alive even while being told the opposite by the hegemonic societies they lived in. Together, we created our own "community of resistance" (Davis 2011).

In Chiang Mai, I learned how to make meaning from my experience and translate it into action. I built community with other young women who had experienced marginalization, both within their societies and within NGOs and social movements. Together with two other women

from marginalized backgrounds, we formed our own transnational network, called *Mekong Women for Peace*. We translated our experiences of disempowerment, marginalization, and oppression into spaces of healing for other marginalized women. Bringing my experience from the personal to the broader political, my experiences of solidarity and transnationalism between minority and Indigenous peoples helped me start to heal from the isolation, confusion, fear and low self-esteem that racism and state violence brought into my life. At the same time, racism, state repression, lack of funding, and other traumatic experiences have not gone away and continue to be undeniable realities for the Indigenous women and women of color in our network trying to work in solidarity with each other. My experiences in activism have been of both beautiful moments and pain. Therefore, my motivation for this research comes from my own experiences of solidarity, healing, empowerment and trauma.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have introduced my dissertation project, including where and who this research took place with. I have also talked in depth about the methods used, including activist methods, Indigenous research methods, and portraiture. In addition, I have reflected on my positionality and ways that I have tried to be aware of this throughout this research project. Finally, I have shared my own self-portrait and how I came to be here and to do this research with *Mekong Women for Peace*. In the next chapter, I focus on grounding this research in place by introducing Chiang Mai as a site of Indigenous resistance, and locating Indigenous women's activism in Chiang Mai within the fields of Indigenous and Asian feminisms. Now you know who I am and how I have conducted this research project, it is time to start shifting towards Chiang Mai and Indigenous women's activism in this region.

Portrait: Memories of Chiang Mai, Northern Thailand



Figure 3. View of the city with Doi Suthep in the background. Photograph by author.

The first memory of Chiang Mai is the sight of Doi Suthep mountain, protecting the city from above. Arriving in a new place in a state of trauma, lacking a sense of safety in the world, and knowing no one, I knew as soon as I saw the mountain that I would be okay here.

If you don't know how to already, you need to learn how to drive a motorbike to get around Chiang Mai. But I was scared and lacked confidence. For eight months, I watched warily, riding around the city on my wobbly bicycle. I finally learned to drive, making slow circles in the empty abandoned parking lot off Nimmanhaemin Road.

From the road, there are sounds, smells and sights: the rumbling of songthaews and cars; the chattering of university students squeezed together on motorbikes wearing black, white and purple uniforms; bursts of red and pink bougainvillea flowers; smoke that makes your throat itch and hurt during the burning season, and sometimes the smell of garlic and chilis frying in palm oil, making your mouth water.

The motorbike brings mobility and freedom but also fear for those who are undocumented. There's always a police helmet checkpoint on Suthep road. Friends without documents send each other messages to warn each other of these checkpoints, weaving their way through the city.

Memories of places that no longer exist

Kad Suan Kaew, the first shopping mall in Chiang Mai, a mammoth brick tower building and symbol of the early 2000s before late-stage capitalism made everything shiny. There, we went bowling, sang karaoke and drank boba tea back when there was only one shop that sold it in Chiang Mai. Now, it is an empty shell.

The bar we loved to go to when we were in our twenties and full of hope and excitement about politics and the future. A wooden open-air building where Thai musicians played protest songs on guitars, dogs wandered about, we drank beer and ate yum hua plee and drunkenly talked about love and politics.

A training center in the student neighborhood of the city, participants from all over the Mekong region eating and laughing together under the outdoor awning. Both the first and second *Mekong Women for Peace* offices, the excitement of setting them up. Now other people live in those houses, and make their own memories.

2022: New places and new memories

Across the suburbs of Chiang Mai, houses crop up where groups of activists from Burma, crossing the border since the 2021 coup, are making a new life in exile. Many of them are returnees, others here for the first time, they slowly build a new life in resistance.

New themed coffee shops are opening up every day in Chiang Mai. Each one is cuter and fancier—so fancy it’s jarring sometimes—than the last, some with rabbits, others with koi fishponds, or bamboo playground structures. Many of these become the sites of my interviews, as most people have not set up an office again since the pandemic and coup.

The pandemic brings more changes too. Chiang Mai feels so peaceful without the floods of white backpackers. New places open up, catering to the tastes of local young people instead. Suddenly, Korean chicken and matcha lattes are everywhere. Perhaps it will change again—has already changed since I wrote this—as the tourists come back.

Change is what characterizes Chiang Mai. Yet what is most constant, what never changes, is that Chiang Mai begins and ends with Doi Suthep, where if you go to the top of the mountain at the end of the day, you can watch the lights of the city slowly come on and let your thoughts be drowned out by the sound of cicadas.

CHAPTER 1

An Introduction to Indigenous Women's Activism in Chiang Mai, Northern Thailand

Introduction

The first chapter of my dissertation affirms the significance and importance of Indigenous women's activism in Northern Thailand. In order to do so, I will first develop a portrait (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 1997) of Indigenous women's activism in Chiang Mai, Northern Thailand. Introducing in detail the place where and people with whom this research takes part, I will discuss Chiang Mai as a site of Indigenous organizing and resistance, and then share about the various groups in this region led by and working with Indigenous women.

The second section of this chapter will discuss the context of Indigeneity and Indigenous women's lives in Asia, with a particular focus on Northern Thailand. I find that Indigenous women in this region are widely underrepresented in the literature, particularly across Southeast Asian, Thai and Burma studies. I then consider how to bridge and learn from the fields of Asian feminisms and Indigenous feminisms to create space for Indigenous feminisms in Asia. I assert that the study of Indigenous feminism in Asia should be based upon the lived experiences and realities of Indigenous women activists and the body of work they have produced both in non-academic writing as well as daily acts of activism and resistance.

Place and People: Indigenous Women's Activism in Northern Thailand

To introduce this topic and my research site, I will start here by grounding my research in place and community. As Joanne Barker argues, Indigenous feminist studies must be grounded and located within Indigenous territories in order to hold the writers "accountable to the specific communities to and from which they write as citizens or collaborators" (2017, 6). I will introduce the community that I write from as a collaborator by sketching a portrait (Goodyear-

Ka'ōpua 2013; Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 1997) of activism in Chiang Mai, Thailand to explain its location and history as a site of Indigenous women's resistance. I will then introduce prominent Indigenous and women's social movements and groups in the region.

Portrait: Doi Suthep, Chiang Mai



Figure 4. View of Chiang Mai from the top of Doi Suthep mountain. Photograph by author.

Everywhere you go in Chiang Mai, you will see Doi Suthep mountain to the west of the city. Blanketed in evergreen, bamboo and bodhi trees, the mountain is green year-round with a glint of gold at the top from Wat Phra That Doi Suthep. This temple is one of the most sacred Buddhist sites in all of Thailand. While known to many tourists as a popular place to visit, Doi

Suthep both symbolizes Northern Thailand's history and context as a site of resistance to authoritarianism *and* a site of contemporary internal colonialism.

First, Doi Suthep is a symbol of resistance and the proud articulation of a distinct Lanna/Northern Thai identity. The monk Khruba Sriwichai is revered in Northern Thailand by Buddhists for building the eleven-kilometer road in the early twentieth century that is still followed to this day to ascend the mountain and reach the temple. Khruba Sriwichai is also revered for his refusal to follow the national Buddhist authorities' attempts to create a centralized and nationalized Buddhist religious order, and symbolizes Lanna defiance against internal colonialism from the Central Thai, Bangkok based authorities (Evrard and Leepreecha 2009, 305).

At the same time, despite its sacred status, Doi Suthep also has become reconstituted by the Central Thai authorities as a symbolic site of Buddhist dominance over Indigenous, Christian, and Muslim groups in Northern Thailand. Continuing seven kilometers up the mountain past Doi Suthep temple, you will find the royal palace of Phuping, which is the winter residence of the royal family. Thus, visiting the temple and royal palace has now become a "total tourist complex" where one can show both their "loyalty toward Buddhism and respect for the monarchy and the nation" (Evrard and Leepreecha 2009, 308).

Beyond the politics, Doi Suthep is also a site of pleasure, connection and spiritual importance. There is a local saying that you haven't arrived in Chiang Mai until you have been to Doi Suthep. And for myself, I never feel truly settled until I visit the mountain. As soon as we arrive in Chiang Mai in June 2022, my three-year-old son also keeps asking to go to the top of the mountain. On the day that we visit, he eats sai glok woon sen, grilled sausage stuffed with

vermicelli noodles, runs up the steps to Wat Phra That Doi Suthep, and gazes out at the view from the top, watching airplanes land and trying to find our house.

Looking down from the top of the mountain, we can see the city of Chiang Mai, a small city of less than 150,000 people. It is situated 695 kilometers north from Bangkok; the distance can be travelled by overnight bus, train or one hour flight nowadays. This dual geographical separation from Bangkok and central location surrounded by neighboring countries are part of what make Chiang Mai a unique site of resistance and transnational cultural exchange. While it may be far from Bangkok, Chiang Mai is only a few hours from Shan State, Burma and not much further to China and Laos to the north and east. All these factors and more that will be listed below weave together to make Chiang Mai a special place of resistance and community building, where activists from across the region have chosen to base themselves.

An Introduction to Activist Groups in Chiang Mai and Northern Thailand

Many social movements and groups not only from Thailand and Burma but also across Asia have chosen to base themselves in Chiang Mai. As will be discussed next, these include both groups from Burma, Thailand, cross-border groups, regional groups, Indigenous and/or women's groups.

Bringing our attention to groups that work with Indigenous women, the majority of non-profits, social organizations and informal activist groups in Chiang Mai focus either on communities from Burma, Thai communities, cross-border or international work. It is a somewhat false distinction to draw a line between "Burma" and "Thai" groups in Chiang Mai, in particular when talking about an Indigenous context. It is important to understand the Thai-Burma border in historical context as a colonial construct imposed in the aftermath of World War Two. As Chayan Vaddhanabhuti states, "prior to [World War Two] in Thailand the border

was not conceived of as a static or a concrete border. The borderline was imposed by the colonial powers” (2011, 316). The result of this colonially imposed border has been “something that prevented connections between the countries in the region, preventing the movement of people and preventing the movement of goods despite the fact that people, who live in the borderland, share the same culture or a similar ethnic background and also trade with each other” (Vaddhanabhuti 2011, 316).

For many Indigenous groups, the border still is a porous concept and Indigenous peoples find ways to cross this border for work, trade, life and to see family, with or without official sanction from the state (Vaddhanabhuti 2011, 319–20). In addition, many Indigenous groups including Karen, Lisu, Tai, Akha and Hmong communities have family and belong to communities on both sides of the border (Vaddhanabhuti 2011, 319–20). Furthermore, many refugees from Burma were born and/or raised in Thailand and have various forms of Thai citizenship or ID cards (Foundation 2019). Chapter Five of my dissertation will go into further detail on trans-Indigeneity and Indigenous transnationalism and how Indigenous women activists live trans-border lives and build transnational connections and partnerships in their work.

While the border *is* a construct, there is still both overlap and distinction when talking about Indigenous women’s groups from Burma and Thailand, both in terms of the issues they face and which governmental authorities their advocacy work is directed towards. In terms of ‘Burma’ groups, while groups such as the Women’s League of Burma (WLB) have focused their campaigning in relation to the Burmese military junta, other groups such as the Shan Women’s

Action Network (SWAN) have advocated for the rights of Tai women in both Thailand and Burma, particularly given the large number of Tai people living in Northern Thailand.¹

Women's groups from Shan State, Burma based in Thailand, both past and present, tend to focus on a combination of leadership and training of young activists, research and documentation of women's rights issues, and advocacy and campaigns. The issues they work on are intersectional and involve addressing gender and patriarchy in communities and at leadership levels, sexual violence, fighting against the military dictatorship, and campaigning to stop large scale-development projects such as dams in Shan State that disproportionately impact and displace Indigenous women (Laungaramsri 2006; Shan Women's Action Network 2002; Women's League of Burma 2016). By necessity, none of these groups work on singular issues because, as Audre Lorde stated, women who experience multiple forms of oppression "do not live single issue lives" (2007, 138). Indigenous women's groups from Burma work on multiple issues, including gender, patriarchy, the environment, land and peacebuilding, because all of these topics are connected and impact their lives.

Many of these groups from Burma were set up by the '88 generation' in the 1990s as student activists fled Burma following the military crackdown on the 1988 pro-democracy movement (Olivius 2019, 762). Most of the Burma-focused groups are inherently transborder, working on both sides of the Thai-Burma border, although a significant number moved back to basing themselves inside Burma after the 2011 democratic reforms in part due to pressure from foundations and donors (Olivius 2019, 762). However, in yet another disruption and turn of events, since the 2021 coup, many of their members had to go into hiding in Burma and/or have

¹ While WLB and SWAN have been based in Chiang Mai at various points in the past, I make no claim here as to where any group from Burma is currently headquartered in the post-coup environment. Many Burma groups are currently working either transnationally, remotely from various countries, or in multiple locations across Thailand.

returned to exile in Thailand again. In just three months from June-August 2022, I met with over a dozen activist colleagues from Burma who had recently returned to Thailand for security purposes; the actual number is unknown but likely in the thousands who are currently outside Burma.

As well as Burma-focused groups, groups such as the Indigenous Women's Network of Thailand (IWNT) and Inter Mountain Peoples Education and Culture Thailand (IMPECT) tend to work primarily in Thailand and with Indigenous peoples on the Thai side of the border (Indigenous Women Network of Thailand and Manushya Foundation 2019; Morton and Baird 2019, 15–16). However, again, it should be noted that many of these Indigenous communities are also connected with Burma and neighboring countries and have families, ties and historical connections outside of the Thai nation-state boundary (Vaddhanabhuti 2011, 319–20). IMPECT focuses on Indigenous cultural protection, land rights issues, campaigning for Indigenous rights in Thailand, and building networks of solidarity between Indigenous peoples across Thailand and regionally. One of the most significant issues that they work on is campaigning for access to citizenship as well as land rights for Indigenous peoples in Thailand.

IWNT, as an Indigenous women's network, focuses on leadership and empowerment of Indigenous women in Thailand, supporting Indigenous women to run for local leadership positions, and documenting Indigenous women's rights violations and concerns, especially access to healthcare, statelessness and access to citizenship.² In addition, fighting to defend their ancestral lands is one of the most salient issues that Indigenous women in Thai-focused groups work on. Indigenous women in Northern Thailand have faced numerous threats of eviction and displacement which they have fought back against. This is due to national parks which restrict

² Please see Chapter Two for more details on both organizations and interviews with women who work with them.

Indigenous peoples' access to their lands, as well as proposed large-scale development projects including dams, agribusiness, mining and tourism projects which the Thai government has attempted to impose on their lands (Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact 2013, 3-5; Indigenous Women Network of Thailand and Manushya Foundation 2019, 49-50).

In addition to local organizations, there are also several international and regional organizations based in Chiang Mai that are led by or work with Indigenous women. These include the Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact, Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development, International Women's Partnership for Peace and Justice, Mekong Youth Assembly, Mekong Women for Peace, and EarthRights International (Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact 2013; Morton and Baird 2019; Kittisenee 2011). Next, I will detail several of these groups and the work they do.

Regional Groups in Chiang Mai Working with Indigenous Women

Mekong Women for Peace: Mekong Women for Peace is a transnational network of Indigenous and Women of Color activists founded in 2014 and based in Chiang Mai, Thailand. Our work focuses on building the leadership of young Indigenous and women of color activists working at the intersection of environmental, gender and peace/military issues. Mekong Women for Peace was founded by a transnational team of young women activists from various countries across Asia and around the world. Our main activities currently are organizing trainings and leadership development programs for Indigenous and ethnic minority young women activists in the Mekong region. Mekong Women for Peace's network is the main home of this dissertation research project.

Mekong Youth Assembly: Mekong Youth Assembly was founded by Mueda Nawanat, a Karen woman lawyer and activist who has been instrumental in the fight for stateless peoples' rights in

Thailand. Their work focuses on “ecological child rights,” specifically looking at how dams and large-scale development projects impact youth in grassroots, Indigenous and minority communities disproportionately.

EarthRights International: ERI works at the intersection of human rights and environmental justice, specifically focusing on how large-scale development projects such as coal power plants, dams, and nuclear plants impact Indigenous and ethnic minority communities across the Mekong region. They work on leadership training for activists, legal rights defence for Indigenous communities engaged in environmental struggles, and supporting communities campaigning against large-scale development projects. ERI was founded in Chiang Mai, Thailand and now has offices in Washington D.C. as well as Peru.

Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact: Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact is a regional alliance of forty-six Indigenous organizations across Asia. They work on regional campaigns on issues including climate change, Indigenous human rights and large-scale development issues. They also run programs to provide support and connect Indigenous women, youth and human rights defenders across the region in their network (Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact 2014).

Understanding Chiang Mai as an Activist Hub

Chiang Mai is well known among many activists in Asia as a key hub of transnational organizing and activism in Asia. I argue here that this is due to multiple intersecting factors, including Chiang Mai’s status as a populist/left wing region in Thailand, location as a site of Lanna and Indigenous identity and resistance, cost of living and lifestyle, and the political opportunity offered in Thailand to engage in certain types of activism.

First, Chiang Mai is a well-known “Red Shirt” stronghold, as the supporters of Thaksin Shinawatra and his family are known. Thaksin Shinawatra is the former Prime Minister of Thailand who was known for his populist policies including the 30 Baht (approximately one USD) healthcare program and who was ousted in a military coup in 2006. Thaksin’s hometown of San Kamphaeng lies less than ten miles from Chiang Mai and there are many people in Chiang Mai who support his policies (Phongpaichit and Baker 2008). As well as the “Red Shirt” movement, many activists of various left wing and progressive political ideologies choose to live or are based in Chiang Mai. This progressive and activist influence can be seen in the departments of Chiang Mai University (CMU) such as the Research Center for Social Development and Women’s Studies Department.

I met with Tom, an alumni of CMU, NGO worker and long-time friend at one of Chiang Mai’s numerous third wave coffee shops. As someone born and raised in Chiang Mai, unlike many activists in the city, he shared his perspective on how CMU in particular had shaped Chiang Mai’s activist trajectory:

There were a group of professors at Chiang Mai University, that's very active in social activism and scholar, they used to have a group called Midnight University, these are professors in my university but doing the midnight because they said something about coming out of darkness... Yeah, but they would go, like when farmers or land rights activist got arrested, they would go, these professors bailed them out or speak up for issues of Indigenous people, land, land rights issues, dams. So...most of them retired now. But I think that that's what historically help built why Chiang Mai has so many of these NGOs (Tom 2022).

Activist scholars at CMU provided support and training via the Midnight University and other platforms under Faculty of Social Sciences from the late 1990s which helped build strong networks of activist and grassroots movements in Northern Thailand. In addition, as well as the presence of Chiang Mai University, it is also important to note that Chiang Mai is located in the heart of the former Lanna kingdom. The Lanna, or Khon Muang people are a culturally distinct

group, separate from Central Thailand, with distinct culture, language and foods (Evrard and Leepreecha 2009, 305). This cultural distinction, as well as years of Thai-ification policies, have created a division between Central Thai and Bangkokians, often seen as the elite, and those in Northern Thailand. This distinction, as well as Chiang Mai's reputation as a center of art and activism, has helped create a culture of anti-authoritarianism in Chiang Mai. Tom shared about his experience being born and raised in Chiang Mai among a culture of activism and resistance:

Historically, Chiang Mai were quite rebellious. The first ever rebels against Bangkok...were the farmers of Chiang Mai, in history they were rebels. 150 years [ago], right when Bangkok colonized the other provinces. So, there was some history there but I don't think it's directly connected. But as a person born and raised here, I feel like, the spirit of that. I myself, I grew up since high school experiencing a lot of these activism. I was part of [the movement against]...the government plan to build a cable car to Doi Suthep. On hindsight it might not be a bad idea compared to the number of cars that getting there [laughter]. I don't know. But at that time, it was not appropriate because it'd be built on sacred site. It'd destroy the biodiversity...but yeah, there was so many locally strong, and it's not just Chiangmai born people, and people from Bangkok and others who fell in love with Chiang Mai and join forces. So that's just my personal experience. I'm here today because of that experience, and it was a success, there's no cable car...Yeah. I remember one of my first trip to Bangkok is to protest this similar project...So maybe that's another reason, like the activism that's already in Chiang Mai...these people, they're not doing like regional or international advocacy activism. But the spirit is there, I think (Tom 2022).

As Tom states, the community-led campaign against the proposed cable car project on Doi Suthep was an example of the "rebellious" spirit of Northern Thai and Khon Muang people in Chiang Mai against Bangkok rule. As well as the majority Khon Muang people, the region surrounding Chiang Mai is also the location of many Indigenous groups' homelands, including the Tai, Kachin, Akha, Hmong, Karen, Lahu and Lisu, among many others (Morton and Baird 2019, 12). An overlapping group are the thousands of Indigenous peoples from Burma living and working in the region, many of whom are from the neighboring region of Shan State (Laungaramsri 2006, 51). The presence of so many Indigenous groups in Chiang Mai is another

important reason why Indigenous rights groups in particular have chosen to base themselves here, most notably Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact (AIPP) as well as several Thai Indigenous rights groups such as IMPECT.

As well as the above reasons, Chiang Mai also offers several highly practical factors that full time activists must take into consideration. For regional and cross border groups, renting an office is relatively inexpensive compared to a larger city such as Bangkok, Yangon, or Tokyo. At the same time, Chiang Mai is a large enough city that groups can operate with less scrutiny, compared to being based in smaller towns or cities in Thailand. High speed Wi-Fi is available with little censorship (excluding topics related to the Thai monarchy), unlike in China or Burma. The cost of living for food, accommodations and nights out is low for those living on a meagre activist salary. And not insignificantly, it is also an enjoyable place to live for many people; even those who have dedicated their lives to fighting the patriarchy and authoritarian regimes like to have fun on occasion too. In Chiang Mai, there are numerous coffee shops to have meetings in, affordable and relaxed bars and restaurants to run into other activist friends, and a sense of community and camaraderie amongst groups working together for the same goals.

The final and perhaps most important factor that Chiang Mai provides is the political opportunity. Chiang Mai offers the ability to operate with relatively less harassment from government authorities for activists. Groups can organize meetings, workshops and trainings without a government official showing up to monitor, as would happen in Burma, Laos or Vietnam. However, for groups from Burma, while they may experience less harassment and danger operating in Thailand than inside Burma at this time, there are still occasional threats of crackdowns, due to the cooperation between the Thai and Burmese militaries since the post 2014 and 2021 coups respectively. In a recent case, three journalists and two activists from the

Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB) were arrested in Chiang Mai on charges of illegal entry after fleeing Burma following the military coup (Tostevin 2021). In their case, they were relocated to a third country and were not deported back to Burma. However, it is still relatively possible to operate in Chiang Mai for Burmese groups as long as they remain under the radar.

One anonymous interviewee from another Burmese organization discussed the case of the DVB journalists, stating in their opinion that the reason they been arrested was because they rented an office in a quiet residential neighborhood and had been noisy, thus disturbing the neighbors who reported them to the police. In their opinion, the DVB journalists were certainly not to blame for being arrested, but it would be better to operate in places in the city with fewer prying eyes or neighbors likely to make a complaint. In most cases, Burmese groups can operate discreetly and under the radar this way, although there is still the fear of periodic crackdowns. Despite these sporadic arrests, dozens of activist groups from Burma have operated on and off in Chiang Mai and various locations across Northern Thailand for the past three decades since the 1988 revolution and 2021 military coup and are usually able to do so fairly reliably as long as they avoid straying into Thai politics.

I discussed more with Tom here about the ways that activist groups are able to operate in Chiang Mai despite the authoritarian context and military rule:

Hannah: It's surprising that Thailand has been a refuge for NGOS for so long, even with the military government.

Tom: Yeah. Yeah. It's been, for a long time, it has been a place where groups function.

Hannah: Do you think they [the military] know that and just don't care?

Tom: Yeah. They know that and [long silence] the level of tolerations because Thailand politics is like, it's not like always military, it's back and forth. And it's not the most threat, maybe they perceive.

And the groups have been, if you noticed, if something about Thailand, the NGOs who make statements, would not be the one who based in Thailand. It would be their branches in other countries. Right? Yeah. I don't know. There could be many reasons...

Hannah: Instead of, kind of like, as long as you avoid, yeah, it's like an unspoken agreement....

Tom: Exactly. There are certain things they know not to cross [long silence]. Sorry, I don't know if that answers your question [laughs] (Tom 2022).

Looking back at our conversation, I can see that the things we “know not to cross” even extends to our speech with each other; we both know what things we are talking about, but avoid stating them out loud; namely, any activism in particular that targets the Thai monarchy, or activism against the military junta in Thailand. NGOs in Chiang Mai absorb this knowledge of the unspoken agreement and avoid direct confrontation with either the Thai monarchy or military; in this way, they are able to operate with a certain amount of freedom despite Thailand's authoritarian political context.

Due to the reasons discussed above, including the influence of activist scholars at Chiang Mai University, a history of authoritarian resistance, the presence of numerous Indigenous communities, proximity to the Thai-Burma border, affordable cost of living, and political opportunity, Chiang Mai has become one of the prominent centers of a “community of resistance” (Davis 2011) in Southeast Asia and beyond. In almost all of these groups, Indigenous women are present, either working for, or as the leaders of a number of these local, cross border and international organizations. However, their presence goes largely unrecognized in the literature on Indigenous peoples, Indigenous feminisms and feminism in Asia, as the next section will discuss.

Indigenous? Feminists? The Contradictions, Confusions and Opportunities of Indigenous and Feminist Frameworks in Northern Thailand

As the previous section has demonstrated, Indigenous women are at the forefront of numerous social activist groups in Chiang Mai, Thailand. However, when we attempt to bridge the reality of what is happening on the ground with relevant literature from Southeast Asia studies, Asian feminisms and Indigenous feminisms, numerous contradictions, confusions, and also opportunities arise. I find that literature which acknowledges the presence and leadership of Indigenous women activists in Northern Thailand is limited in general across all fields, and there is still not enough research that even recognizes Indigenous women activists in Asia as a whole. Therefore, the purpose of the rest of this chapter is to consider how to bridge these fields and create space for Indigenous women's activism in Asia in the literature.

First, in reviewing the most relevant regional literature, I find that Indigenous women's activism in Northern Thailand has been largely sidelined by regional scholars from Thai and Southeast Asian studies; while this is less the case with Burma studies scholars, these rarely engage with the concepts of Indigeneity or ethnicity when profiling Indigenous activists.

To understand this sidelining, I engage with the concepts "Indigenous" and "feminism" separately next. I discuss here that "Indigenous" is a contested term in mainland Southeast Asia, not only at the governmental level, but also among activists. Next, I discuss the term "feminism" and its lack of uptake among Indigenous women's rights activists in Northern Thailand. While Indigenous women rarely use the term, their work in the field of gender quality and women's rights also goes under-acknowledged by self-identified feminists in the region, who are most commonly from the dominant Thai and Burman ethnic groups.

In the third and final section of this chapter, I will then discuss the field of Indigenous feminisms and consider how bridging these fields may create a conceptual grounding for

understanding the lived experiences of Indigenous women activists in Chiang Mai as well as other regions of Asia. I assert that taking Indigenous women's activism and stories into account as equally valid forms of knowledge and experiences is an essential task for Southeast Asian studies and women's studies in Asia. This is important regardless of whether or not Indigenous women self-identify using the terms Indigenous or feminist.

Indigenous Women in Thai, Burma and Southeast Asia Studies

Indigenous women's activism in mainland Southeast Asia is a particularly under-researched field. I will first discuss here the relevant literature from Southeast Asian, Thai and Burma studies.

My research project asserts that women, especially Indigenous women are “always present if we look for them” as Noenoe Silva states (2004, 7). In particular, we need to consider the persistent problem of scholarship and work that falsely depicts Asian women as invisible, silent and/or as victims (Fujiwara and Roshanravan 2018). My research counteracts the previous tendency towards invisibilization by putting Indigenous Asian women and scholarship at the center of this work. Furthermore, it insists that research must be informed by the actual lives, issues, and experiences of Asian and Indigenous women. As Lynn Fujiwara and Shireen Roshanravan note, “political projects of knowledge generation are liberatory only if they are informed by on-the-ground struggle” (2018, 26).

When we consider the “politics of citation” that Noelani Goodyear-Ka'ōpua points out (2015, 6), it has been important to me to try to find literature from the Mekong region, Thailand, and Burma about Indigenous women's transnational activism, and ideally that is written by Indigenous women. In general, I have found that the majority of sources published in academic writing on these topics are written by white, Western authors, with some pieces written by ethnic

majority Thai or Burman scholars, and few by Indigenous scholars, a fact that I hope will change in coming years.

There is a strong need to “Asianize” Asian studies as a number of scholars have written about (Dirlik 2005; Leong 2011; Sato and Sonoda 2021) and I would add, to genderize and Indigenize Asian and Southeast Asian studies. So much of the writings about Indigenous women in Asia are written by Western authors or ethnic majority writers from the region, with few Indigenous women published in academic settings, especially from Thailand and Burma. For example, there is a strong body of work on Indigenous peoples and Indigenous social movements in Northern Thailand (e.g. Baird, Leepreecha, and Yangcheepsutjarit 2017; Leepreecha 2019; Morton and Baird 2019) but none of these works engage a gender or feminist perspective.

On the other hand, works can be found which have a gender or feminist perspective focusing on Thai and Burmese women’s activism; however they almost all focus on ethnic majority women, and/or do not focus on ethnicity or Indigeneity. One major work on feminism in the Mekong, *Women's Movements in Asia: Feminisms and Transnational Activism* by Mina Roces and Louise Edwards covers issues of transnational women’s activism in Thailand and Vietnam. However, it does not include any studies of Indigenous or minority women-led transnationalism (Roces and Edwards 2010). Similarly, *Critical Chatter: Women and Human Rights in South East Asia* includes interviews with women human rights activists from across Southeast Asia. While this includes some interviews with ethnic minority women activists, neither Indigeneity nor ethnicity are addressed in their work (Lambert, Pickering, and Alder 2003). In Thailand, Virada Somsawasi and Kathleen Corrigan’s (2005) work portrays stories of women environmental activists in Thailand and Amara Pongsapich (2007) focuses on

movements in Thailand for abortion, LGBTQ rights and towards women's political empowerment. However, again, none of these works address the role of Indigenous women.

Meanwhile, more literature can be found focusing on the role of Indigenous women in women's activism in Burma, as well as in exile in Thailand (e.g. Olivius 2019; Olivius and Hedström 2019; O'Kane 2007; Laungaramsri 2006), although this literature is not written by Indigenous women themselves. These works also rarely focus on transnational or regional Indigenous women's activism, with the exception of Laungaramsri whose work focuses on Tai women's activism on the Thai-Burma border.

As the previous paragraphs have demonstrated, Southeast Asia, Thai, and Burma studies are all lacking in scholarship both about, and written by Indigenous women from the region. One article on transnational Indigenous women's activism in the Mekong with an Indigenous woman co-author is "Fostering a Grassroots Women's Movement through Feminist Leadership on the Burma-India Border" co-written by Cheery Zahau, a Chin woman activist from Burma and Ginger Norwood from the U.S. They are both well-known activists in the Mekong region and are some of the few to publish their work in an academic journal setting. Zahau and Norwood critique a rights-based approach to feminism and describe some of the challenges for transnational feminism in their work, in particular issues of power and funding as well as making feminist concepts culturally appropriate in local contexts (Norwood and Zahau 2011).

Other pieces written by Indigenous women, specifically from Thailand and Burma, can be found primarily in non-academic sources. This large body of work that Indigenous women have produced outside of academia, including NGO reports, stories and oral histories, need to be given equal weight and consideration as valid forms of knowledge as the Western-dominated 'canon' of Southeast Asia studies. These include hundreds of NGO reports, documentaries and

story collections published by groups including the Indigenous Women's Network of Thailand, Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact, Women's League of Burma, EarthRights International, Shan Women's Action Network, Karen Women's Organization and the Kachin Women's Association of Thailand, to only name a few (Indigenous Women Network of Thailand and Manushya Foundation 2019; Shan Women's Action Network 2002; Women's League of Burma 2002; Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact 2014). These comprise the vast majority of the writing published by Indigenous women in the region and therefore are extremely important sources of knowledge that have been written by Indigenous women themselves about their lives and experiences.

Throughout this dissertation, I use reports written by Indigenous women's organizations extensively as secondary sources of knowledge, in particular to explain the contexts and challenges that Indigenous women in the region encounter. However, it should be noted that as these NGO reports are primarily written in an advocacy context, their purpose is to focus on highlighting problems and challenges in the region. In order to also highlight strengths and strategies, I draw upon stories and testimonies from Indigenous women activists from the interviews and group discussions I conducted for this research. In this way, my research seeks to foreground Indigenous women activists' multiple forms of written and oral sources of knowledge.

Neither Indigenous, Nor Feminist? Contested Terminology in Northern Thailand

In this section, I will next engage with the terms Indigenous and feminism and discuss their applicability and usage in the context of Indigenous women's activism in Northern Thailand. I will first start by discussing the concept of Indigeneity in Asia and why it has been a contested concept, both in the literature and among Indigenous activists on the ground.

Indigeneity in Asia

The concept of Indigeneity is widely contested in Asia, where the dynamics of colonialism and settlement are not as clear-cut as settler colonial states in Turtle Island/North America, Hawai'i, Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand. Taking advantage of this ambiguity, many Southeast Asian governments have espoused the “salt water theory” which claims that colonization did not occur in Asia as there was never any crossing of an ocean in order to settle a place (Baird 2016, 501). Thus, many Southeast Asian governments, including in Thailand and Burma, do not recognize the existence of Indigenous peoples and/or claim that all peoples living in their region are Indigenous (Indigenous Women Network of Thailand and Manushya Foundation 2019, 13; Morton and Baird 2019, 30).

To counteract the “salt water” narrative, some Indigenous groups in Asia have advocated that Indigeneity in Asia should be applied to not only “first peoples” but also “colonized peoples” in general (Baird, Leepreecha, and Yangcheepsutjarit 2017, 546). However, Indigenous authors such as Jeff Corntassel question defining Indigeneity through colonization, pointing out that there are Indigenous peoples who are not living under colonial rule and/or hold political power in their territories such as Fijians and East Timorese peoples (2003, 80). Furthermore, Indigenous peoples’ identity and existence should not be predicated on colonizers or colonialism. In this specific context in Southeast Asia, it seems the intention in using experiences of colonization to define Indigeneity would be to exclude dominant/colonizer groups that do have ancestral connections and claims to their lands from claiming Indigenous status such as Thai and Burmans. In addition, using colonization rather than first settlement to define Indigeneity would allow for the inclusion of groups in Asia that have been subject to forced relocation by colonizers and are not living on their ancestral homelands.

Furthermore, Indigeneity in Asia, as in many parts of the world, continues to be a fluid and contested context. Rather than focusing on colonization, other Indigenous groups in Asia, such as the Coalition of Indigenous Peoples in Burma/Myanmar, focus on self-identification, as well as the criteria of “non-dominance in the national context, historical continuity, ancestral territories, and cultural values” (Coalition of Indigenous Peoples in Myanmar/Burma 2015, 2). They also note that there is a need in Burma, similarly to many countries in Southeast Asia, for more dialogue and clarity about the meaning of Indigeneity in the local context (Coalition of Indigenous Peoples in Myanmar/Burma 2015, 3).

In the case of states in Asia, the primary motivation for denying Indigeneity is due to the fact that legal recognition of groups as Indigenous comes with collective rights for self-determination and sovereignty over Indigenous land and usage according to the United Nations (Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact 2013, 4-5; Baird, Leepreecha, and Yangcheepsutjarit 2017, 545). While some countries in Asia have recognized Indigenous peoples’ rights to varying degrees, including Japan, the Philippines, Taiwan, Cambodia and Nepal, this has not occurred in any of the other Mekong region countries, including Burma and Thailand. Although the Thai and Myanmar regimes voted in favor of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), it is not legally binding. Both Thailand and Burma refuse to recognize the existence of any Indigenous peoples in their territories, and instead claim that all of their citizens are Indigenous (Coalition of Indigenous Peoples in Myanmar/Burma 2015, 3; Baird 2019).

While the Thai constitution does provide the right for chattiphan (ethnic groups) to live according to their “traditional culture, custom, and ways of life” (Thai Constitution of 2017 2017, 21), this is not followed in practice. There is currently no Thai legislation that recognizes the existence and terminology of *chon phao pheun muang* (Indigenous peoples) or Indigenous

rights (Prachatai 2021). Indigenous activists have proposed legislation to address this in the Thai parliament in 2022 and there is some hope that the situation may change in the future towards a greater recognition of Indigenous peoples' rights (Editorial team 2022). The constitution of Burma/Myanmar does not mention Indigenous peoples or any type of collective land ownership or Indigenous rights either; the term *htanay taing yin tha* (Indigenous peoples) is not recognized or included (Coalition of Indigenous Peoples in Burma/Myanmar 2020, 3).

As well as at the governmental level, among activists in both Burma and Thailand, there are differing understandings and usages of the term Indigenous, *htanay taing yin tha*, or *chon phao pheun muang* as well. Among activists from Burma working in international/transnational settings, in my experience, the term "Indigenous" is less often used in favor of ethnic, ethnic nationality, ethnic minority (which is also a disliked term by some), or most commonly, just the name of ones' own group. I discussed with Mai, an activist from the Tai ethnic group her thoughts on the term Indigenous among activists from Burma:

Hannah: Oh yeah, I have one question I was curious about, because you use the word Indigenous, right?

Mai: Mmmhmm.

Hannah: And in Thailand I hear many people say, Indigenous, but I don't hear many people from Burma use this word, like, why do you think that is, or, do you think most people they will call themselves as Indigenous if they're...Shan or Karen?...Sometimes I don't know whether to use the word Indigenous or not, you know, it is the right word or minority or what do you think is the best word?

Mai: Yeah, it's quite interesting to me as well, like in Thailand...like the country around the region, they use, like [call] themselves Indigenous, but in Myanmar we use our ethnic, because we are not an Indigenous group, right?

Hannah: So, why not?

Mai: That is, I'm also, like, have a question about that [laughs]. I don't know, maybe just the meaning of the word, we think ourselves is not a small group because...in Myanmar

we have more than 135 Indigenous groups and then we are a part of that group. But in Thailand the majority is...in the urban area. It's quite an interesting question [laughter].

Hannah: You think people think Indigenous means like a small group...?

Mai: Yeah, minority...we don't even call ourselves like a minority (Mai and Saekue 2022).

As I will discuss later, as with the term feminism, I generally avoided using terminology not commonly used among activists such as Indigenous or feminism unless they were brought up by interviewees themselves. Otherwise, I found it created a sense of distance and exacerbated the potential power imbalance between myself and those I had invited for an interview. However, as Mai used the term Indigenous herself, we discussed its meaning, and she stated a position I have also heard in informal conversations with activists over the years, namely that they consider the term Indigenous to apply to smaller ethnic groups but are ambiguous about whether it applies to larger ethnic groups such as the Tai. This is in part due to the fact that Tai people are one of the largest ethnic groups in Burma and originally would have had the right to secede and form their own independent nation-state under the post-colonial Panglong Agreement and 1948 Constitution (Graceffo 2019).

Ambivalence toward and/or rejection of the term Indigenous has also been the position in the past of some of the larger ethnic armed organizations such as the Kachin Independence Army (KIA). The situation is in part caused by the fact that since 1989, the military government has recognized 135 groups as "Ethnic Nationalities" who are accorded citizenship and certain rights to political participation. This is how groups such as the Rohingya, who are not listed as an official Ethnic Nationality are denied citizenship. Some groups and armed organizations such as the KIA have expressed concern that claiming the status of Indigenous peoples could mean risking losing their status and rights as Ethnic Nationalities (Morton 2017, 5).

However, there is no one monolith and Indigenous is not a fixed term; uptake of the term has increased among activists, particularly in Chiang Mai, due to the influence of groups such as Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact. Keeping in mind that all of the alternative terminology, such as ethnic, ethnic nationality or ethnic minority, is also contested and is problematic for various reasons, throughout my dissertation I use the names of peoples' ethnic groups first, and then also use the terms Indigenous, ethnic group, and ethnic nationality to refer to broader coalitions or groups of people, in order to reflect the multiple layers of terminology that are actually used in the region.

In contrast to Burma, the term Indigenous is more widely used among activists in Thailand, especially those from groups such as the Akha, Hmong, Karen and Lisu. Chiang Mai has become well known among Indigenous groups as a center for Indigenous peoples' organizing in Asia (Morton and Baird 2019, 15). Prasit Leepreecha, a Hmong scholar, has argued that a process of "becoming Indigenous" has occurred among groups in Thailand, where groups have increasingly identified with the term Indigenous since the mid-2000s as young Indigenous activists made connections with the international Indigenous peoples' movement (Leepreecha 2019, 34).

Due to the strength of Indigenous peoples' organizing, some strides have begun to occur towards recognizing Indigenous rights in Thailand. The government has taken steps to increase access to citizenship for the hundreds of thousands of Indigenous stateless peoples living in Thailand, although there are still many who cannot access citizenship depending on their country of birth or lack of documentation such as a birth certificate (Chandran 2020). In addition, since 2021, the Network of Indigenous Peoples in Thailand has proposed the Council of Indigenous Peoples in Thailand bill, which would protect Indigenous peoples' rights to land, spiritual and

cultural practices (Prachatai 2021). As well as their proposed bill, there are another four bills currently under consideration by the cabinet, however they appear to be currently stuck in bureaucratic proceedings. Nonetheless, these are significant steps towards Indigenous rights in Thailand which have been made in recent years by mobilizing the language and rights of Indigenous identity (Editorial team 2022).

While the term Indigenous is more embraced by activists from some groups such as the Akha and Hmong, who tend to be minorities in the numerical sense in the regions they live, it is rarely used to apply to Khon Muang (the majority group of Northern Thailand, whose distinct culture and language has experienced colonization from Central Thailand). And in Burma and in Thailand, it seems most unclear among Tai activists, who make up one of the largest minority groups in both Northern Thailand and Burma. I discussed with Hseng, a Tai longtime NGO worker on Thai-Burma issues who is in her thirties about her thoughts on Indigeneity and Tai people:

Hseng: So that's why I think they [IMPECT, an Indigenous rights group in Thailand] work with, in different group na, they try to claim their rights. But for Indigenous people, I think their case is better than us, because they are original from Thailand, right? (Hseng 2022a).

I notice here Hseng's use of the term "they" to describe Indigenous people, and ask her why some Tai people consider themselves as Indigenous, whereas she doesn't describe herself that way:

Hannah: This is what I don't understand, cause some people are like, some of them [in IMPECT] are Shan, right? And you guys are also Shan? So it depends if you're born in Thailand? Or what is the difference?

Hseng: Mmmhmm. Actually, they don't accept Shan before na, in the past na they don't accept as Indigenous. Even, also they don't accept as refugee. That's why we have no choice, we have to be only migrant. Like that, the situation like that. But after like,

many Shan settle down here and then they live here long time, let's say thirty years, this type of people can get Thai citizen (Hseng 2022a).

Because many Tai people are stateless or undocumented, it is difficult to estimate the number of Tai people living in Northern Thailand, but some sources put it at around one million (Wansai 2022). Tai people are not recognized as refugees or as Indigenous peoples by the Thai government, as Hseng explains, so they most often have no choice but to come to Thailand as migrant workers or without documentation. However, despite their lack of governmental recognition, Indigenous rights groups in Thailand such as IMPECT recognize the Tai as an Indigenous group and have Tai members and leadership. However, given that these groups function using the Thai language, it would be difficult for Tai people who are not raised in Thailand and fluent in Thai to join these groups.

While the English term for Indigenous has been discussed here, as that is the term used when working in regional and cross border groups, naming and terminology around Indigeneity is also complicated and multifaceted in Thai and Burmese. The terms for Indigenous in Thai and Burmese are both relatively recent translations by Indigenous rights groups and are not yet widely used or understood outside of a number of rights groups.

“Hill tribe” or *chao khao*, which is used by the Thai government and is the most commonly used term to refer to Indigenous peoples in Thai, is not used by Indigenous rights groups due to its negative connotations. Instead, the term *chon phao pheun muang* is preferred by Indigenous activists. This is a relatively new term developed as a translation of the term Indigenous. However, one survey of Lua, Khon Muang, Hmong and Lisu community members in Thailand found that the term *chon phao pheun muang* is not widely understood outside of Indigenous rights organizations, with most community members being unsure of the meaning and whether it applied to them or not (Baird, Leepreecha, and Yangcheepsutjarit 2017).

In Burma, the military regime and 2008 constitution only recognize the term *taing yin tha* (national races), which refers to eight of the “national races” (Kachin, Karen, Karenni, Chin, Mon, Arakan, Tai and Bamar) recognized by the regime as present in Burma prior to British colonialism, and includes the majority Bamar ethnic group; it excludes many ethnic groups who do not fit under these categories including the Naga, Tavoy and Rohingya. The term for Indigenous peoples developed by Indigenous rights groups in Burma is *htanay taing yin tha*, which translates as “original dwellers who have strong ancestral ties to the present territories” although again there is still some confusion about exactly who this applies to, at least among the activists that I have interviewed. The Coalition of Indigenous Peoples in Myanmar/Burma acknowledges these issues, stating that “there is a need for a national-level dialogue to identify and recognize indigenous peoples in Myanmar/Burma, based on the international concept and the UNDRIP” (Coalition of Indigenous Peoples in Myanmar/Burma 2015, 3).

Despite the lack of consensus around the term Indigenous or *chon phao phuen muang* or *htanay taing yin tha* and differing levels of interest or usage of the term by activists, it is still a significant term that has been employed by many groups, especially in Thailand, but also increasingly in Burma, as a way of enacting agency, building connections across borders, and practicing self-determination. As Charlotte Eubanks and Pasang Yangjee Sherpa note, perhaps the better question for Indigenous studies in Asia “is not ‘who is Indigenous?’ but rather ‘what can Indigeneity do?’ for specific people living in a specific, contested space” (Eubanks and Sherpa 2018, xii).

In the context of Okinawa, Megumi Chibana’s work similarly aims to “move away from exploring indigeneity through identity politics of Okinawa/ns (which questions whether they are indigenous or not, for instance)” (2018a, 137–38). Instead, Chibana focuses on studying “local

agency to examine how, at which point, and to what extent, Okinawans have translated, adapted, and embraced various aspects of ‘indigeneity’ for the purpose of practicing self-determination” (2018a, 138). It is important to note that even if the term Indigenous is not widely used among activists in mainland Southeast Asia, there are many translating and embracing “aspects of ‘Indigeneity’”; their works should not be sidelined even if they are not using the term Indigenous to describe themselves (Chibana 2018a, 138).

Feminism in Asia

Having discussed the “Indigenous” component of Indigenous feminisms, I will next turn to the term feminism and its usage and applicability (as well as lack thereof) in Asia and particularly among Indigenous women activists in Chiang Mai.

With the exception of prominent South Asian feminists, the field of Asian feminisms is fairly nascent, compared to other fields within Third World and Women of Color studies such as Asian-American and Indigenous feminisms. Asian feminists such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Kamla Bhasin, Chao-Ju Chen, and Kumari Jayawardena have contributed towards building a body of scholarship within Third World feminism which focuses more specifically on the experience of women located in Asia. Within this field, much of the work is dominated by East Asian and South Asian writers, with mainland Southeast Asia under-represented. Reflecting this under-representation, I also noted during my visits to the Women’s Studies Center at Chiang Mai University that the curriculum taught is mainly from Western women authors, with Mohanty being a notable exception.

Asian feminists have made important contributions in repudiating Western feminists’ claims of universalization as well as deconstructing the myth that feminism originated in the West. For example, Kumari Jayawardena’s ground-breaking work *Feminism and Nationalism in*

the Third World traces genealogies of feminism in Asia and demonstrates that women have been organizing in Asia vociferously since at least the nineteenth century on issues as diverse as decolonization, national independence, women's right to vote, and labor rights. Many of these women's movements included anti-colonial struggles in occupied countries including India, Egypt, and Korea (Jayawardena 1986). Going further back, Kamla Bhasin points to 'foremothers' of Asian feminism such as Akka Mahadevi (a philosopher and poet from the 12th century) and Kartini, a feminist icon and princess from Java who fought for the right of women to be educated in the 19th century (Bhasin 2012, 1).

In the Thai/Burma border context, there were also many early Asian feminists who have been under-acknowledged. Women in Burma were leaders in the anti-British colonial movement of the 1920s, including prominent figures such as Daw San (Ikeya 2013). While Thailand was never formally colonized by a Western power, women were also active in the women's rights movement in the early 20th century, including through publishing *Kulsatree* and *Ying Thai*, which were print media that discussed women's rights, labor issues, gender and patriarchy (Buranajoenkij 2017, 4). Women were also active leaders in the labor rights movements of the late 1800s and early 1900s in Thailand, as well as the socialist movements of the 1950s and pro-democracy student movements of the 1970s (Buranajoenkij 2017, 5).

In looking at contemporary Asian feminism, Asian feminists distinguish themselves from Western feminists, acknowledge differences across Asia, and see an urgent need to address the impacts of neoliberalism, globalization, patriarchy, and militarism on women in Asia. Chao-Ju Chen applies "Asia as method" to Asian feminisms in order to center Asia and de-center the West in their work. In acknowledging the enormous diversity that exists in Asia, Chen argues for "differentiated universalism" as grounds for Asian feminism. This means accepting difference

while still looking for commonalities as Asian feminists. Asian feminism, according to Chen, should not gloss over important differences of context, privilege, country, or colonial histories in the region (Chen 2007).

Despite this call for acknowledging difference, not many Asian feminists seem to have taken up the call of deeply addressing difference when it comes to issues of ethnicity or Indigeneity in their work. While class and sexuality have been more discussed, ethnicity still seems to be invisibilized, a point that prominent feminist Mina Roces notes, stating “the issue of ethnicity is another one where more work still needs to be done. Women’s movements in Asia still need to pay more attention to the minority and/or indigenous women” (Roces 2010, 15). Furthermore, when Asian feminists do write about Indigenous women, problematic tropes sometimes arise. For example, in one of the few academically published works in Asian feminism that I found that mentioned Indigenous women, the following description is provided:

Many aboriginal peoples have been severely neglected. Their lands are deforested or polluted by mines, they are forced to remove to other areas, and they are even compelled to give up nomadic lives and convert to the religions of majority populations. We have very little information on the effects of these upheavals on women, especially their health, reproductive rights, and capacity to sustain a livelihood. The question of bio-welfare for minority aboriginal groups is especially pressing because many are suffering from high rates of alcoholism or is in danger of dying out. The widespread denigration of aboriginal women adds to their lack of rights and capacity to reproduce their families and way of life that runs counter to development plans (Ong 2011, 41).

As well as depicting Indigenous women as lacking in agency, and the inclusion of some problematic tropes about disappearing Indigenous peoples, the notion that there is very little information about the effects of displacement and upheaval on Indigenous women can be quickly disproven by the hundreds of reports, press releases and articles that Indigenous women have written about these issues in forums such as the Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact or Women’s League of Burma.

Perhaps reflecting the fact that Asian feminist writing and feminist activism is mostly dominated by ethnic minority women, Indigenous women activists in Northern Thailand rarely use the term feminism or refer to themselves as feminist, even when their work is centered around women's rights and gender equality. About half-way through my interviews, while reviewing the initial questions I had drafted, I realized I had been avoiding asking interviewees about what Luana Ross calls the "F word" (2009). Feeling that this was something I "should" be doing, in order to be able to link my research with the relevant arguments, I made an attempt to ask about feminism to one women's rights activist from Burma:

Hannah: So how do you think about feminism? [note: I can hear the hesitancy in my voice when asking the question]

Siphoung (Co-Interviewer/Translator): Can you explore more in feminisms? [Laughing] Yeah. I had a hard time to translate [laughter].

Hannah: Yes...[laughter]

Hannah: You know the word, feminism? [note: I sound even more uncertain at this time]

Siphoung: Feminism...Feminism...She also doesn't know. I kind of know but maybe better to elaborate.

Hannah: Well, I mean basically, the idea that men and women should be equal, right. But some people don't really like the word feminism. For them, it depends, yeah.

Siphoung: Feminism...I think it's same with gender equality but still different, right?

Siphoung: The gender equality the same, right?

Hannah: The same, but...

Siphoung: But movement can come from man or woman.

Hannah: Yes, that's true. Men can be feminist, too. Yeah.

Siphoung: Yes. [Long pause] (Yu and Siphoung 2022).

If I had followed my own instincts, I knew that the term feminism was not commonly used among Indigenous women activists in Chiang Mai. However, I attempted to introduce the term into my interviews in order to fulfil my own anxiety about information I “needed” to put in my dissertation, thus causing a jarring moment of awkwardness and distance in the interview. After seeing the lack of traction with the term and my own discomfort and inability in the moment to meaningfully explain what feminism means (including the fact that feminism does not only include men and women but should be inclusive of all genders) in the moment, I switch back to the terminology of women and women’s rights which I know will be more familiar for the interviewee. The rest of the conversation flows more smoothly:

Hannah: So what the situation now for women? How do you think is the situation is going now for women’s rights?

After this experience, I avoided using the term feminism in interviews again, unless it came up naturally, or the women I was talking with brought it up themselves. Despite the fact that many Indigenous women activists are working actively on women’s rights and gender equality, many do not identify as feminists or feel any connection with the term. Confusion, a vague sense of ambivalence, or disinterest were the main reactions to the term whenever it has come up in conversation as well as my working experience. This is in large part due to feminism being seen as an elitist or outsider concept, mostly taken up by those from the ethnic majority. One colleague recounted a story of a workshop led by feminist (Western and majority ethnic) trainers where the female participants were “told to shout” at the male participants; the implication being that feminism was seen as too antagonistic of an approach for the community of Indigenous activists she was working with.

Mwe, another woman activist from Shan State, Burma in her thirties shared her experiences with the term feminism:

When we're talking about feminist [clicks tongue] actually does have a lot of issue in Myanmar. Yeah, because the translation is they said that women kind of—because when we call male domination and we call it machoism, is that right? And then like, kind of like, they are strong, when we talk about feminist, kind of, they translate Ma Wa Thii, the definition when we understand this is so, kind of, like you know, women aggressive... Yeah. But for me, when we talking about feminists I just understand justice, you want to, manage whatever that is unequal, and you make it to be balanced. You just want to be made equal (Mwe 2022).

As Mwe expresses, many Indigenous women activists are comfortable with the terminology of gender equality, justice or women's rights, but not the term feminism itself. In general, with the exception of the previous interview, I used whatever term the people I was interviewing used and followed their lead. However, it should be noted that using the terms women's rights or gender equality rather than feminism does also have drawbacks. "Women's rights" as a term is potentially less inclusive of trans and LGBTQ communities, and less intersectional in that it is not clearly linked to other forms of oppression such as class, disability and cisheteronormativity. While there has been more intersectional activism which recognizes multiple forms of oppression in recent years in Thailand and Burma, such as linking LGBTQ rights with women's activism and the pro-democracy movement (Chia and Maneechote 2021), the use of terminology here probably in part also reflects this lack of intersectionality among some women activists, especially when we look at pre-2020 women's activism in the region.

A report on feminism in Burma also noted that "feminists have also found that the word 'feminism' seems to be negative even for some women's rights defenders" (Aye Lei Tun, la Ring, and Su Su Hlaing 2019, 15). While the term feminism has gained more traction among some Thai women activists, many of these activists themselves are aware that it is mostly a middle class, ethnic majority Thai dominated movement that embraces the term. Chanida

Chitbundit, from Thammasat University's Women's Studies program stated: "Upper- and middle-class women present their own problems as the problems of all women...The fight that society tends to be aware of is the fight of [these] educated women, which emphasizes legal reform" (Poopoksakul 2019). As Mui Poopoksakul notes, the Thai word for feminism, *satreeniyom* is rarely used in favor of the English word. Poopoksakul reflects that "the foreign term 'feminism' should have tipped me off to at least a certain level of Westernization of the speakers who use it—and with that the concomitant class implications" (Poopoksakul 2019).

One of the most prominent self-identified feminist activists in Northern Thailand, Ouyporn Khuankaew also stated similar concerns about the feminist movement in Thailand, stating "I see that some young Thai women who are exposed to the progressive Western feminist movement on LGBTQ and women's issues are being active. But this is a very small group of young middle-class women, mostly based in Bangkok...The feminist groups in Thailand including IWP [International Women's Partnership for Peace and Justice]—which are very small in number—do not work enough at organizing grassroots women" (Khuankaew 2019).

The feminist movement in Thailand has made strides in the past few years to become more inclusive of LGBTQ communities and Indigenous and rural women, and to make connections between militarism, the pro-democracy movement and feminism in order to become less of a "straight, middle- and upper-class cisgender women[']s" movement (Chia and Maneechote 2021). However, in my experience working with Indigenous women activists, in thirteen years I have only ever heard a few people use the term feminism, and there is a distance and often lack of interest in connecting with ethnic Thai and Burman feminists.

Much of this distance may be related to the double disconnect that the term feminism brings—first as an English, Western word, and second from the term feminism being often

introduced through ethnic Thai and ethnic Burman women's groups and university curriculum. The disinterest or discomfort with the word may reflect deeper divisions and lack of trust towards elite women in Thailand and Burma, who are often seen to be out of touch and not understanding of Indigenous and rural women's lives and context. As Mwe stated,

So yeah, they [Burman activists] might be understand the overall of the situation in ethnic, but not really in deeply I think. Maybe some—just very few Burmese activists who really would like to change the society they really understand, especially Burmese ethnic who like, come and stay with KNU [Karen National Union] or EAO [Ethnic Armed Organization] area, they come and saw how the ethnic really suffering and struggle and still like, you know, not abandon them, still help them or something. So but very few, very few Burmese activists, but for the rest, I do not really know do they understand or not (Mwe 2022).

While some in the West assume a universal experience of struggle among Third World women, and therefore assume that any Asian woman can speak on behalf of any other Asian women's experiences, there are really vast disparities in experience and privilege that have to be acknowledged within Global South contexts, as the above quote from Mwe illustrates.

One experience I had during a community visit highlights this gulf. This occurred during a community visit on the Thai-Burma border together with a group of primarily Indigenous students to learn about community organizing against a proposed dam project. During the visit, we were informed that a group of activists from Bangkok would be visiting for a few hours as they also wanted to learn about this social movement. Given the length of travel (over one day in each direction), we were astonished that they would only visit for a few hours, but it was insisted that their program had a tight schedule and they would not be able to stay any longer. Joining our group for a few hours, one moment stood out in particular when one of the Karen women leaders began to speak about the dam project. She was wearing traditional clothes and immediately all the Bangkok activists stood up and pulled out expensive photography equipment and started

taking photos of her rather than listening to her speak. Rather than taking the chance to listen, learn, and show humility, their actions showed an attitude of objectification and disrespect towards an Indigenous woman community activist and leader.

As Mwe stated, there are some ethnic Burman and Thai activists, just as there are some Western and other outsider activists, who take the time to learn more deeply about Indigenous women and rights. However, there need to be more Asian feminists willing to really take on this project of listening and trust building between Indigenous and ethnic majority women.

Bridging the Gap: Indigenous and Asian Feminist Frameworks and Opportunities for Indigenous Feminisms in Asia

As the previous section has demonstrated, Indigenous women's activism in Northern Thailand has been under-represented in Southeast Asian studies and Asian feminist studies. This is also the case in Indigenous Feminisms, where the "canon" of literature tends to come from English speaking, Global North contexts. Even if this is true, to be clear, I consider the fields of Asian feminisms and Indigenous feminisms with great respect and affection. I see these as parallel groups with important knowledge who have largely not been in conversation with each other, or with Indigenous feminists and women activists in mainland Southeast Asia in particular. I believe that by bridging these fields of Asian and Indigenous feminisms, new insights can be generated, especially when they are based on Indigenous women's lived experiences.

In this final section, I will consider two frameworks from Indigenous feminisms that offer opportunities and synergy with Indigenous women's activism in Northern Thailand. These include asserting the validity of Indigenous women's forms of knowledge, including stories and

feelings, and asserting Indigenous women's sovereignty. Finally, I will imagine how creating space for Indigenous feminisms in Asia opens up new areas of learning and possibilities.

First, Indigenous feminisms assert that Indigenous women's experiences, especially their stories and feelings *are* valid forms of academic knowledge. Luana Ross privileges storytelling as an Indigenous epistemology and asserts her own vision of Indigenous/feminism, stating that "my indigenous/feminism privileges storytelling as a way to decolonize and empower our communities" (2009, 50).

Mishuana Goeman's concept of (re)mapping also foregrounds Indigenous women's stories as epistemologies that can be understood as forms of mapping knowledge, particularly given the academy's inability to recognize them as such (2013, 24). Goeman shows that Native stories are forms of geography and defines (re)mapping as "the labor Native authors and the communities they write within and about undertake, in the simultaneously metaphoric and material capacities of map making, to generate new possibilities" (2013, 36).

Further, Indigenous feminists have asserted that speaking of feelings, including anger, love and rage are also valid forms of academic knowledge. Dian Million writes in articulating *felt theory* that Indigenous women have been "insisting on the inclusion of our lived experience, rich with emotional knowledges, of what pain and grief and hope meant or mean now in our pasts and future" (Million 2009, 54). Native scholars have asserted that "feelings, including their anger, would and must reenter [our] accounts, which would be incomplete without them." However the challenge that Indigenous feminists continue to face is to get settler states or academic hegemonic practices to give credibility to these feelings and voices as legitimate forms of knowledge (Million 2009, 73).

The focus on stories and emotions resonates with the reality of Indigenous women's activist work in Chiang Mai. In Thailand, the Asia Indigenous Peoples' Pact has been advancing Indigenous women's stories as important sources of knowledge by publishing Indigenous women's essays since 2014. They write that these are "an attempt to rectify historical accounts to include the perspectives, struggles and invaluable contributions of women," in particular "the Indigenous women's voices and "her stories" (Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact 2014, 47). Similarly, other Indigenous women's groups, including *Mekong Women for Peace*, have also focused on storytelling workshops and publishing books of stories in order to highlight the voices of Indigenous women (Mekong Women for Peace 2022). Collaborative storytelling has been an important part of the methodology used for this research, and I weave numerous quotes, stories and portraits through the following chapters of this dissertation.

Second, the issue of sovereignty is another key contribution of Indigenous feminisms that bridges closely with the work of Indigenous women activists in Chiang Mai. Barker shows the "primacy of sovereignty and self-determination in [Indigenous feminists'] understandings of how feminism is or is not relevant to them" (2017, 39). Indigenous feminism is about achieving sovereignty on all levels, including sovereignty of the body, spirit and land, and political sovereignty as well. This is a direct response to the violation of all forms of sovereignty that colonialism brings. Barker further asserts the importance of returning "back onto our lands, into our bodies, in relationality and responsibility for one another" as another way of exercising sovereignty (2017, 28).

Sovereignty of the body is crucial to Indigenous feminists as sexual violence and colonialism are inextricably linked. As Ross states, "colonialism is not just about conquering Native lands through mapping new ownerships, but it is also about the conquest of bodies,

particularly women's bodies through sexual violence, and about recreating gendered relationships" (2009, 33). The inextricable link between rape and colonialism therefore shows that sovereignty of Indigenous nations is predicated upon Indigenous women also having bodily sovereignty (Deer 2015; Ross 2009).

The issue of sovereignty raised by Indigenous feminists is also very relevant to Indigenous women in Northern Thailand and the Thai-Burma border context, in particular bodily sovereignty. In the context of Burma, the desire to control Indigenous women's bodies in Burma in particular is linked with the "desire to control the vast natural resources in ethnic areas" as the military has extensive business interests in oil, natural gas and hydropower projects in Indigenous territories, as the following sections will discuss more (Women's League of Burma 2016, 2). In Thailand, Indigenous women's bodily and cultural sovereignty is challenged by controls on freedom of movement, restrictions on citizenship, and state attempts to stop the passing down of Indigenous languages and cultures within families through the educational system (Indigenous Women Network of Thailand and Manushya Foundation 2019, 25-27; Leepreecha and Meixi 2019, 711).

However, Indigenous women in Asia may bring different understandings and beliefs in what sovereignty looks like for them under various political conditions, as many Indigenous groups in Asia seek either recognition within the framework of the Thai state, or a federal system of government, in the case of Burma (Indigenous Women Network of Thailand and Manushya Foundation 2019; Fink 2001; Morton and Baird 2019; Women's League of Burma 2023).

These differentiated contexts can provide valuable perspectives and additions to Indigenous feminisms as well. Finally, as the following chapters will discuss in more detail,

Indigenous women's experiences in Asia demonstrate some of the challenges faced, as well as strategies used, when exercising sovereignty under authoritarian conditions.

Conclusion: Creating Space for Indigenous Feminisms in Asia

Indigenous women's experiences in mainland Southeast Asia have been underrepresented in both Asian and Indigenous feminism. Yet, their stories and experiences have important contributions that can advance our knowledge and understanding of both fields. For Asian feminism, Chen's theory of "differentiated universalism" helps center feminist research in Asia while simultaneously acknowledging the vast differences in the region (Chen 2007, 24–25). However, by highlighting the experiences of Indigenous women in Asia in particular, important issues of privilege, ethnicity, Indigeneity, and colonialism are brought up as necessary areas that Asian feminism needs to discuss more and pay attention to. Indigenous feminisms assert the validity of Indigenous women's forms of knowledge as well as the primacy of sovereignty for Indigenous women (Barker 2015; Ross 2009), which are both issues that resonate with Indigenous women's work in Northern Thailand in the area of story publishing as well as working towards sovereignty, albeit under different political conditions and meanings in both Thailand and Burma.

The lack of Indigenous women's rights activists who identify as feminists and the fact that quite a few do not use or are unclear about the term Indigenous may account for part of the reason of why Indigenous women activists in Chiang Mai and other regions in Asia are underrepresented in Indigenous feminist and Asian feminist literature. Perhaps similarly to some of the ambivalences and critiques around feminism expressed by Indigenous women in Australia, Hawai'i and Turtle Island (Moreton-Robinson 2000; Trask 1996; Ross 2009), feminism is not a term that resonates for many Indigenous women activists in this part of the world. However,

despite the fact that many Indigenous women activists in Chiang Mai do not self-identify as either feminists or as Indigenous, their contributions and work should not be ignored or sidelined in feminist and gender studies or Indigenous politics literature. The work that Indigenous women activists are doing on the ground in Northern Thailand to create Indigenous and feminist-centered futures is valuable and holds important lessons for other women activists to learn from. As the next chapter will discuss in detail, this work continues to occur despite conditions of increasing authoritarianism, heteropatriarchy and colonialism in the region.

Portrait: P'Miju

Today, Hseng and I are meeting with P'Miju from IMPECT (The Inter Mountain People's Education and Culture in Thailand), one of the largest Indigenous peoples rights groups in Northern Thailand. On the outskirts of Chiang Mai, the office is reminiscent of many Thai NGO spaces. The main building is a large, squat two story concrete building which has been painted white. On the way to the building, we pass through a walled garden complex with a large outdoor bamboo sala where activists gather to eat and spend time together. The building itself has linoleum flooring; faded framed photos of smiling participants decorate the walls, alongside stacks of NGO publications and three-ring binders. We are escorted to a small waiting area with four wooden chairs arranged around a table with brightly patterned fabric, where we are offered locally grown coffee in small glass mugs.

P'Miju enters the seating area with a wide smile. She introduces herself, explaining that she has a Thai name but doesn't like to use it, as the Thai officials at 14 years old told her that "her Akha name was too complicated to pronounce." So she instead uses her Akha name proudly. The Vice President of IMPECT, she wears a stylish denim shirt with large silver buttons and a red amulet on a silver chain. She is open, friendly and warm; despite the fact that we are the ones who have asked her for an interview, she repeatedly presses that she doesn't want us to feel that we are doing an interview, but that we should feel that we are friends.

Sharing about IMPECT's work, she explains that IMPECT is an Indigenous-only organization; no Thai staff are allowed, and every level of the organization has to have women. Their work focuses on environmental management, Indigenous cultural protection, and building network and solidarity between Indigenous peoples.

“We fight a lot. I have been fighting for thirty years since when I was young.” She laughs broadly. I ask her how she became an activist, and she shares her journey.

I feel like, what men can do, women also can do it if men can do. So I tried hard and I ran away from my community because I cannot live in the situation that other women are facing. So, I ran away from Mae Sai, and came to Chiang Mai, to Fang, to work as a housekeeper for eight months, without any salary. I had to wake up at two am and only had time to take a rest for two hours a day. That’s why I’m very skinny, very strong [everyone laughs]. At that time, I could not speak Thai, so I learned from the television and radio, listening all day, every day (Miju 2022).

Later, she got a job working as a cleaner at IMPECT, where she started to learn about more Indigenous rights and issues:

At that time I cleaned the office. I studied only in adult school, didn't go to formal education after high school. When we had a meeting (at IMPECT), I was very excited, I wanted to learn everything, and I would come at four am to clean the office.

I didn't know that time there were other Indigenous people, I only knew about Akha and Lahu people. I was very excited at that time, oh [there are] Lisu people, oh Hmong people, oh my god [laughter].

I wanted to learn everything, every month I would be very excited for the monthly meeting, and go to clean, and then observe the meetings. I became a fundraiser [at IMPECT] and I was worried because I didn't know how to draft the proposal...I changed from being a cleaner to being a fundraiser. I was very excited. In just one year (Miju 2022).

P’Miju shared her story about attending the first Indigenous peoples rights protest in Thailand in the early 2000s, and being one of the only women present:

How I became an activist, Indigenous people gathered together, and we had a big protest. This is the first time to have a protest of Indigenous people to claim their rights, twenty-two, twenty-three years ago.

Also Akha people were there, and someone asked me to be a translator with the villagers and I got to know their problems, like sometimes the villagers houses get burned, land grabbing and arrested people. Different Indigenous people, we face the same problems like land grabbing, don’t have ID card, get arrested by police.

We went to Salakran, a big government provincial level office in Chiang Mai. We stayed there without going home, gathering to claim our rights. That was the beginning for me to become an activist, when I went to stay at the protest village at Salakran.

We stayed there one month, with 50,000 Indigenous and Thai people, 95% were Indigenous. It was a big problem that Indigenous people didn't have citizenship, so we cannot move anywhere, and the police take money from the Indigenous people [bribes for travelling without an ID card]. At that time, there were no other women activists in the protest village, I was the only one. I was the first Indigenous women activist, it was something new for them at that time to see me (Miju 2022).

After the protest in the early 2000s, her work became more directly related to human rights, and she faced threats to her life:

We had a protest, after that I changed my position to human rights defender for the Indigenous people. This role is very dangerous, someone used a gun and tried to kill me and even gave me poison, I had to go to the hospital...

After I was poisoned and getting better, recovered, I was kind of reborn. The U.S. embassy helped me and I went to the U.S. for five years. It was not safe at all for me to stay in Thailand, my friends and colleague, many people were killed (Miju 2022).

Once she returned back to Thailand, she changed her strategy to be less confrontational with the government and find ways to "make friends" and "give a credit to the government." This way, it is safer for them and they have also been able to continue to make progress towards Indigenous peoples' recognition and rights in Thailand. She tells us about the legislation that IMPECT has proposed that would be the first to recognize Indigenous peoples right in Thailand:

We drafted what we need and demand to the government. And now what we have been demanding to protect our rights is now in the parliament chai mai ka, it will be in the process to become a law in the future.

I can give a suggestion and teach you, how to write your demands and the process, because we have been working on this issue so long, ten years already.

We have been drafting this for ten years, but even if it's not a perfect law, but at least this law we [Indigenous people] drafted by themselves to protect our rights. Not just land rights but all our Indigenous people of Thailand's rights (Miju 2022).

We discuss having her visit our organization to teach our participants about advocacy; she is very warm and willing to help. I am starting to feel a little nervous; over forty-five minutes ago, several politicians in suits from the Move Forward political party had arrived for a meeting with her about the proposed Indigenous rights legislation.

“Don’t you need to go to the meeting?” I ask her, worried that we are taking up time away from her important meeting with the politicians. She waves her hand, “It’s okay, just a few more minutes, they can wait.” She is calm, self-assured. “They can wait,” she reassures us. They will wait for her.

CHAPTER 2

Intersectional Challenges: Indigenous Women Navigating Colonialism, Authoritarianism, and Heteropatriarchy in Northern Thailand and Shan State, Burma

Introduction

Indigenous women activists in Thailand and Burma live at the nexus of multiple forms of state and societal oppression, and are constantly finding new ways to navigate, redefine and transform these experiences of oppression. Using the concept of intersectionality as a framework, this chapter will review the political contexts of Indigenous women's activism in Northern Thailand and Shan State, Burma that underpin these forms of oppression. While Indigenous women activists in Chiang Mai come from many countries across Asia, those from Shan State, Burma and Northern Thailand make up the majority of people interviewed for this research and therefore I focus on these two locations in this chapter.

I argue here that intersectional experiences of living at the nexus of colonialism, authoritarianism and heteropatriarchy are three of the most significant political contexts that Indigenous women activists' movements in Northern Thailand seek to address and transform in their work. I also argue that intersectionality as a conceptual framework can be better employed to understand the lived experiences of Indigenous women in the Global South by the inclusion of experiences of colonialism and authoritarianism as analytical categories, in addition to the most common categories of race, gender, sexuality, disability, socioeconomic status, religion and so forth.

While this chapter mainly focuses on challenges that Indigenous women face, in order to explain the political contexts they navigate in their work, I am intentional to not simply

“reproduce stories of oppression” or present “pain stories” (Tuck and Yang 2014, 227). The types of oppression described in this chapter are not passively accepted by Indigenous women activists, but instead give rise to and shape women’s leadership and activism as they seek to address these challenges and change society and their current circumstances. Furthermore, these experiences of oppression are not static but are constantly changing over time as the political context in both Thailand and Burma shifts in response to Indigenous women’s activism as well as broader political trends. I would like to imagine this chapter as parallel to the next three chapters, in particular Chapters Four and Five, which highlight and focus on strengths and strategies that Indigenous women in Northern Thailand are using in their work to address these multiple intersectional challenges.

Intersectionality as an Analytical Framework

As Jamaica Heolimeleikalani Osorio writes, “Indigenous feminists must...work constantly against a current of ‘whitestream’ feminism that has excluded many Indigenous women from feminist spaces, and therefore deterred many Indigenous women from having any interest in participating in the first place” (2021, 17). A similar critique of mainstream white feminism has been made by numerous women of color, Indigenous and Global South feminist scholars such as Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Chandra Mohanty, Gloria Anzaldúa, Haunani-Kay Trask and Aileen Moreton-Robinson, to name a few. As a result women of color scholars have developed their own theories and epistemologies which better articulate the experiences of women of color and Indigenous women. Among these new conceptualizations in feminist consciousness, intersectionality has been one of the most significant and impactful concepts in shaping women of color feminism.

In intersectionality theory, a term which was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, power relations are not only examined through the lens of gender, but also through exploring the multifaceted ways that identity affects our experiences of marginalization and privilege, including gender, race, class, age, ability, immigration status and sexuality (Crenshaw 1991). We should not consider these as static categories but rather as “multiple, fluid structures of domination” which articulate how women may experience various forms of oppression, privilege and domination simultaneously (Mohanty 2003, 55).

While Crenshaw rightly deserves credit for naming the term intersectionality, the work of earlier queer Black feminists and Indigenous women should also be acknowledged for laying the foundation for today’s popularization of intersectionality theory. In the 1970s, the Combahee Collective stated that “the major systems of oppression are interlocking” (1977). They also pointed out that everyone else’s liberation is predicated upon Black women’s liberation, as “if Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression” (Combahee River Collective 1977). Similarly, in the 1980s, Audre Lorde rejected the tendency of white feminists and men of color to compartmentalize issues and struggles (2007, 138), and Angela Davis wrote extensively about the intersection of gender, race and class (1983). Going back further to the 19th and early 20th Century, earlier Black feminists such as Ida B. Wells and Claudia Jones also worked within the civil rights and communist movements to raise the issues of Black women and demonstrate that their rights could not be separated into gender or race alone (Kelley 2022, 135–36).

Among Indigenous women, Natalie Clark demonstrates that “understanding...the concept of intersectionality...is not new” and “has always been part of our truth-telling” (2016a, 49). Clark points out that Indigenous women in the 1800s and early 1900s such as Zitkala-Sa and Winnemucca were talking about the interlocking systems of oppression and violence that Indigenous women and girls experienced as related to colonization, race, age, and land in essays and speeches such as “Regardless of Sex or Age” in 1924 (2016a, 49).

Thanks to the work of Black and Indigenous feminists, intersectionality is an essential conceptual framework for understanding the lives of women and people who live at the intersection of multiple forms of oppression. As a theory, intersectionality is useful because it helps highlight the differentiated experiences of women, including within the Global South. Even among intersectional feminist scholars, the “Third World Woman” is often portrayed as a “singular, monolithic subject” (Mohanty 2003, 17) without acknowledging that there are disparities of ethnicity, Indigeneity, class and race *within* the Global South as well. Thus, intersectionality helps to explain why this research highlights the stories and experiences of Indigenous women in particular rather than assuming that “Thai,” “Burmese” or “Asian” women have a commonality of experiences.¹ Furthermore, as Crenshaw stated, intersectionality helps us build better coalitions of solidarity, pointing out that “through an awareness of intersectionality, we can better acknowledge and ground the differences among us and negotiate the means by which these differences will find expression in constructing group politics” (1991, 1299). By acknowledging the differences between us, we can build better coalitions of struggle between women of color, Asian, and Indigenous feminists.

¹ This is not to imply that Indigenous women also do not have vastly varied experiences and degrees of privilege.

While there are not many academic articles on intersectionality in the Mekong region context so far, it is clear that Indigenous and ethnic minority women are leading the way in analyzing and advocating on issues of intersectionality due to their lived experiences. Karen activist Naw Mu Si from the Women's League of Burma states, "women from ethnic minorities, and especially refugees and migrant women, are doubly and even triply discriminated in many aspects of their lives" (Women's League of Burma 2002, 4). Taking an intersectional analysis, the Women's League of Burma argues that women experience multiple forms of intersectional discrimination in Burma, including based on their gender, sexuality, ethnicity, citizenship, and disability, among other categories (2002, 4). However, they argue that racism is the most fundamental form of discrimination and violence in Burma as it "relates to the Burmese military's version of homogenizing meta-narratives of the modern nation-state" (Women's League of Burma 2002, 4).

As well as analysis, Indigenous women-led organizations in Burma and Thailand including the Shan Women's Action Network, Pa-O Women's Union, Karen Women's Organization, Kachin Women's Association of Thailand and Indigenous Women Network of Thailand have been at the forefront of taking action to advocate on the intersectionality of oppressions that Indigenous women in Burma and Thailand may experience due to their multiple identities. These experiences of oppression may include statelessness, forced relocation, sexual violence, human trafficking and gender discrimination within NGOs as well as in the ethnic armed groups (Indigenous Women Network of Thailand and Manushya Foundation 2019; Kachin Women's Association Thailand 2019; Shan Women's Action Network 2002).

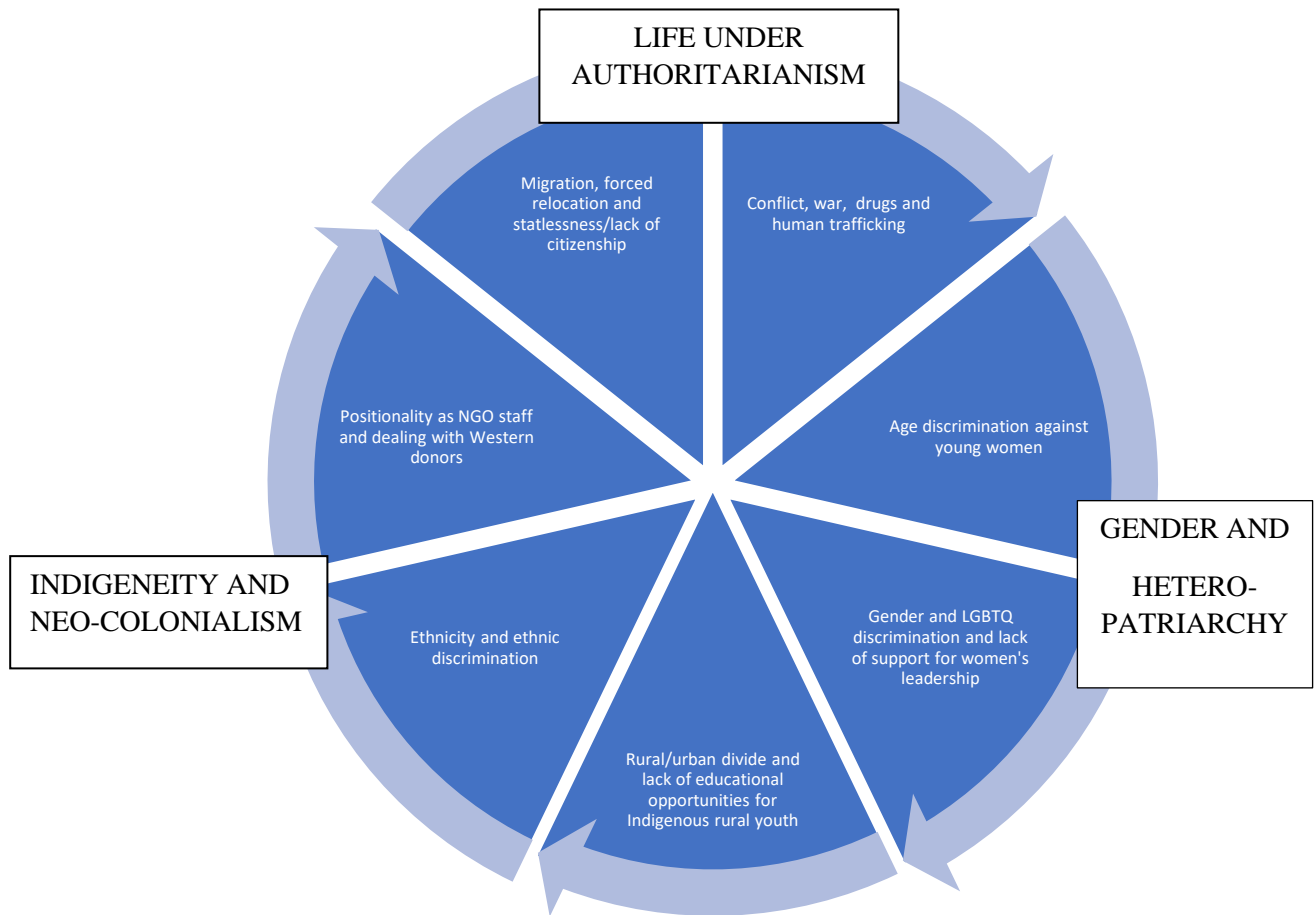


Figure 5. Intersectional challenges for Indigenous young women activists in Northern Thailand and Shan State. Based on focus group discussion, January 2nd, 2020.

However, in order to apply this concept in Asia, there are ways that intersectionality can be further developed as a theory in order to better describe Indigenous women's lives in authoritarian and neo-colonial contexts. In a focus group discussion in January 2020 with Indigenous young women activists based in Chiang Mai from Thailand and Burma, we discussed the applicability of intersectionality theory to their lives and experiences as young women activists. While the participants were interested in and found the concept useful, the group also noted several areas of their experiences and challenges which are not commonly discussed in intersectionality theory. In addition to gender, they identified experiences of colonialism and

neo-colonialism due to their Indigenous identities as an important aspect of their daily lived experiences, including facing discrimination from ethnic majority groups, being unable to study in one's own ethnic language, problems with accessing citizenship, and also neo-colonial experiences dealing with Western and majority ethnic donors. Life under authoritarianism was another important aspect of intersectionality for the group; the experience of living under authoritarian rule created many drastic effects in their lives including forced displacement, migration, statelessness, war and conflict, human trafficking, persecution and threats as activists, and lack of educational opportunities.

As intersectionality as a framework has been most advanced by women of color scholars from the Global North, it makes sense that when bringing this concept to a Global South context, it is important to think about how to adapt and reconfigure concepts to make them work in differing political contexts. Incorporating experiences of coloniality and authoritarianism into the analytical categories of intersectionality is an important step to make intersectionality theory more applicable to Global South contexts, particularly for women living under colonial as well as authoritarian rule.

Understanding Colonialism, Authoritarianism, and Heteropatriarchy in Shan State, Burma

I will now turn to a more specific geographic focus as I discuss the most significant intersectional challenges that shape women's activism in the Thai/Burma border region and Northern Thailand, including colonialism, authoritarianism, and heteropatriarchy. This section will focus on Shan State, Burma, while the next section will focus on challenges and contexts in Northern Thailand. Throughout this chapter, I will weave political background and context from

secondary sources with Indigenous women's written and oral stories and testimonies of their lived experiences.

Indigeneity and Colonialism in Shan State, Burma

In Burma, it is usually the ethnic minority or nationality groups who make up between 30-50% of the population who identify as Indigenous, although the term Indigenous is less commonly used in favor of ethnic minority or ethnic nationality (International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs and Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact 2008, 341-342). These Indigenous groups include the Tai, Chin, Kachin, Karen, Karenni, Mon and many more; there are over 135 different ethnic groups in Burma (International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs and Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact 2008, 345). In Shan State specifically, there are numerous Indigenous groups, with the Tai being the largest group, and also Danu, Palaung, Akha, Kachin, Lahu, Lisu, Intha and Pa-O communities among others.

As in many countries that experienced Western colonialism, many colonial dynamics today can be traced to the legacies of European imperialism. During their occupation of Burma, British colonial administrators used divide and rule policies to exacerbate ethnic divisions between the majority Burmans and Indigenous communities. During World War Two, many ethnic and religious minorities including the Karen, Kachin and Muslims fought on the side of the British, and majority Burmans at first with the Japanese (M. Smith 1995). Following independence from the British, the 1947 Panglong Agreement and 1948 Constitution had promised a federal, secular system of governance with each state, including Shan State, that agreed to join the treaty having autonomy in self-administration over their territory, and the right of secession from the union (Moe 2018, 132). After the assassination of Aung San, the interim leader of the postcolonial government, multiple Burman-led governments' promises of

federalism and self-governance for Indigenous groups continuously deteriorated and finally collapsed with the military coup of 1962 led by Ne Win. As a result, violent conflict continues to this day by the Burman army (Tatmadaw) in order to have total control over Indigenous territories.

Burma today can be understood as a post-colonial state and neo-colonial context where “internal colonialism” (Casanova 1965; Evrard and Leepreecha 2009) of Burman, Buddhist nationalist rule has pushed assimilation and elimination (Wolfe 2006) strategies against both Indigenous peoples and religious minorities in Burma. As the Women’s League of Burma argues, majority “Burman and military identities are merged and privileged over other ethnic identities in every facet of life” (2002, 6).

Burman neo-colonial domination over Indigenous peoples and women in Burma results in the teaching of the Burmese language in schools, rather than allowing Indigenous languages to be taught (Moe 2018, 130; Walton 2013, 15). Indigenous peoples experience what is called Burmanization as they are forced to use the Burmese language, rather than their Indigenous languages in everyday life. Tzarm from Shan State shared one example of everyday Burmanization when she went to Yangon for the first time as an adult. While Tzarm was born in Shan State she had moved to Northern Thailand as a young child as a refugee and had not returned to Burma in many years:

The first time I went to Rangoon without being able to communicate in Burmese. Then, I went to the Thai embassy in Rangoon and the front desk, the officers there are Burmese [Burman]. Although they can speak Thai or English, they didn't talk to me in English nor Thai, they just spoke in Burmese which I already told them “I don't understand” and they still like, “Ah, what passport are you like holding, what nationalities are you, and then why don't you speak [Burmese]”

They still have no idea about [the differences], like not every ethnicity [in Burma] can speak Burmese because Burmese is not their native or mother tongue. And then they

still acted like, they are the majority and they [still wanted to say that], “Okay you have to know our language”... Yeah, that was my first time in Burma... And [in Burma proper] although you can speak Burmese... the accent is not the same with them. They will say, “Oh, you are the mountainous... people”... or, “You are from the very rural area.” I faced the same (Tzarm 2022).

Tzarm experienced Burman language domination upon returning to Burma, where she was expected to speak Burmese and had her accent commented upon. Similarly to Tzarm, Mwe also left Burma because of the war in Shan State, in her case in the early 2000s. She graduated from a university in Thailand and later moved back to Yangon a few years ago to work for a women’s organization in Burma. She shared about her experience here with Burman domination and Burmanization in daily life:

Yeah... I am fled to Thailand, I moved to Thailand since 2006. So, when I back to Myanmar in 2018, so it’s like twelve years. And then in Myanmar I’m from, my background is from the conflict affected area, kind of, we call black zone, until now there is no development or no NGO or INGO in there. So, you know, and the education system in Myanmar, like for the lower Burma is might be a little bit better... like people speak Burmese fluently. But in the ethnic area, non Burmese are, like, to speak in Burmese is very challenge for us, even though we read, we write, we don’t understand the meaning. That’s why we can’t speak.

So... for my case after I moved to Thailand and when I joined [the women’s organization] so the most challenge for me in the first year is communication [laughs]. Because the language. Like, I couldn’t speak well in Burmese. That is so funny [laughs] when some Burmese... they said that “Oh, that’s so lovely that because your accent is not, [it’s] very different from Burmese.”

So, I think this is kind of, when we think deeply, this is kind of a very politics. Kind of Burmanization because like there is no language, even I don’t understand in Burmese, no one translate to me in my mother language, but when Burmese come to us, we have to translate until they understand (Mwe 2022).

As Mwe shares, even within an activist women’s organization, the domination of the Burman language led her to struggle to understand and have her accent pointed out when she spoke Burmese; on the other hand, Burman people coming to Indigenous territories would expect to receive translation rather than learning Indigenous languages. To resist Burmanization, there

are also many organizations that either operate in their Indigenous language (although this is more difficult for multi-ethnic groups), or that prefer to use English as a common language rather than Burmese.

Authoritarianism and Militarism in Shan State, Burma

The Burma Army is the root of many problems in Burma. In the 75 years since independence from Britain, the Burma Army has been unwilling to resolve the conflict...After taking power from the civilian government last year, the situation of human rights violations in the country has worsened...Therefore, in my opinion, if you want to solve the problem at the root cause, it is necessary to overthrow the Burmese military dictatorship” (Hseng 2022b, 9).

After independence from British colonialism in 1948, a succession of Burman-led governments both under civilian and military rule failed to follow through with promises of political representation and a federalist system of democracy for ethnic nationalities and Indigenous peoples. This led ethnic groups to take up arms against the Tatmadaw and government (Women’s League of Burma 2008, 6). A Burman-led military coup in 1962 resulted in military dictatorship for the majority of the past sixty years. The consequences of this military-run dictatorship have included forced conscription into the armed forces, disbandment of universities, mass arrest of political dissidents, and over six decades of violent conflict with Indigenous groups (Fink 2001; Women’s League of Burma 2008, 6-7).

Up until the 1970s, Indigenous armed groups and their political parties such as the Shan State Army and the Karen National Union controlled large sovereign territories of their own ancestral lands (Fink 2001, 47-48). However, following the Four Cuts policy in the 1970s which sought to cut off ethnic armies’ access to food, money, soldiers and information, many Indigenous areas were systematically attacked and displaced by the Burman military forces. Hundreds of thousands of Indigenous peoples were displaced and have been subjected to well-

documented practices of forced displacement, rape and sexual violence as weapons of war, killing, forced labor and torture over the past fifty years (Fink 2001, 48-49; Shan Women's Action Network 2002, 5-7).

In 2011, the military regime began to take steps towards creating a nominally civilian government whilst still maintaining power via the 2008 Constitution which held a quarter of parliamentary seats for military officers (Women's League of Burma 2016, 1-2). While the reasons for this change are not known, it may have been to attract international investment and economic revenue and/or to respond to international pressure following nationwide protests led by monks during the 2007 Saffron Revolution. Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of the pro-democracy National League for Democracy (NLD) party was released from detention; the NLD (which is still very much a Burman-led and dominated political party) won the elections held in 2012. The military began signing peace agreements with a number of ethnic armies and some censorship laws were relaxed (Women's League of Burma 2016, 1-2).

Not everyone trusted the military junta's sudden change of heart, however. Indigenous women in particular, who had experienced decades of documenting the military junta's use of rape and sexual violence as weapons of Indigenous control, were at the forefront of highlighting the reasons why the junta still should not be trusted. Groups including Shan Women's Action Network and Karen Human Rights Group documented how peace agreements were being used as pretexts to open up Indigenous lands for large scale development projects that would make the military and foreign investors wealthy (Karen Human Rights Group 2013). Nonetheless, a steady flow of activist groups began moving back to Burma. In some cases, groups had no choice but to move back to Burma with trepidation and reluctance as Western donors made it a condition of

funding to be located inside the country. In other cases, activists went back willingly, wanting to return and be a part of the growing activist movement within Burma.

The situation changed dramatically yet again in February 2021 when the military launched another coup and arrested democratically elected politicians including Aung San Suu Kyi. The coup occurred after the NLD won the November 2020 elections by a landslide and the military-backed party, Union Solidarity and Development Party further lost seats in parliament.

Almost immediately, activists in Burma began organizing to resist and overthrow the new military regime. Mass protests took place, led by women and students, throughout February and March of 2021, with hundreds of thousands of people across the country showing up for protests every day during what protestors named the Spring Revolution (AP News 2021). Over the course of February and March 2021, the military response to the coup grew increasingly violent, with armed forces employing rocket-propelled grenades and shooting protestors in the head. As a result, over seven hundred protestors, primarily young people, were killed by the army in those two months (Frontier Myanmar 2021b). Due to the security situation, protestors changed tactics to save lives, using strategies such as organizing protests at odd hours when they knew security forces would not be present, launching balloons with protest messages in the air, and “silent strikes” with participants staying home and refusing to go to work (Frontier Myanmar 2021b).²

In addition, the Civil Disobedience Movement organized shortly after the coup is a leaderless movement where public sector workers such as healthcare workers, banking staff, teachers and university professors have been on strike since the 2021 coup in an effort to bring down the military’s administrative machine (Bociaga 2021). At its height over 360,000

² For more detail on the protests and tactics used, please see Chapter Four.

government workers were part of the CDM movement, but this has come down to around 200,000 due to its members being targeted by the military junta for arrest, torture and harassment (RFA Myanmar 2022). However, this is still a significant number of people engaged in nonviolent resistance to this day.

In addition to nonviolent resistance, approximately 65,000 young people and activists, including many Indigenous women in Burma, have joined the People's Defense Force (PDF). The PDF is the armed wing of the civilian led parallel government set up in Burma known as the National Unity Government (NUG) after the 2021 coup (Banyar Aung 2022). It sees itself as the true army of the people of Burma since the military illegitimized its authority with the illegal coup (National Unity Government 2022). The PDF includes armed groups set up or recognized by the NUG as well as several ethnic armies. The number of Indigenous women who have joined the ethnic armed forces belies the idea that militarized nationalism *vis a vis* women and feminism are contradictory forces (Olivius and Hedström 2019). At this time, having tried with the Civil Disobedience Movement and not seen success in non-violently overthrowing the junta, many activists, including women activists, see armed revolution as the only realistic option left (Mizzima 2022).

In response to these various forms of resistance since the 2021 military coup, the junta has violently cracked down on protests and has harassed, threatened, arrested, and tortured activists systematically. This has resulted in over 13,000 detentions of activists and 2,565 deaths of activists as of December 2022 (Assistance Association for Political Prisoners 2022). Due to this ongoing tragedy, many young activists have either travelled to Thailand, other countries in Asia and the West to live in exile; are sheltering in ethnic armed group territories at present; or have joined the ethnic armed groups as members of the People's Defense Force.

It is hard to express how much the experience of living through the 2021 military coup and subsequent revolution coup has impacted the Indigenous women activists from Burma who have been part of this research. Even as someone who is not from Burma, but with very close friends that I have seen spend the past year in hiding, imprisoned, or go into exile in the past year, I cried while writing about these experiences. For those from Burma, as the next chapter will discuss in more personal detail, it has been an extremely turbulent time, one full of trauma, hope, anger, and resistance. Many of my friends, until last year, had moved back to, and settled in Burma, and are now finding themselves re-building or starting their lives in Chiang Mai all over again. If they are still in Burma, many are living in hiding, moving from place to place. That is not to say that they are not strong and resilient, but the situation is still emotional and hard to describe.

Heteropatriarchy in Burma

While Indigenous women's lives in Burma are perhaps most shaped by internal colonialism and authoritarianism, heteropatriarchy is another related challenge that Indigenous women have to face and address. As the Women's League of Burma argues, the "root causes of discrimination against women from Burma...are attributable to the ongoing racist and sexist policies of the current ruling military dictatorship in Burma" (2002, 2).

Heteropatriarchy, together with militarism and authoritarianism impact Indigenous women through policies and practices targeted at them and their families. These include the outlawing of Indigenous languages in schools, promoting Buddhism over other religions, land grabbing and military rule in Indigenous regions, sexual violence and rape in conflict areas as a weapon of war, criminalizing same sex relationships, and criminalizing inter faith marriages (Colors Rainbow and Equality Myanmar 2018; M. Smith 1995; Women's League of Burma

2016). Sexual violence against Indigenous women in Shan State is linked with the military's goal of controlling Indigenous land and natural resources, including controlling Indigenous areas in order to develop highly profitable dams and gas lines such as the Tasang Dam on the Salween/Thanlwin river and the Shwe Gas and Oil pipeline (Women's League of Burma 2016, 2).

Indigenous women face violence and harassment most significantly from the Burman army, but also within ethnic armed groups in Shan State. Sophia and Nay Chi Oo, who are Indigenous and minority women in their twenties who joined one of the ethnic armed groups connected to the Peoples Defense Force (PDF) after the coup shared some of their experiences and analysis:

Hannah: How did they treat you when you joined [the PDF]? Were they welcoming?

Sophia: At first, they were so surprised to see women joining and doing this kind of heavy work, and it was a big struggle to join, and they were proud to see women join the troops.

Siphoung (Co-interviewer): Did their attitude change over time?

Nay Chi Oo: We met with many different types of people, some treated us normally, others tried to take advantage of us as women and touching us, others harassed us and bullied us. After we heard this kind of thing every day it became normal.

For us, gender discrimination and harassment, we are aware of it, but for younger sisters in the camp, they will be harassed but they aren't even aware that their rights have been violated because they have come to accept it as a custom or it becomes the culture.

Sophia: I had awareness from the training provided by [an NGO]. I also read a lot of news on social media, that's how we could distinguish between harassment and normal behaviour. For those in the camp, it is very normal for them, but for us coming from the outside, we are also aware of it and exactly know that it is sexual harassment...

Nay Chi Oo: In general in Myanmar, compared to the past, gender equality is getting better, but in the military areas, it is a hierarchy system and patriarchy system is still in place and getting worse compared to outside. Even people who are already aware about

gender equality, when they came to the camp, they said "Why women, you have to come here, women supposed to be at home, and you can do some other way of revolution...[it's] not necessary for you to take a gun and fight for it" (Sophia and Nay Chi Oo 2022).

As Sophia and Nay Chi Oo stated, many women that I spoke with felt that in general, gender discrimination was improving in Burma. However, the military coup had created several factors worsening heteropatriarchal attitudes in Burma, including activists joining the armed groups and becoming immersed in a male-dominated, heteropatriarchal environment. In addition, the collapse of the court system in Burma since the coup has been a significant blow for survivors of gender-based violence and domestic violence, as Mwe states below:

Gender based or sexual violation in gender based...is more than before. In life before coup, at least, I think at least we still have the justice or the courts we can bring the...when the victim or survivor, they would like to like call for justice or whatever. So [our partner organization] they will provide legal advice on how to say that judicial system, take them to the court or something like that.

Actually, I would like to say this; before coup, this court is not really success for women, not stand for women, just something that can show, you see we have a court ...But during the coup, every system collapse. And then more domestic violence is double, treble (Mwe 2022).

Gender based violence in Burma increased and was exacerbated by the pandemic and then military coup which caused the court system to collapse. As well as violence and discrimination against women generally, discrimination and criminalization of LGBTQ women and communities is prevalent across Burma; this has been both improving and worsening in recent years. The criminalization of LGBTQ peoples in Burma can be traced to British colonial origins, as it was the Penal Code of 1861 which subjected same-sex sexual acts to terms of imprisonment (Colors Rainbow and Equality Myanmar 2018). Equality Myanmar found that the majority of people surveyed in Burma now support the repeal of this act, as LGBTQ activists have been actively and prominently campaigning against it (Rainbow 2018).

There are many prominent queer activists in Burma, such as Aung Myo Min who founded Equality Myanmar, one of the most prominent LGBTQ rights groups in Burma, but there are not many well-known Indigenous women activists who publicly identify as queer from Shan State that I am aware of. LGBTQ groups are mainly based in Yangon and Mandalay, which are Burman-majority ethnic areas. This is mostly due to safety issues, in particular in the post-coup environment. August, an activist in their twenties from Shan State stated:

They [the military] are focusing on, they are targeting to all the people who involve in the revolution, but if we are a LGBT person, also you involve in the democracy movement, you will get tortured more...

I think you might have heard about that, the military is religious, extremely. It's an irony. Actually, they are not religious, they are taking cover of the religion as their shield for brutality. They say they are protecting the religion, nationalism and many more...some of the monks from the military side, they say being an LGBTQ person goes against the Buddha's will. That's why it is a taboo thing...and if you do, you are a sinner...and being a sinner, there is no problem to get killed by soldiers. They think they have the right to torture people, the right to kill people, whom they assume are destructing their heritage, their religion (August 2023).

As Indigenous activists are at higher risk of detainment, and LGBTQ activists are at higher risk of torture, it is extremely unsafe in the post 2021-coup environment in Burma for LGBTQ activists, especially women, nonbinary and/or Indigenous LGBTQ activists in Shan State. In a sign of growing polarization that we also see around the world, August discussed how while the military had been becoming increasingly violent towards LGBTQ activists under the guise of Buddhist nationalism, the pro-democracy movement had become more supportive with LGBTQ representation at the highest levels of the government-in-exile:

They recognize us, they acknowledge us. Let's see U Aung Myo Min as a figure in the revolution, who is the Prime Minister of Human Rights...of the National Unity Government...he's also an LGBTQ person. And most people in the revolution accept that. So, we don't think that there would be a problem for our participation in Myanmar democracy issue (August 2023).

In conclusion, this section has described how Indigenous women and LGBTQ communities in Shan State, Burma face challenges that intersectionality as a framework does not fully encompass. Most importantly, as well as sexism and gender discrimination, life under authoritarian and colonialism most affect their day to day lives and experiences. However, Indigenous women and LGBTQ communities in Burma are not passively experiencing these challenges; they are fighting back, whether through armed resistance or more subtle strategies, as the following chapters will describe in more detail.

Understanding Colonialism, Authoritarianism, and Heteropatriarchy in Northern Thailand

Hseng: But for Burmese case, they will do directly. They cruel, yeah, you show you are cruel, but in Thailand, they use different way.

Hannah: Different way...[long silence] (Hseng 2022a).

Colonialism in Northern Thailand

This section will move across the border from Shan State, Burma to Northern Thailand, following the route that many Indigenous women activists from Shan State have taken in recent months in 2022. In Thailand, the dynamics of colonialism, authoritarianism and heteropatriarchy that must be navigated by Indigenous women are both similar and different in many ways to Burma. As the quoted discussion between Hseng and I above alludes to, the Thai state in recent years focuses more on mechanisms of control that are sometimes hidden under the surface such as assimilatory policies, rather than direct warfare against Indigenous peoples as in Burma.

Starting with dynamics of colonialism, Indigenous women in Thailand also experience “internal colonialism” or what Sinith Sittirak terms “colonialism within.” The term “colonialism within” helps us understand Thailand as a colonial state with Bangkok at its metropolitan center

and Isaan, Khon Muang, Southern Thai and Indigenous peoples at the periphery. Colonialism within Thailand looks like primarily Buddhist, Bangkok and Central Thai based, ethnic Thai elites using the tools of Western colonialism to cement their own power over other ethnic groups and religious minorities (Sittirak 2013).

Khwampenthai or Thainess and the creation of what is now known as “Thailand” is deconstructed in *Siam Mapped* by Thongchai Winichakul (1994). This work focuses on the “geo-body” and the “technology of territoriality” (Winichakul 1994, 16) which created the spatial construction of the nation of Thailand. Winichakul demonstrates that prior to the Siam-French wars and British influence and pressure, multiple sovereignty was commonly practiced, with the boundaries of overlords often overlapping. Land could fall under the protection of more than one overlord, and could also be given away (Winichakul 1994, 96–97). It was not until the arrival of European colonizers in the region that the “notion of a modern boundary with absolute and exclusive territorial sovereignty was applied” by the rulers of Siam (Winichakul 1994, 97).

Facing the threat of colonial powers, the Siamese rulers chose to “[enter] the contest with the European powers to conquer and incorporate...marginal states into its exclusive sovereign territory” to avoid European colonization themselves (Winichakul 1994, 101). Lands that had been previously “protected” from afar under multiple overlords instead became permanently under the territory of Siam, with their rule ensured through the presence of Thai officials and military force. In Northern Thailand, this process occurred as the Chiang Mai kingdom, which had previous been a vassal state to Siam, was annexed into the Kingdom of Siam and fully relegated to provincial status by 1893 (Maneechote 2020).

Since colonialism, “Thai-ness” is “constructed through the binary opposition of what is Thai and what is other-ness” (Winichakul 1994, 166). Examples of “otherness” in Winichakul’s

work are primarily those from other nations, in particular Vietnam, Burma, Laos and Cambodia (1994, 166) as well as communists (1994, 170). Inside Thailand, Winichakul writes, “we may think about all sorts of minorities who are well inside the geobody but are on the edge of Thainess, ethnically, religiously, or ideologically, and are not well accepted into the domain of Thainess” (1994, 170).

Indigenous women are excluded from “Thainess” through state policies that deny them Thai citizenship as well as societal attitudes of discrimination and racism. Indigenous peoples in Thailand have been widely denied or restricted access to Thai citizenship (Indigenous Women Network of Thailand and Manushya Foundation 2019, 25) and live under a system of up to twenty types and classes of ID cards, many of which restrict Indigenous peoples’ most basic rights, such as freedom of movement even within Thailand, and access to healthcare and education (Indigenous Women Network of Thailand and Manushya Foundation 2019, 20). Particularly for Tai women, the Thai government does not recognize the conflict in Shan State and Tai people cannot apply for refugee status unlike other Indigenous groups from Burma (Women’s League of Burma 2016, 8). This means that many Tai women live in Burma under temporary work permits or with undocumented status, which makes Tai women more likely to experience worker rights violations, exploitation, or difficulty accessing education (Laungaramsri 2006).

Tzarm shared some of her experiences living as a Tai stateless person in Thailand and experiencing neo-colonialism. She came to Thailand as a young child, first living in an orphanage, and later attending high school and university in Thailand.

As someone who was not born in Thailand, she was denied the ID card that she would have needed to access education and to be able to travel freely.

Being the stateless person in Thailand is also not easy. Yeah, I think the rights that I need the most [is freedom of movement], like what do we call—being a stateless person in Thailand, you are not free to travel, you are not free to...access to education. When I was in the orphanage, it was difficult to [access to] education. I had to study twice to get the certificate.

Because the first time I studied and I finished primary school, we couldn't get the certificate because of no ID and also once we got the ID we still could not get it until they changed their policy...then later on, we had to start again, start over again to get the certificate...it took double time. I was, over age, the age is over, meaning too old to start in a normal school, like regular school. So, we have to study in nonformal education (Tzarm 2022).

Tzarm experienced neo-colonialism twice; first from the Burman military violence which compelled her to leave her home in Shan State as a child; then again in Thailand where her lack of ID card or citizenship meant that she had to attend primary school twice as her original certificate was not recognized by the authorities, and then was deemed over the age to attend public school, thus meaning she had to attend non formal education instead.

As well as denial of citizenship and the subsequent issues this caused for access to education and jobs, Tzarm and also many others faced racism and discrimination in Thailand:

Tzarm: And then also many things, like when I go to the hospital, they said that, “Oh you are migrant, you are stateless people, you just wait” and at that time, it was a very bad experience to face that kind of racism or discrimination. Like, the only way you can go to the hospital is the government hospitals. And then we have to wait a long queue. Yeah, and then especially if you are not Thai or not the citizen of Thailand you will have to wait longer and face so many [issues].

Hannah: You feel like it was a lot of discrimination in Thailand? Or is it just kind of like, some places, like a hospital?

Tzarm: I think most [laughs]. Most of them. They discriminate. It really depends on the environment.

Hannah: Do you think young people are like, better?

Tzarm: Yeah, I think so. Yeah, young generation. Like my friends at a university. They really understand. And when I told them I was a stateless person here and they said, “No, you speak fluent Thai, and you are like Thai people. I don’t understand why you don’t get a citizenship yet” or something like this, and then they really understand, and they treat me well...

I think the younger generation will understand more, but still again really depends on the people that you meet. Because not everyone, I think in every community, there are bad and good people (Tzarm 2022).

Tzarm and Hseng were both born in Shan State and grew up in Thailand. As they both pointed out, their experiences of racism and discrimination in Thailand really depended on who they met. Hseng, who has spent most of her life in Thailand, took care to emphasize that “some Thai people are very nice” (2022a). However, even though they experienced individual Thai people as kind and received support and solidarity from some Thai activists, they still faced state-sponsored discrimination and exclusion as Indigenous women born outside of Thailand.

These experiences are not exclusively limited to Indigenous women from Burma, or those born outside Thailand. Indigenous peoples born in Thailand also experience similar challenges of racism, discrimination, and denial of basic rights such as citizenship and freedom to travel under the neo-colonial Thai regime. Mueda Nawanat was born in Thailand but because her parents were refugees from Burma she was denied citizenship and lived as a stateless person for much of her childhood. Finding this unjust, she fought to change the law so that those born before 1992 could receive Thai citizenship:

Life as a stateless person is very difficult...when I was still stateless I didn’t have any rights; I didn’t have freedom of expression; or, freedom of movement. People say a stateless person is “of no use to their country”...I needed to stand up and say that I am stateless, and an ethnic person, and accept that about myself...if you do not accept yourself first, people in society will not accept you (Nawanat 2022)

As someone born and raised in Thailand, Mueda chose to focus her advocacy towards the Thai government and changing the law to get Thai citizenship:

Many of my friends, as well as the teachers in the school, called me alien...I felt that it was not true. I am human. I have a strong thinking that I belong to this country, Thailand. I was born here and I grew up here. And I really do love this country (Nawanat 2020).

Her fight for Thai citizenship led her to become nationally recognized in Thailand and she won a full scholarship to Payap University to study law. At the age of 21, her advocacy for stateless peoples' rights resulted in the passage of Article 23 in the 2008 Nationality Act, which allowed stateless people born in Thailand before 1992 to apply for citizenship (Nawanat 2020).

Although all the stories above have involved Indigenous women either born outside of Burma or with ties back to Burma, Indigenous women who have historically lived on lands within the Thai state boundaries face many of the same issues including lack of access to citizenship and discrimination. Even Indigenous peoples born and living on their ancestral lands inside the nation-state boundaries of Thailand have been frequently denied Thai citizenship. This is especially a problem in rural areas where it is difficult to access services such as birth registration, especially in the rainy season when roads may not be passable (Indigenous Women Network of Thailand and Manushya Foundation 2019, 31).

Unlike other neighboring countries including Cambodia or Laos, the terms to refer to Indigenous peoples in Thai clearly distinguish them as non-Thai, and Indigenous women born in Thailand have frequently been mixed and conflated with those from other countries (Morton and Baird 2019). Indigenous women have been depicted as a “threat” to the Thai nation (Baird, Leepreecha, and Yangcheepsutjarit 2017, 546) by the Thai state, which attempts to assimilate Indigenous women and their families into the Thai state. These assimilation programs include

initiatives to change Indigenous peoples' sources of income to tourism and convert to Buddhism, as well as conducting formal education in the Central Thai language and directing that family names must be in the Thai language (Indigenous Women Network of Thailand and Manushya Foundation 2019, 49-50; Evrard and Leepreecha 2009, 316; Leepreecha and Meixi 2019, 706).

Citizenship, healthcare, education and the impacts of tourism and land development projects are issues that have been particularly identified by Indigenous women's groups in Northern Thailand as most impactful of their lives (Indigenous Women Network of Thailand and Manushya Foundation 2019, 5). However, the work of Indigenous rights groups in Thailand has resulted in some improvements including widened access to citizenship and currently proposed legislation to recognize Indigenous peoples' rights in Thailand (Prachatai 2021).

Authoritarianism and Militarism in Northern Thailand

Colonialism within and authoritarianism are linked in Thailand through the Thai state's attempt to create authoritarian control and assimilate all Indigenous groups into the project of Thainess through the powers of the ethnic Thai-led monarchy and military. As Paul Chambers and Napisa Waitoolkiat write, "today, the monarchy and military co-operate together in a symbiotic relationship, dominating the country to boost each of their political and economic interests" (2016, 426). Chambers and Waitoolkiat argue that the military sees itself as the guardian of the monarchy and "the military's self-defined top national security mission is to protect the monarchy" (2016, 427).

While Thailand has often been thought of in the past as a constitutional monarchy, since the 2014 military coup, Thailand can be understood in 2022 as a context where "non-elected elites hold veto power over the effective power of popularly elected representatives to govern" (Chambers and Waitoolkiat 2016, 430). This is evidenced by the military's frequent use of coups

to remove democratically elected leaders, as well as other forms of removal such as dissolving democratically elected parties, bringing corruption charges, and filing of *lèse majesté* complaints using Article 112 which makes any insults against the monarchy a crime. While Chambers and Waitookiat are pessimistic, arguing that “Thailand will join Egypt and Pakistan as cases where elected civilian control is non-existent or frail” (2016, 440), recent large-scale protests in 2020 against the military show the persistence of resistance to authoritarianism and militarism in Thailand.

The 2020 protests in Thailand, mainly led by youth, young women and with prominent LGBTQ leadership, started with the court’s decision to dissolve the opposition party Future Forward which has been especially popular with youth voters. The 2020 protests called for an end to the cycle of military coups as well as calling for reforms to the monarchy (Beech and Suhartono 2020). The protests are also important in that they are one of the first times that LGBTQ rights and democracy rights have been linked in pro-democracy protests in Thailand, thanks to the leadership of Thai LGBTQ activists (South China Morning Post 2020). Although the importance of this should not be understated, it should also be noted that these protests have not yet linked Indigenous issues in the same way. Indigenous rights groups protests have received far less international attention and coverage and tend to focus on issues specific to Indigenous communities, especially land grabbing and the right to citizenship (Morton and Baird 2019; People’s Dispatch 2022).

Authoritarianism as an everyday lived experience for Indigenous peoples in Northern Thailand looks quite different from Burma, although no less impactful. The Burmese junta employs both assimilationist policies as well as extensive use of direct forms of violence including engaging in military warfare against Indigenous peoples. In Thailand, in contrast,

while violence against Indigenous activists does occur, neoliberal and neo-colonial forms of control rather than warfare are more often used, including the forced assimilation of Indigenous peoples' languages and culture, denial of freedom of movement, denial of citizenship, and land grabbing of Indigenous territories under the guise of national parks and development projects.

Heteropatriarchy in Northern Thailand

In terms of heteropatriarchy and sexuality, Thailand has a reputation among many people outside the country as an LGBTQ friendly location. This is in part due to the fact that the Tourism Authority of Thailand markets the country as such in campaigns such as 'Go Thai, Be Free' in 2019 in order to attract LGBTQ travelers for holidays and destination weddings (Huang 2022). However, the reality for LGBTQ people living in Thailand is more complex than this. Timo Ojanen, Ratanashevorn Rattanakorn, and Sumonthip Boonkerd argue that gay and lesbian people are still expected to adhere to certain gender norms in order to attain acceptance in Thai society (2016). In addition, despite Thailand's global reputation as a destination for gender-affirming surgery, within Thailand it is still difficult for trans people to attain prestigious positions in Thai society and have no legal pathway to officially change their gender identity (Human Rights Watch and Thai Transgender Alliance 2021). Prominent LGBTQ activists in Thailand, as in Burma, tend to be ethnic majority Thai; while gender is often discussed among Indigenous women activists, sexuality is less so, at least in my experience, and it is less common for Indigenous women in this region to identify publicly as LGBTQ.

Heteropatriarchal and discriminatory attitudes that Indigenous women have to navigate and address may come from both from dominant Thai society as well as within their own communities. P'Noraerii, one of the board members of the Indigenous Women's Network of Thailand, shared her work to change patriarchal attitudes and systems within her community, and

her journey to become the first ever headwoman (elected leader) of her village Huay E-Kang, which is a Karen Pakayaw community.

In Pakayaw belief, we have a saying that women have a green area only in the house, but men have a green area outside of the house. That means women cannot go out of the house to learn freely, to express freely, or do anything freely, only men (Noraerii 2022).

Feeling frustrated with the limits that she experienced growing up, she educated, organized and advocated to make change.

I improved my skills through capacity building and Indigenous women leadership as part of a project with IMPECT (Inter Mountain Peoples Education and Culture in Thailand Association) twenty years ago. After I built up my skills and my confidence, we went to the community to build a women's network to change the structure... We build up the skills of women in the village to change their attitude. At the beginning, the women in the committee don't have enough power, because they still believe this culture, this belief is beautiful. They're still not strong enough to change the structure.

So we come together and make a critical thinking group, we asked them, "Are you satisfied with your situation?" We talked and exchanged, and most of the women said they don't have power to make decision about income, or family planning, or land ownership, they didn't have that right as women (Noraerii 2022).

She did not stop her work here; she continued to organize women to become leaders at the political level in her community:

After we built the network, we encouraged women to be leaders at the community level. We encouraged women to be mubaan (village) leader, which never happened in the past—this role always belonged to men. We also encouraged women to join the local sub-district as headwomen to increase the number of headwomen.

In Huay e Kang village in the past we don't have women leaders all, but now most of the leaders at the local government, headmen and subdistrict are also women. Women took all [the positions] [Everyone laughs].

In the past history, for four hundred or five hundred years it was only male leaders, but this year changed to be all women. In the past we didn't have an identity, but now we changed to take a leader role (Noraerii 2022).

While P’Noraerii described experiencing heteropatriarchal attitudes in her community, she was active in resisting, transforming and changing the role of women in her community as a result of her experiences. Like so many of the stories highlighted in this chapter, P’Noraerii, Hseng, Tzarm, Mueda and other Indigenous women used their experiences of racism and discrimination as motivation to create change in their communities and broader society. They were not passive in the face of injustice, but chose to actively challenge the dynamics of oppression they experienced, and make changes so that other Indigenous women would not face their same experiences.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown the confluence of challenges and contexts that Indigenous women activists in Northern Thailand and Shan State are addressing, namely heteropatriarchy, internal colonialism and authoritarianism. In present day Thailand and in the Thai-Burma borderland region, the intersection of these three factors affects Indigenous women’s lives and organizing as they often find themselves at the crossroads of both Thai and Burman militarized, gendered and authoritarian nation-building projects of ethnic exclusion (Laungaramsri 2006). Hundreds of thousands of Indigenous people, including women and their families, have left Burma due to the ongoing war and conflict and are currently residing in Northern Thailand. Indigenous women from Burma living in Thailand have to navigate racial discrimination and Thailand’s militarized border and immigration system (Laungaramsri 2006). Indigenous women in Northern Thailand that are labelled as being within the Thai state also experience these authoritarian-led projects of exclusion, including denial of citizenship, lack of education in Indigenous languages, and other forms of assimilatory policies.

In response to these intersectional challenges, Indigenous women in Northern Thailand and across Asia are leading activist movements which challenge authoritarianism and heteropatriarchy. Despite facing many intersectional challenges, Indigenous women are “not passively giving into state and other pressures for social and cultural change”; they continue to push back, resist, and transform their circumstances (Leepreecha, McCaskill, and Buadaeng 2008, 2). As the following chapters will discuss in detail, Indigenous women activists based in Chiang Mai have responded to the issues discussed here in myriad ways and forms. They have founded organizations for women’s rights, cultural heritage protection, and Indigenous education. They have advocated at the U.N. level and towards the Thai government for increased Indigenous rights, including over land and forest use, the right to citizenship, and the teaching of Indigenous languages in schools (Baird, Leepreecha, and Yangcheepsutjarit 2017; Indigenous Women Network of Thailand and Manushya Foundation 2019). Indigenous women and communities on both sides of the Thai-Burma border often work together in solidarity and support, such as organizing trainings to learn from each other’s successful campaigns (Vaddhanaphuti et al. 2019). Finally, they have worked for women’s peacebuilding organizations, and they have also joined ethnic resistance armies in Burma.

Indigenous women activists in Northern Thailand and the Thai-Burma border may be teachers, organizers, mothers, childfree, revolutionary fighters, NGO staff, workshop facilitators, students, and activists; sometimes they have been many of these things at the same time. Regardless of the path and strategy they choose, the commonality is that they are active and present leaders for change who continuously challenge, fight, subvert and transform the dynamics of violence and oppression that the state attempts to impose upon them. In the next chapter, I will share some of the stories of these activists as well as my own engagement with the

activist community of *Mekong Women for Peace*, in order to depict the emotional and lived experience of being an activist through increasing authoritarianism, the pandemic and the military coup in Burma.

Portrait: Sophia and Nay Chi Oo

Sophia and Nay Chi Oo are both young women activists in their early twenties from Indigenous and religious minority groups (I have not specified which to reduce the likelihood of identifying them) from Shan State, Burma. They travelled to Chiang Mai in June 2022 after spending one year living and working with one of the ethnic armed revolutionary groups in Shan State after the February 2021 military coup.

The three of us met many times during my time in Chiang Mai as they joined the collaborative storytelling project and also loved to play with my three-year-old son. They are young—the same age as most of the university students that I teach—and soft spoken but determined. And until recently, they too had been university students in Shan State before the coup upended their lives. Sophia wrote about her experience joining the civil disobedience movement and then ethnic armed group after the coup:

I did Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) after the coup to protest against military coup. I don't know about the politics, but I did civil disobedience movement because I want to oppose the coup and protest against military coup. Although we tried hard and endured all struggles with hope before the coup, we are hopeless and don't know what to do after all situation (coup).

I know that no matter how hard I try, nothing will be changed under the military government. I focused on the armed revolution and let go of everything for my desire to get back the freedom and the future of our country. Therefore, I decided to join the ethnic armed force from black zone (Sophia 2022, 33).

They faced many physical challenges in the armed group; however, they were resolute to overcome these in their fight for democracy in Burma:

Approximately hundreds of young people arrived at the training camp each day from different places in Myanmar. I have never thought that there would be so many people. We only ate twice per day and drank the water from the streams and rivers due to the

problem of food shortage. Sometimes, there is no salt, but we can eat no matter how bad the taste of food was.

When we swore our promise to appreciate the food before we have a meal, the revolutionary was awake.

“We eat food and curry provided by the country and people”

“We will serve the country and follow the people’s interests” (Sophia 2022, 33).

We met in August 2022 to talk more about their experiences at a coffee shop near their home and office. On the day of the interview, Sophia wears dark blue jeans and a pink button-down blouse, while Nay Chi Oo has on jeans and a long white buttoned shirt over a dark grey t-shirt. Under a large white umbrella and next to an enormous fan that serves the purpose of both blowing away mosquitos and providing noise cover for our conversation, we talk over cheesecake and chocolate cake.

In the interview, Sophia and Nay Chi Oo shared some of the challenges they had faced as well in the camp, including discrimination as young women. They eventually chose to leave due to the culture of sexism where they experienced regular harassment and were limited in their work to “women’s” roles such as sewing badges:

Hannah: What kind of work did you do in the [PDF]?

Sophia: We have to cook every day, and we had to sew clothes and badges [on the uniforms], and we also had to do patrolling since early morning until eight or nine pm and carry a gun. We had to do inventory list when the rice and food bags arrive. We also had to carry weapons. We worked all day. Very tired.

Nay Chi Oo: Very tired, and we have to carry all the guns and weapon materials.

Siphoung: Why did you join the PDF? What was your turning point? What did you think you would be doing there?

Sophia: I have a younger brother and he asked if I wanted to join military training, at the time I was joining a different skills training. Her brother said it would be the last training and I connected with Nay Chi Oo and decided to join. I thought by joining the military training I can get skills and contribute to the PDF in my own state.

Nay Chi Oo: At first our idea was to join the training and just get the skill and come back to our community and these skills would be valuable and needed. We thought the military training skill would help us to be part of the revolution. I planned to go just for a short time and come back.

But later on, after arriving in the camp, the commander asked them to do sewing instead of providing training, and we had to spend a year just doing sewing. Maybe because we are women, and there are no men that had this responsibility [sewing] (Sophia and Nay Chi Oo 2022).

Although young Indigenous women activists like Sophia and Nay Chi Oo have faced many challenges such as these in the revolutionary groups, they see armed revolution, in addition to other strategies of education and training at this point as the best option to overthrow the military regime in Burma:

I gradually realized that armed revolution is the key answer to destroy the grassroot of militarisms that grow up for over 70 years. The economy of our country began to decline, and the inflation is raising day by day due to the COVID pandemic and military coup...

I think that the ways to solve the current situation of Myanmar is armed revolution; on the other hand, we need to keep ourselves updated from news and enhance our human resources. That is the best way to develop the country in a long term (Sophia 2022, 34).

While many Indigenous women have joined the People's Defense Force, and others are continuing their activist work in exile using non-violent strategies, every activist from Burma that I know feels proud and supportive of those who had joined the PDF. The consequences of joining the PDF should not be downplayed or romanticized; the young people who have joined are living in conflict areas with daily bombing risking their lives, and many like Sophia can no longer see their families so as to not endanger them.

Sophia writes that “the hopeless of our country and the loss of next generations’ education opportunity is encouraging to me to keep going on” (2022, 34). While it is not easy, she continues to find new ways to work for justice for Burma from exile in Thailand through education, organizing and activism. From university student to revolutionary fighter in Shan State, and now an intern at an NGO in Chiang Mai, she keeps finding ways to keep going and not give up despite the difficulties she has encountered. Sophia titles her story, “We’re Trying to Be Okay.”³

³ To read Sophia’s story in full from the collaborative storytelling project, please visit https://drive.google.com/file/d/18yIgpcK_ehIWa7OqexaBJHdM2IF1Fwan/view?usp=sharing

CHAPTER 3

Love in the Time of State Violence

Introduction

This chapter is a love story. It is the story of a group of women, who once upon a time, decided to start a group together that will be called here *Mekong Women for Peace*.¹ Dedicated to empowering and connecting Indigenous, minority and marginalized women across borders, a group of young women decided to leave the system and safety of their jobs in order to build their own vision and network. Their love for each other, their love for their work, and their love for their communities has persisted through repressive governments, fights with donors, a global pandemic, and more than one military coup. This is a messy story of healing, hope, and pain. It is a story of resistance. It is a story of love.

The story of *Mekong Women for Peace* began when young women from across Asia, the U.S. and around the world experienced moments of loneliness, isolation and discrimination as children and young adults. For myself, my own experiences with sexism, racism and discrimination both in my personal life and in the NGO world caused me both pain and a passion to ensure that the same did not happen to other marginalized young women. As these women and I came to know each other while working in NGOs in Northern Thailand, we found a commonality of experience. We had all found ways to thrive and resist the conditions of *slow violence* (Nixon 2011) which characterized our lives.

In my own case, coming to Thailand after years of experiencing state discrimination and violence as an Arab and Asian American in the U.S. gave me the opportunity to meet other

¹ As noted in the introduction to this dissertation, this is a pseudonym due to the current security situation for activists in Thailand and Burma.

women from Asia and around the world who had also experienced marginalization because of their identity. Whether they were Tai in Burma, or Muslim in Thailand, they too had been called terrorists by their government, and they too were finding ways to keep their strength and belief in themselves alive despite the hegemonic societies they lived in. We formed our own transnational network, called *Mekong Women for Peace*, together with Indigenous and minority women from across the Mekong as well as other countries around the world. Through our network, we translated our experiences of disempowerment, marginalization, and oppression into spaces of healing and empowerment for other marginalized women. We did so through programs that would nurture, support and uplift other marginalized women, including trainings, internship and leadership development programs. Our programs also brought Indigenous and ethnic minority women together in spaces where they could learn and exchange with each other across borders. Through this work, we created a transnational “community of resistance” (Davis 2011; Wiebe 2016a, 249).

In this chapter, I share the *affective* dimensions of the story of *Mekong Women for Peace*, a group that I am intimately entwined with myself. By doing so, I bring a feminist and intersectional perspective to the study of social movements by looking beyond the exterior nature of campaigns, activism and social movements. Instead, I emphasize here the importance of how activism affects our human, lived, everyday experiences. I hope to show how activism both hurts and heals us on an intimate level.

As a foundation, this chapter asserts that speaking of feelings and experiences in the context of activist movements *is* theory. As Dian Million states in naming these epistemologies as *felt theory*, for Indigenous women, their lived experiences and emotions, including “pain and grief and hope...[continue] to be segregated as a “feminine” experience, as polemic, or at worst

as not knowledge at all” (Million 2009, 54). Yet, not only are these feelings equally valid as forms of knowledge, they are also incredibly powerful. As Million writes in speaking to Indigenous women, “our voices rock the boat and perhaps the world. They are dangerous” (2009, 55). Because Indigenous women’s feelings and experiences are dangerous, they are marginalized, sidelined and “challenged ferociously” by academic gatekeepers (Million 2009, 64). Indigenous women and women of color have struggled to have our experiences and knowledge taken seriously and be accepted as legitimate within the academy (Anzaldúa and Moraga 1983; Million 2009).

While many well-known social movement scholars focus mainly on tactics, strategies, political opportunities and other external factors in social movements (e.g. Bob 2005; Goodwin and Jasper 2015a; Keck and Sikkink 1998) it is clear to me as an activist myself that we are missing an important point if we do not also consider the people in our movements’ interior lives. Even for those scholars who are most focused on how social movements achieve their goals, the study of emotions and relationships is critical; the interior worlds of activists, including our own emotions, health and relationships, are some of the most important factors behind the scenes in whether movements strengthen or collapse.

There *are* a number of social movement scholars who study emotions and affect within the field of sociology. Much of this work focuses on categorizing, labelling and analyzing protestors’ usage and engagement with emotions as a tool or mobilizing force in their work (e.g. Goodwin and Jasper 2006; Jasper 2011; Ellefsen and Sandberg 2022; Ruiz-Junco 2013). However, many of the scholars do not seem to identify (at least explicitly) as part of the social movements they study, and it is striking to me how much objective distancing can be found in the literature on emotions in social movements. The emotions discussed in this field are

predominantly treated as objects of study, and as tools that activists use strategically to mobilize others, rather than feelings and emotions that the writers themselves experience. In this chapter, it is important for me to include my own emotional responses and experiences, rather than claim the role of a distant observer. Including my own emotional experiences in this chapter provides a richer and more layered account of what it is truly like to experience emotions within social movements.

As well as focusing on emotions, intimacy, stress and trauma in the context of activism, this chapter takes a decolonial approach to these topics. When speaking of emotions, intimacy and relationships for activist women who have experienced marginalization, it is impossible not to speak of stress and trauma. Despite living under ongoing conditions of racism, colonialism and marginalization, the women in our network have continued to survive, thrive, and resist. Yet, it is undeniable that the situation is far from “peachy” (Tuck 2009, 419). Burnout, trauma, and physical illnesses are rife among activist women in my communities and networks, including myself.

While this is all true, we also need to find a way to speak of these issues without reproducing colonial tropes of “damaged, diseased, or unhealthy” (Simpson 2017, 102-3) Indigenous communities and communities of color. I hope to do so in this chapter by turning away from the biomedical approach to trauma that can be used to pathologize Indigenous and communities of color. Instead, I approach the conversation around healing in the context of *Mekong Women for Peace* through the lens of intimacy in community, everyday acts of decolonial love, and centering justice and sovereignty as healing. Fundamentally, as bell hooks notes, we are rarely “healed in isolation” (2000, 215), and it is by inverting the West’s focus on

individual healing and trauma to instead focus on community, that makes for a decolonial approach to intimacy and healing.

When speaking of the topic of healing, intimacy and trauma, it is important to acknowledge my own positionality in this topic and in the context that I am speaking from. As an ally and supporter to Indigenous and ethnic minority social movements in Northern Thailand, I have multiple overlapping identities of privilege as well as shared connections and experiences. I see myself as both an insider and outsider in this community of activists, as I have discussed in detail in the introduction to this dissertation. In terms of privilege and oppression, our experiences of state violence are very different; I have experienced the threats of racial violence, imprisonment, surveillance and wiretapping, government harassment and deportation intimately first hand while living as an Arab-American in the U.S. However, this is still very different from the type of authoritarian violence that regimes in Burma and China employ against activists which can often involve threats to life as well as forms of totalitarian surveillance and harassment beyond my own experiences.

It is also salient for me to note that I do not identify as Indigenous; when I use the term “we” in this essay, I refer to some of the common experiences that women of color, Global South and Indigenous women may face, as well as shared experiences that we as a team of women from various marginalized backgrounds faced in the formation of *Mekong Women for Peace*. However, I think it is important to acknowledge that the experiences of Indigenous peoples and people of color should not be conflated or equivocated, whether in settler colonial contexts (Tuck and Yang 2012) or when considering global forms of privilege and repression. Where I cite Indigenous authors in this essay, I do not presume an understanding of how Indigenous peoples heal, engage or disengage with healing, nor do I think it is my place to do so. Healing, love, and

intimacy are deeply personal experiences, and I do not seek to tell anyone else what they need or what will work for them in terms of their own healing. As Cherríe Moraga writes, “the only way...is to write so completely from your heart what is your personal truth” (2000, vi). I hope I have done so here, but I am open to learning and take responsibility for any mistakes I make in the rest of this chapter.

In this chapter, I share the story of the formation of the international women’s activist network, *Mekong Women for Peace* in Chiang Mai through the lens of my own as well as another key member Siphoung’s experiences. Combining theory and real-life experience, I weave together stories that highlight our lived experiences as women activists working under authoritarianism and state violence over a decade from 2013 to 2023. Through this process, I hope to show our experience of forming a *community of resistance* (Davis 2011). I believe that we do our social movements a disservice if we do not acknowledge the spectrum of feelings and experiences they bring us, including pain and joy, intimacy and community, trauma and burnout, decolonial love, and justice and sovereignty. Activism is so often painted with a dramatic, colourful brush that only shows the highlights of protests, singing, marching, and those moments of connection, hope and excitement. If we do not also show the day-to-day, we risk misrepresenting and caricaturizing ourselves. This ultimately can cause burnout and disillusion when it becomes impossible to live up to that beautiful picture that we have painted.

In this chapter, first I share how the formation of *Mekong Women for Peace* was an act of decolonial intimacy and community building, as well as some of the challenges that arise when building intimacy in community. I then talk about our experiences during the military coup in Burma and global pandemic, and how these traumatic experiences as well as everyday stressors for activist women can cause burnout and disconnection. However, as the third section shows,

everyday acts of decolonial love, including self-love and self-care, are also used to sustain and nourish ourselves. Finally, I share what life is looking like for *Mekong Women for Peace* coming on the other side of the pandemic and coup, and how justice and sovereignty are always at the heart of a decolonial approach to love, healing and intimacy.

Part One: A Story of Intimacy and Community under Authoritarianism

The Watermelon House

Chiang Mai, Thailand

January 2015

January is known as cool season in Chiang Mai, when the temperatures drop enough to wear a sweater or jacket on your motorbike in the evenings. It's also referred to as high season; usually in reference to the tourists visiting Thailand who arrive in droves to traverse the temples and cool off with fruit smoothies, but the winter is also a kind of high season for those with various connections to Chiang Mai to meet, gather and celebrate.

Today's celebration is a momentous one. After deciding to found our own organization eighteen months ago, we have finally secured the support to open our own office and community space in Chiang Mai. Our organization, we envision, will be a place where women from marginalized backgrounds from all around the world can find support, healing, and connection with each other. We plan to do trainings, workshops, leadership development, and exchanges between women.

Despite, or perhaps because our organization focuses on connecting women across borders, we're all often based in different places. In reality, this means periods of loneliness and isolation, punctuated by high spirited gatherings of friends and colleagues. Today is one of these

moments of gathering and connection. Siphoung² is based in Burma; Kim, Sandar and I in Thailand are opening the Chiang Mai office. Siphoung comes for a visit to celebrate the opening of the Chiang Mai office. It's natural for us that a party with a great deal of food and drinks is in order.

The office itself is tucked in a quiet residential neighbourhood in Chiang Mai. It is a small, three-bedroom concrete house painted in a bright mint green. Standing in front of the house at the entrance, the jade-colored tiles hanging over the front window glisten like jewels in the warm winter sun. Envisioning the garden as a healing space for activist women, we fill the outside with plants. There are bright orange bird of paradise stalks that border the walls; papyrus stems with tall, fan shaped, feathery stalks; neon pink and purple ginger plants, and hanging orchids and succulents around a small sitting area. Tiny fish nibble at the red and pink water lily plants, while dragonflies flit across the garden. It's quiet, except for the frogs who bellow and croak at night, as well as the occasional motorbike and ice cream truck that drives through the neighbourhood in the daytime, jangling a happy tune.

Inside, the walls of the house are chewing-gum pink with mint green trim around the windows and doors; we nickname it the "Watermelon House." The colors feel almost luridly bright to me at first, but eventually grow on me to feel quirky, eclectic and cosy. The house shows our personality right away; no serious boardrooms or stark masculine tones for us. It's so much more than an office for us. It's a place where women activists from across Asia and around the world can gather, a safe house, a place of connection and belonging. We install fast Wi-Fi, because for women activists from around the region, the Watermelon House can be a place where any website or information can be accessed freely. Instead of formal desks and office

² All names have been changed for security reasons and to protect the identity of those written about here.

chairs, we buy brightly coloured Thai traditional floor pillows, foldable low tables to work on, and bamboo woven mats to line the floor. Our goal is to create a space that feels informal, cosy and intimate—“like a coffee shop”—we say jokingly.

For the opening party, we roast strips of chicken, beef and vegetables for mugata, a Thai-style barbeque which is steamed on coals outdoors. A colleague cooks tofu nway, Tai noodles in a creamy chickpea sauce with crunchy peanuts, chili, sesame oil and sweet palm sugar on a huge metal wok; another friend mixes lapetho, a sour, spicy and crunchy Burmese pickled tea leaf salad with tomatoes, fresh garlic and chillies. We all drink Leo beer, orange juice, and Spy, a sickly sweet bright pink wine cooler sold at 7-11. The house and garden are full of friends and colleagues, mainly Indigenous and ethnic minority women from Thailand, Burma, other Asian countries and the U.S. A friend from Burma folds hundreds of paper butterflies in blue and white. We stick them to the wall in a swirling and undulating pattern, the butterflies expanding and reaching towards their freedom.

The next day, Kim, Siphoung and I have breakfast together in the garden with a few friends and partners. We share eggs, dark roasted coffee, and Tai-style noodles. We talk about the joys of the evening; the food we ate and the friends we saw, as well as the food we are eating and sharing today. We also share our concerns about the difficulties we are having with our donors, the upcoming NGO law in a neighbouring country that threatens to vastly restrict our projects there, and the challenges Siphoung is facing in her community organizing work against a large-scale hydropower dam project in Burma. The mosquitos are trying to get us, so we have to put out three fans and burn mosquito coils to spend time in the garden together. But it is worth it for the moment of connection together, which we know will be short lived before we all get separated again. It's worth it all, just to be together.

Intimacy and Community

The *act* of forming the *Mekong Women for Peace* network was a radical undertaking of building community and intimacy between women who had experienced marginalization. By coming together as a network, we were able to build up our own power, voices, and strength. This action was in direct response to the logics of heteropatriarchy, racism, and neo-colonialism that seek to undervalue, undermine and silence marginalized women's voices and power, and keep us separated from each other. *Mekong Women for Peace's* formation *did* have strategic goals, including to increase the leadership of Indigenous, minority and women of color in social movements across Asia, as well as to build networks and alliances between historically marginalized women globally. However, these goals would never have been developed without a basis of trust and intimacy between the women who decided to form the network. In this section, I will discuss how intimacy with each other and in community is one of the most foundational ways that women seek to decolonize healing and build alternatives to logics of state as well as heteropatriarchal violence.

Indigenous and women of color scholars have theorized how the intimate can be a space of both violence and healing, due to the colonial logics of heteropatriarchy and heteronormativity (Carby 2019; Osorio 2021). This may be especially true for those who are women of color, Indigenous women, and 2SQ (Two Spirit and Queer), who represent the “lived alternative to hetero-normative constructions of gender, political systems, and rules of descent” (L. B. Simpson 2017, 51). Most of the women in our network, including myself, came to *Mekong Women for Peace* having experienced intimate forms of heteropatriarchal or racist violence (including emotional or physical violence) in our personal lives as well as in social movements. While the

intimate can hurt us, these intimate relationships can also be a space of healing, as *Mekong Women for Peace* intended to be.

Jamaica Heolimeleikalani Osorio theorizes pilina, or intimacy, as a Kānaka Maoli alternative to settler modes of governing relationships, gender and sexuality, especially heteropatriarchy and cisheteronormativity (Osorio 2021). Central to Osorio's work is the concept of the '*upena (net) of intimacies*. The '*upena* is important because "many people seem to think of relationships as ecosystems existing between two people at a time" (Osorio 2021, xxi). The '*upena* allows us to see relationships as taking place within a constellation of relationships with others and the land, with various rights, pleasures and kuleana that come with these relationships (Osorio 2021). Although this concept is rooted in a Kanaka Maoli epistemology and I don't intend to suggest here that it should be transferred to Southeast Asia, the '*upena of intimacies* resonates when I think of *Mekong Women for Peace's* vision to create a global web of connections, intimacy and support between marginalized women.

As well as Osorio's work, many women of color and Black scholars also emphasize the importance of intimacy, community, and interconnection. As hooks explains, the foundation of intimacy in community is in "healthy interdependency" with each other (2000, 214). adrienne marie browne defines interdependency as "the idea...that we can meet each other's needs in a variety of ways, that we can truly lean on others and they can lean on us" (2017, 87). In *Mekong Women for Peace*, interdependency has taken place by supporting each other and showing up in the ways that we are most able to, according to each person's unique strengths and abilities. This might, to give some real-life examples, include writing a grant on my part; helping sign a rental lease or open a bank account on a Thai team member's part; grassroots fundraising to provide supplies for a protest, or bringing food and snacks to share from one's hometown to a meeting.

These acts of interdependency are rarely done because we are being paid to do so, or feel obligated to do so. They are small, everyday acts of solidarity, support, and interdependent intimacy, done with the goal of meeting each other's needs, and based in love and care.

Greed, capitalism, consumerism, colonialism, racism, fear, the will to dominate, and desire for material advancement are the opposite of interdependency and what keep people in isolation and away from community (hooks 2000). As hooks writes, "greed violated the spirit of connectedness and community that is natural to human survival" (2000, 117). In the case of *Mekong Women for Peace*, choosing to work together for very little, if no material gain, was an act in opposition to the dominant culture of capitalism, materialism and greed.

Intimacy through connection in community can be cultivated through practicing a culture of giving and reciprocity rather than a culture of greed. Sulak Sivaraksa suggests that in the Asian context, we can do so by re-connecting with "traditional Asian cultural values...[which] stress the spiritual side of a person as well as the group to which he or she belongs. Personal growth is always related to social well being...Personal achievement at the expense of others is frowned upon. Exploitation, confrontation, and competition are to be avoided, with unity, communality, and harmony are encouraged" (Sivaraksa 1992, 5). By stressing the needs of each other and the group, *Mekong Women for Peace* members became giving, contributing members of a community.

In contrast, cultures of consumerism, capitalism and individualism prey upon our senses of loneliness, isolation and greed, and can cause us to either isolate ourselves from community or cause direct harm to others in community. Sobonfu Somé writes on this topic; "when you don't have community, you are not listened to; you don't have a place you can go to and feel that you really belong...this disempowers the psyche, making you vulnerable to consumerism and all the

things that come along with it” (1997, 22). The more isolated and lonelier we are, the more vulnerable we are to consumerism, which convinces “people to buy disconnection, insatiable hunger and emptiness” (L. B. Simpson 2013, 109). Alongside consumerism and capitalism, Western and dominant cultures of individualism can cause individuals who have internalized these messages to act in ways that damage communities.

Working in Thailand, traits such as over-confidence and competitiveness, which are often valued by Western and heteropatriarchal cultures, are often liabilities when working in Indigenous and grassroots social movements. The influence of cultural values such as *greng jai* and *anade* (being considerate of others; avoiding causing inconvenience, discomfort or embarrassment to other people) and *jai yen* (keeping a calm heart; avoiding raising your voice, getting angry, overexcited or rushed) mean that it is especially important to approach community work with patience, humility, deference, and a willingness to listen. When we internalize traits and beliefs such as over-confidence and self-superiority, especially for those of us raised with privilege, this can result in individuals in movements making decisions without consulting the group, taking on too much work for themselves, or acting in ways that belittle or undermine others. This can cause intimacy and trust within communities to be damaged or ruptured.

The type of organic intimacy that many Indigenous women’s movements in Chiang Mai base themselves upon can be challenging. Without accountability mechanisms, it can be exploited by individuals who are not putting community or group needs first. When there is no clear leader, because decisions are made as a group, then some people may see a power vacuum that they will try to fill themselves. In addition, knowing that they are unlikely to be fired or called out for their behavior can create issues of accountability. Siphoung, an activist in her

thirties who has been leading her own organization in Shan State discussed this issue in talking about her group's working policy:

If I feel that oh, this person is very working so hard, so we feel she deserved to, to work with us, as a staff, so then sort of just recruit organically. The bad thing about our way of conduct is we kind of recruit people very organically, and the good thing is we know each other very well. The bad thing is, if they don't work, if they don't work effectively or efficiently, so we have no way to say no [laughs]. Because it's on the relationship (Siphoung 2022).

Intimacy and relationships involve far more than acts of support and love. There is also frustration, irritation, a great deal of gossip and complaining, pain, hurt feelings, and sometimes even violence—as well as joy and healing. We do ourselves and our work a disservice if we do not acknowledge how *difficult* in fact intimacy is. These difficulties are particularly enhanced under conditions of authoritarianism and state violence, where so many of us are grappling with internalized behaviours, including trauma, insecurities, anger, paranoia and anxiety. These internalized behaviors can come out in unhealthy or aggressive ways if we direct them towards each other instead of the root causes of our oppressions.

At the same time, despite its difficulties, intimacy can also create lifelong bonds and connections that go beyond any social movement's short-term goals. Our friendships and relationships can build new realities, forms of resistance and ways of living and working together. The act of creating *Mekong Women for Peace* was to create a new ontology where marginalized women could build their strength, voices and power together in reciprocal intimacy. To have created this reality, and to continue to create it in our everyday work, is an ongoing act of courage and resistance that should be acknowledged.

Part Two: Pandemic, Coups, Connections and Disconnection: A Story of Trauma, Healing, Stress, and Activist Burnout

April 2021

A Basement in Northern California and a Safe House in Shan State, Burma

Over the next six years since the night of the opening party, *Mekong Women for Peace* grows and changes in different forms. The Watermelon House only lasts one year; the police show up one day and the landlord turns out to have legal issues, meaning our team no longer feels safe to stay there. We move to another neighbourhood where we continue our work, full of quirky artists and coffee shops. The new house is a little more spacious and recently remodelled, but I never quite feel the same about it as that first space. Regardless, we continue on; we open a center in Shan State as well as Chiang Mai and hire interns and staff. Hundreds of young women activists become a part of our network through our trainings and leadership development programs. There are many beautiful moments of connection, healing and exchange that happen during our workshops and between our team.

At the same time, we constantly deal with stress, trauma and fear of investigation from the increasingly authoritarian regimes that surround us on all sides. We never manage to find a stable long-term donor to support our work and are constantly applying for grants and trying various forms of income generation projects. The stress of worrying about having enough money to pay rent and salaries is overwhelming. In 2020 and 2021, we eventually have to close our physical centers, due to lack of funds in Thailand and the military coup in Myanmar; this is both deeply sad and also turns out to be extremely prudent with the soon-to-arrive global pandemic. After I start trying for a family and decide to pursue a PhD, I step down from being a staff member and continue to be involved part time in the organization as a member of the network and part time consultant.

Coming to early 2021, we are one year into the pandemic and two months post-military coup in Burma. Like many others, I learned about the military coup in Burma from the news online with shock and dismay. My Facebook feed, which is now my only portal to the outside world, has been taken over by photos and videos of colleagues in Burma protesting on the streets. Friends from Burma, Thailand and the U.S. and I have also organized to send money and safety gear to protestors who are fighting for their lives against the tanks and weaponry of the military junta.

At the same time, several million people across the world have already died from coronavirus, and we have all spent the past year isolating at home, afraid, and watching the COVID toll numbers rise and spread towards our various corners of the world. By a confluence of only-in-a-pandemic set of circumstances, I've found myself isolating at my in-law's house in Northern California together with my husband's family, husband, and two-year-old son. Aside from them and a few months stay with my parents at the start of the pandemic, I haven't touched, hugged, or even stood close to any other people in over a year. The few times I have seen other friends or family, we have stood outdoors at six-foot distances, wearing badly made handmade masks and fogged up glasses, and then gone home and had panic attacks and nightmares about dying. The combination of the pandemic, coup, PhD, toddler, in-laws and isolation hasn't been great for my mental health. I'm still trying to take care of myself though, and one way I have been doing so is to exercise every night after my son goes to bed. I'm in the middle of my workout one night, when a call comes from a friend in Burma.

9:14pm, April 17, 2021, in my father-in-law's basement

I'm halfway through my thirty-minute dance workout when I go to check the timer on my phone. I'm exercising in the basement in an attempt to have some privacy from my in-laws.

Down here, the blinds are shut, so I can't see the night-time forest beyond the house outside, though I know the fox and racoons are probably making their evening raids of our food scraps. Dua Lipa is blaring in the background of the workout that I'm streaming on the television; I'm alone down here except for my cats, who are staring balefully at me, annoyed at the intrusion to their peace and quiet. Their eyes bore into me, willing me to sit down and be a human lap as quickly as possible.

Picking up my phone next to the television during a break in the workout, I see a missed call. +95 means it's from Burma. I frantically pick up my phone. "Shit, how did I miss it?" I mutter agitatedly to myself. I call Siphoung back and she tells me that she's online and wants to talk. Siphoung and I have been in touch throughout the coup, fundraising and supporting young people who have been protesting and those who have been arrested or are now in hiding. She's also currently in hiding herself, and the only way for us to communicate since she went to hide out in a remote village is via our phones as she can't get on email.

I open the encrypted app we have been using to communicate and try to call her. No response. I try again. No response. She tries me again. No response. We go back and forth about ten times before giving up. It is because of a bad connection or government interference? I don't know but I feel that queasy feeling every time I have to worry about government surveillance.

"Shall we just chat here?" I type. "Yes," she writes back and then updates me on the fundraising. We have been raising money for the protestors and she wants to have someone else take over doing the bank transfer. In the past few days, she has sent money using her personal bank account. I wince because I am worried for her and know how dangerous it is to have sent money from her personal account directly, but the situation was urgent. I agree that it is a good idea to have someone else take over who is already out of the country. Truly, I don't get the

sense that there is anything she really needs to talk to me about, but I have the feeling that perhaps talking with someone outside Burma helps her feel connected to the outside world, while she is in hiding and now that the military junta has cut off internet access.

It occurs to me it's strange that my phone won't call her, so I restart it. And now, voila! We're talking on the phone. Just that human contact of voice feels so much better. It's been almost two weeks since we last talked, as she has been in the village with no internet access as it is no longer safe for her to stay in the city. She tells me about how she and another woman tried to organize a workshop in the village where they have been hiding out. But afterwards, another headman called the village headman to say that her husband should go hide in the forest and he refused. They think that someone in the village is trying to intimidate them, and assumed that her husband must have organized the training, because he is a man. "When they arrest people, they just come and do it" she says, "No warning."

I ask her if we can turn the video on and it feels good when it works. Probably the problem was just with my phone, I tell her. I'm reassuring myself and her at the same time. I can see she's in the downstairs of someone's house with fiber internet. She's sitting in an outdoor seating area with low wooden chairs and furniture. Her son is standing next to her crying, and she apologizes about it laughingly. I laugh too, "Don't worry, it's always loud here too, my son's asleep right now, so it's the only time he's ever quiet," I tell her. It's a moment of normalcy, joking about our loud toddlers, in the midst of a pandemic and a coup.

I wonder if I should mention about the idea of her going to Thailand. I know a lot of people are leaving now and I just want her to be safe too. I feel torn though, because I don't want to seem like I am discouraging her or don't believe in the revolution she is fighting for. I settle for a somewhat feeble, "Be careful and let us know if you need anything." For the first time ever,

she tells me “Yes, if I really need anything I’ll let you know.” That’s when I know how bad the situation is, because Siphoung is not one to ever ask for help.

“Thank you all for your support, if we are not successful, I will feel guilty” she says. I tell her not to feel guilty, her friends are supporting her because we want people to be safe, not only because of a political aim. “We still have hope because now we have a new government, if the international community recognizes this government, we will win,” says Siphoung. She is always one to find hope, even under the hardest of circumstances.

We hang up the call and I sit down to write these notes, and I feel like the worst person in the world to even think of putting a single word of this in my thesis. I write this entry with deep reluctance. Now, upon reflection, I can see that the writing, the recording of this experience is important so that we don’t forget what it was like to live through those days.

I finish my notes. I don’t finish my exercise video; I immediately start browsing through Facebook, searching for updates from friends in Burma instead. My feed is a surreal mix of friends showing off their stay-at-home baking projects, mashed up with bloody scenes from protests in Burma, inspirational quotes, and masked social distanced selfies. Really, what has happened to the world? Within a few minutes, I’m simultaneously scrolling through social media, frantically reading the news in Burma and the U.S., and checking the COVID infection and death toll tracker on two local news sources and the New York Times. Why doesn’t my phone ring when people call? It’s literally my only connection to the outside world and my friends in Burma. I really need to fix it, but stepping inside a Verizon store right now presumably means I will get COVID and give it to everyone in my family and then we will all die, so I guess I’ll just have to figure it out myself. I try to go for a walk in the woods nearby the house to calm

myself down, but the sight of a person from a distance makes my heart start pounding. I shut the doors and stay inside until I feel better and calm down.

The next morning, recognizing that I need some support, I message another member of *Mekong Women for Peace* who is a mindfulness and trauma healing trainer. She guides me through exercises to calm down and reconnect with my body; she helps me see that the adrenaline coursing through my body and causing my hands to clench in semi-permanent fists comes from a great desire to protect myself, my family and support my friends throughout a pandemic and a coup. She reminds me that the exercise is a way of healing my body, of releasing these pent-up stress chemicals. With her support, which we also provide to the women in our network in Burma, she's able to help me and the women in our network move some of the trauma through our bodies and heal.

Trauma, Stress and Burnout Under State Violence

I wish that the story of *Mekong Women for Peace* would be an uncomplicated story of women's empowerment, healing, and living happily ever after. Yet, the reality of building community between women experiencing state violence means that repression and trauma, as well as acts of community and self-love will continue to occur.

In this section, I share about how trauma, stress and burnout affect marginalized women in social movements and the forms of stress and trauma that are experienced, including political violence, surveillance, neo-colonialism and donors. As the most recent examples of the military coup in Myanmar as well as the global pandemic show, these are not abstract political events that actors in social movements respond to, but also deeply personal, lived experiences of trauma, healing, resilience, disconnection and connection for women activists. The connections that

Mekong Women for Peace had created were not broken by these experiences, but they were both strained and strengthened.

Trauma

It is important when speaking of trauma in relation to Indigenous women and women of color to first acknowledge the causes of trauma as colonialism and state violence. This is in order to avoid playing into any stereotypes or medicalized forms of trauma discourse that pathologize Indigenous women or women of color as damaged or in need of intervention.

The causes of political trauma for Indigenous and women of color come from *structural* experiences of violence. The root causes of these structural forms of violence and domination are greed and the desire to dominate on the part of oppressors. These have been expressed for the past five hundred years of European and ethnic majority domination through colonialism, capitalism, consumerism, slavery, land grabbing and violence.

Even in contexts without European colonization, in many cases ethnic majority groups took up the tools and tactics of Western colonialism in order to defeat the West. This often meant attempting to forcibly incorporate Indigenous and minority peoples into ethnic majority nation-states. In the context of Northern Thailand, while Thailand was never formally colonized by a Western power, the ethnic majority Siamese rulers instead chose to “enter the contest with the European powers to conquer and incorporate” Indigenous and minority groups (Winichakul 1994, 101). Meanwhile in Burma, Indigenous peoples have been working for the past sixty years for the right to self-determination after a military coup in 1962 led by the ethnic Burman majority army (Fink 2001, 29) under conditions of internal colonialism (Casanova 1965). On both sides of the border in Thailand and Burma, Indigenous peoples and women in particular have experienced the trauma of land grabbing and the stealing of land as well as denial of

citizenship status. Women in particular have experienced the confluence of patriarchy and ethnonationalism through violence as a weapon of war as well as sexual violence and human trafficking (Indigenous Women Network of Thailand and Manushya Foundation 2019, 34; Women's League of Burma 2016, 24-25).

Furthermore, in authoritarian contexts as well as for groups targeted for surveillance in so-called-democratic countries, various forms of state violence and surveillance can also cause what I call here *surveillance trauma*. These experiences of state surveillance can include wiretapping, monitoring activists' email and social media, the use of undercover spies and informants, arrests, and torture. The result can be similar to many other forms of trauma, including racialized trauma, where those targeted may experience anger, insomnia, hypervigilance and/or loss of confidence, as I have experienced myself (Muslim Wellness Foundation 2018). However, surveillance trauma is unique in that it is specifically designed to cause fear, paranoia, and isolation. It is a weapon deliberately, artfully and intentionally employed by the state in order to weaken communities and social movements. Surveillance trauma means that the very act of being an activist becomes an act of great resistance; it also means that being an activist comes with very significant risks.

The topic of trauma was on the minds of many women activists from Burma during the time of this research, having gone through the emotionally turbulent and traumatic experience living through a military coup and pandemic at the same time. Mwe, an activist in her thirties who had been living in Burma for several years up until the coup, shared her feelings at this time living in exile in Thailand in 2022:

When I arrived in Chiang Mai, I feel safe. But, because I arrived in Thailand...in 2021, and at that time, I live in Bangkok. I feel I don't understand at the time, and I feel sad but I couldn't stop to think about Myanmar every day like, you know, kind of trauma for three or four months and then with the friends that we came together, they all been

working in different organization, you know, we always keep updating. So even though wherever you are, we still have—just our physical stay away from Myanmar. Our mind is inside (Mwe 2022).

Thin and Siho, two women activists still based in Burma as of 2022 shared their experiences with political trauma and their own strategies for healing in a group discussion:

Thin: During the period of COVID...I can calm down, and do meditation, something like that. But after the coup...it was so suffering and cannot do, because even small things that contribute to the society, as much as I could, I can do it, but to peaceful my mind, I could not do it. And since the coup I could not do meditation at all, even five minutes, I cannot concentrate. Every bad thing coming, all the time.

Hannah: Yeah, I also feel...Since COVID and everything else happening...I can't meditate at all. I don't want to close my eyes [laughter]. Yeah, it's...I think when we are in the really terrible situation, with the trauma, we also don't need to meditate if it's not helpful.

Siphoung: Yes, yes, it's not helpful, yeah. Unless you calm down, you cannot do it, because the more you pressure yourself to do meditation, the more bad things came in.

Hannah: Yes, it can make you feel worse.

Siphoung: It's right, yeah.

Hannah: Better to do anything that makes you feel better. Doesn't have to be sitting quietly, can be going for a walk, or listening to music, anything.

Siho: The healing part for me, until before early 2022, I was also upset a lot and suffering from this situation [of the coup]. But after 2022, I changed the way I heal myself, is go to the gym for two hours, and also tired, and also learn English training, and join many training, and after that I go back, and when I can take full rest because tired from the gym, and fully sleep, and get fresh in the morning. Otherwise, I get tired and headaches.

After the coup, for six months I could not sleep very well, and I got headaches for one part, and it's also related to nerves. And maybe because of stressful, and cannot sleep well, so since then I tried to change my lifestyle and hang out with friends, yeah. Because of the fear as well, because many of our friends got arrested. And from one, and then, they, the connection one, because from the investigation, they ask a lot, and then they have to say, because they...torture. That's why people had to provide information, so, from the connection, and many friends already arrested, so I'm also afraid. Even though I live in the safe house, I didn't feel it is safe at all, so later on I

came back home, and there is no more arrests from my connections, that's why I feel better since then. Now I get better and as normal as before, I can concentrate my work and I can do as before.

Hannah: You can find a way, right, that works for you, and to get better?

Siho: I also have many fishes and also plants, I bought a lot and just enjoy with them [laughter] (Cherry, Saw Kalyar, Siho, Siphoung and Thin 2022).

Despite having experienced deeply traumatic events, most activists were aware of themselves and their own emotions, and finding ways to heal and manage themselves; it is important to acknowledge this and avoid portraying activist women who have been through trauma as victims lacking in agency.

Trauma Healing Concerns and Critiques

When talking about trauma, while wellness and mental health discourse may be useful in some ways, it is important to reject medicalized trauma work which pathologizes communities of color and Indigenous communities as damaged and in need of intervention. Natalie Clark, who is a trauma counselor and researcher with Indigenous young women, finds that the trauma framework from the West may be used as a “shock and awe” model to justify interventions into Indigenous communities (Clark 2016b). Clark argues instead for a strengths-based rather than deficit-based approach to Indigenous healing, centering the strengths and resiliency of Indigenous women, and highlighting connection to culture, language and land as some of the potential sources of strength.

Due to “shock and awe,” Million cautions that the therapeutic model of trauma is detrimental to Indigenous nations’ self-determination claims. As the trauma model is based on victimhood, it can mean giving up power; this has certainly been the case throughout the history of Western psychology and psychiatry’s tendency to incarcerate and drug those deemed

‘mentally ill’. Furthermore, the “pathology” model of trauma healing which depicts Indigenous peoples as damaged, is dangerous for Indigenous peoples’ sovereignty work as “damaged” people can be claimed by the colonial state as unable to self-govern (Million 2013).

Furthermore, when trauma is discussed as an “individual health problem” this can be used to obscure the role of the colonial state as the perpetrator of violence (Clark 2016b, 1). Million shows that the trauma model is linked with rise of neoliberalism which puts focus on the individual’s self-responsibility to work “on ‘oneself’ to become more effective, vital, or productive” in the capitalist society (2013, 149). This dynamic can play out when organizations only focus on wellness, meditation or trauma healing among marginalized peoples without addressing or acknowledging the root causes of community trauma.

Even the turn from the language of “victim” to “empowered survivor” may feed into the neoliberal, individualistic model of pathologized trauma healing. As Brianna Delker, Rowan Salton and Kate McLean note, what they term the “redemptive master narrative” expects victims to recover from trauma, share their stories, heal and ultimately become advocates for others (2020, 252). Some people may find healing through such a process and the critique is not of individuals who do so. The concern about the “redemptive master narrative” is that it pushes individualistic, American ways of thinking, uses positivity as a way to mask violent conditions, views healing as a linear process, and expects individuals to pull themselves up by their bootstraps, get over whatever they have suffered, and become a feel-good example for others (Delker, Salton, and McLean 2020).

Delker et al. point out that there are many reasons why healing is not a linear process, or why individuals might not choose to publicly identify as having experienced trauma. Indigenous communities and Global South communities are still experiencing racism and colonialism, so the

trauma experienced is ongoing and thus not healed from. It may not be safe or healing to talk publicly about trauma, particularly when it is ongoing and when the perpetrators of the trauma hold power and have not been held accountable. Finally, the “redemptive master narrative” around trauma pushes positive emotions and punishes the expression of emotions such as anger, rage and bitterness, which many Indigenous and minority communities also feel for good reasons. For these reasons, we should not expect people to ‘heal’ as an end goal, particularly in any type of linear way, or idealize those who choose to share their stories publicly as having healed *more* than people who choose not to talk about their trauma (Delker, Salton, and McLean 2020).

For these reasons, when talking about trauma in the context of Indigenous communities and activist communities, it is important to not frame trauma as an individual issue but rather one related to political contexts and conditions, to reject state-based interventions, and to highlight strengths and resiliency.

Stress and Burnout

In addition to the structural conditions of colonialism and violence which can cause trauma, Indigenous women activists in Northern Thailand face specific stressors due to the nature of their work which can become sources of chronic stress and eventually lead to burnout. These include working for low pay, dealing with donors and short project cycles, cultures of silence and martyrdom, and the expectation that women will engage in “emotional labor” such as facilitating conflicts in activist movements (Gorski and Chen 2015). Another major stressor can be Indigenous women’s dual experiences of racism and sexism in social movements (Blackwell 2011; Trask 1984).

The culture of silence around wellbeing, and lack of support for Indigenous and minority women activists continue to be prevalent problems in activism, although there has been an increase in awareness about this over the past decade. These are serious issues for social movements that need to be talked about and addressed. First, stress and exhaustion can cause physical illnesses including cancer, heart disease and diabetes for women who engage in activism. These are literally matters of life and death for Indigenous and women of color activists. Gloria Anzaldúa died at the age of sixty-one of diabetes; Audre Lorde at fifty-eight of cancer; bell hooks at sixty-nine of kidney failure; and Teresia Kieuea Teaiwa at forty-eight of cancer, all well under the average life expectancy for women in the U.S. which is eighty years old. As Moraga writes, there is a “profound cost...of just being us... ‘stress’ is too benign a term” (Anzaldúa and Moraga 1983, xxiii). It is beyond sad to me that so many of the prominent women of color figures in activism and academia that I admire died too young.

For myself, I had not taken my own diagnosis of borderline diabetes due to years of chronic stress and unhealthy coping mechanisms as an activist seriously until learning about how many women of color activists died early from health issues. I realized that I needed to choose to value my own life and right to live. Over the past few years, I have been able to reverse my prediabetes though decolonizing my diet and physical activity; but not all health issues can be solved or get diagnosed early on. In addition, due to structural violence, women of color and Indigenous women may or may not have access to health support and quality health care, places and time to safely exercise, and information about nutrition and exercise that is culturally grounded and appropriate.

Second, emotional health can suffer as a result of burnout in activism, including depression, insomnia, and panic attacks (Gorski and Chen 2015). Emotional health is just as

important as physical health because it affects our overall quality of life, well-being, our relationships with others, our physical health, and our ability to engage in activism or support others. In my case I experienced insomnia and anxiety after a combination of dealing with increasing authoritarianism and surveillance in the Mekong region, the 2016 U.S. election and Muslim ban, and years of financial stress and experiences of racism while dealing with Western donors. A number of women that I interviewed from Burma also mentioned problems with sleep and insomnia after the coup (Cherry, Saw Kalyar, Siho, Siphoung and Thin 2022). Insomnia, as I have experienced also, is also detrimental to our physical health, as it causes our immune systems to become suppressed and more susceptible to various types of illness.

For Indigenous women activists based in Chiang Mai, one of the biggest causes of daily stress that most identify is the toll of dealing with “endless” cycles of donors, project reports and proposals. As I have experienced myself, the requirements that donors have are often onerous and time consuming. Local activists often feel swamped with the reporting, proposal and auditing requirements, which must often be completed every few months, leaving a lack of time to do the actual on-the-ground work of organizing and campaigning. Furthermore, short term grants are common—often less than a year—which mean that groups frequently find themselves scrambling for funds and trapped in financial instability. Much of the resulting stress that activists face, including short project cycles, endlessly applying for grants, and struggles to pay staff and cover expenses, are rooted in donor organization’s neo-colonial attitudes and systems.

The reality of grassroots NGO work for many people, especially Indigenous women, means dealing simultaneously with donors, low pay (sometimes no pay), internal conflicts, endless proposal and report writing, political crackdowns and state violence, and pressure from family. Almost 50-60% of activists eventually leave social movements due to burnout, which has

a greatly detrimental effect on our social movements' long-term sustainability (Gorski and Chen 2015). While many people start out in their twenties with great excitement about this type of work, by the time many women reach their thirties and forties the pressure and stress become too much; burnout and fantasies of quitting have become a common topic of conversation among myself and my friends and colleagues. Tzarm, an educational activist and I also talked about how the isolation and years of working from home online during the pandemic had exacerbated these trends, resulting in many of our colleagues quitting their jobs. Yet, many are torn between the desire to escape our work, a sense of commitment to the work, and an uncertainty about what else we could do, as we discussed:

Tzarm: I feel like we all want to stay with ourselves [after the pandemic]. I started to wear my glasses [laughter] after I start working with a computer and sitting in an office.

Hannah: Yeah. I also don't know if I want to do something else with my life. Well, I'll just have more happiness and...

Tzarm: Yes, yes, I feel like I want to turn away from the NGO work and then do something else like with my, what do you call, my force. Not just physical force, not— [pauses]

Hannah: Mental.

Tzarm: Yeah, yeah. And then when we get tired physically, we can just do like [something else] and get better but with mental—

Hannah: It's kind of endless, right you know, you never get to—

Tzarm: Yes. Endless. We still have to bear with it all the time [laughs].

Hannah: [laughs] I know...but I have no physical skills to do, like, a garden, or something. I have no ability [laughter].

Tzarm: Yeah, that's true [laughs]. When I, before the coup, I went back to Shan State. Because my visa is expired, my passport is expired. And then I think that oh, I need like, maybe change my career and I just went back to my hometown, maybe like doing something different. And maybe trying to do something else.

Hannah: You were thinking of moving back [to Burma]?

Tzarm: Yeah. Moving back. And when I went back, it's really difficult, when you used to like, work and earned some income...but then you go there, and you just stay at home and jobless and with no income. It's quite difficult. Then I say oh, maybe I cannot survive [laughs]. And also, I went to the farm with my aunt. Trying to help them with picking the maize. But no, it's tired. It's good but I think I cannot do that every day. Because physically, we don't work like that all the time (Tzarm 2022).

Tzarm and I discussed a common fantasy of quitting our jobs, yet not knowing what else we could do, and feeling tied to our commitments. Siphoung and I also discussed burnout, stress and her desire to quit her job as the Director of her organization in Shan State:

Hannah: You said you tried to quit [laughter].

Siphoung: Yeah, I tried to quit many times because it is time for other people to take a lead...I also wanted to—I don't want to be—how to say—oversee everything? I want to kind of relax, and working like what I want to do, but here is, I can't even read for the book. What I want to read, relax, not really have time at all. Then a lot of program, a lot of projects, a lot of proposals, many, many things, after one finish, another coming. Like this [sympathetic laughter].

And also, we also have people who can lead it. Like [name removed] and other people, they can really take a lead already. Then I decided to quit since two years ago. Then last year, I propose at the board of director meeting, but they said, it is not a good time to quit. Because in this difficult time, if we quit, it easily to collapse, there's no further connection or maybe no higher responsible, even though we have a lot of staff...they are capable of doing everything. But sometimes it's, they still don't want me to quit yet...

Hannah: Do you still, like, want to find a way to step down? Do you think you should keep going longer now?

Siphoung: In fact, I really want to quit if possible. Because too much responsibility. And if I quit, I can do my own thing...Not too stressful, and I can still work like, freelance. But now, it's too much responsibility. That's why I want to quit. But, if I like, right away, if I quit...so, I also afraid because many people are very stressful, like, many people, like, staff are burned out. And many people, because of, not work, because of many things, like political situation, cannot go very freely. They have to worry many thing. Yeah. So that's why I also [laughs]...Yeah, in fact, oh, if I can quit is very good (Siphoung 2022)

Many activist women find themselves torn between their commitment to their work and the reality of the work, where activists like Siphoung cannot find enough time to relax, read or spend time with their families. The work that women activists are doing in Chiang Mai is far beyond a job; it is often their family (many are in relationships with other activists), a lifestyle, a social movement, and a community that they feel a part of and a responsibility towards. Many women like Siphoung and Tzarm, and I have also felt this way, feel torn between a deep commitment to the community, and the reality of the toll of the work, which can be damaging to our personal health, relationships and family lives. Many women dream of quitting to start a coffee shop, organic farm or bakery, and to return to their hometowns and live a more peaceful life.

Ultimately, if our social movements are hurting women of color and Indigenous women and leading to burnout, then we should reflect on how to change our ways. While wellbeing and trauma healing are now much more commonly talked about in social movements than before, which is an important step, the fact is that unless some of the structural constraints that women struggle with are addressed, women will continue to burn out and leave their work. In particular, the hierarchical and neo-colonial relationship of donors with activist movements and organizations is one of the most impactful causes of daily stress and trauma for Indigenous women activists. Shifting this dynamic to one of mutual trust and solidarity, with longer grant cycles and less micromanagement, is an achievable change that would greatly reduce levels of stress, turnover and burnout among activist women.

Part Three: A Story of Reconnection and Decolonial Love

Summer 2022

Chiang Mai, Thailand

Two days after my husband, toddler and I arrive in Chiang Mai, jet lagged and bleary, Siphoung and I are reunited for the first time since the coup and pandemic. It's been two years since we were last in Chiang Mai pre-pandemic; Siphoung has now left Burma for her family's safety. For this reunion, we've all arranged to stay in the same hotel in a student neighbourhood in the city. The hotel is surrounded by bustling activity, food stalls, and motorcycles on the street. In contrast, the inside is quiet, with frangipani and palm trees, a resident cat, and a small pond with fish that our toddlers love to look at. Coming into our room, we embrace and sit down on a wooden bench lined with bright orange and red cushions with Akha fabric designs.

While almost all mask mandates have been lifted at this point in the U.S., masks are still required when we go outside in Thailand. However, most people in Thailand have stopped masking among friends. I'm grateful to be able to connect again face to face without screens. We sit down and talk a little, though we both are tired. In my case it's only from jet lag (and two years of a pandemic and toddler), but for her, she has been working nonstop since arriving in Thailand a few months ago, helping organize other activists from Burma who need to come to Thailand, as well as still managing her organization's programs in Burma.

I ask her how it's going living in Thailand and at her mother's house outside of Chiang Mai. Living with relatives is one experience I can well relate to at this point, after almost two years of isolating at home with family. "Oh, it's good," she says. "My mum is helping with everything, taking the kids to school, washing their school uniforms, cooking food for us. We're so lucky," she says.

“And how are the kids adjusting to being in Thailand?” I ask, as they have grown up their entire lives in Burma. “They’re doing well,” she says. “At first, they used to cry and ask to go home, especially because they miss their babysitter. But my mum put them on a routine, and the school they are going to has many other Shan children, so they are okay now,” she says. She’s exhausted, so she goes to rest. We laugh about the hotel room away from our parents being a good chance to rest and have some privacy.

Over the coming days, more activists from Siphoung’s network arrive in Thailand from Burma, including quite a few that I have met online for trainings throughout the pandemic. My husband becomes an impromptu Uber service, shuttling activists to places they can stay, as everyone is worried about using public transit or rideshare apps for security reasons. Among the group, there’s a seven-year-old girl, and she, my son, and Siphoung and Hseng’s children chase each other around and play together when we all meet up.

Siphoung is most worried about finding an office, which will also be a safe space for activists coming from Burma. She almost secures a place, but the landlord changes their mind at the last minute when they hear that a group from Burma will be staying there. Finally, she rents a three-bedroom house in a residential neighbourhood. It’s a narrow row house, and the inside has heavy wooden furniture and old European paintings. A large balcony on the second floor looks into trees and neighbouring houses. The atmosphere in this house, which we decide to share with *Mekong Women for Peace* and the organization she has founded in Burma, is so different from our old offices. We’ve long since gotten rid of our cute triangle pillows and decorations after closing the old office, and no one has the money, time, or energy to think about decorating and design in the middle of a crisis.

It's hot inside the house—it's the beginning of rainy season, and the house has no shade. Siphoung wavers between turning on the air conditioning in the living room when the heat becomes too much to stand and turning it off every time she gets worried about the upcoming utility bill. The heat and feeling of sadness and loss creates a feeling of heaviness inside the house. Yet, while there's no plants, decoration or parties, the love and connection are still there. People cook bowls of noodle soup for everyone, kids play together, and some of the young people work on craft projects to raise funds for the safe house. There's also a lot of time spent on laptops, maintaining connections with friends and family back in Burma, keeping the sense of being busy and continuing to fight against the regime. Once a guitar is sourced, there is music and singing again. It's not a joyous reconnection, it's not a celebration, and everything is tinged with a great sense of loss and disconnection yet love and caring are still there.

A few weeks after renting the house, Siphoung is managing the logistics of a trauma healing and stress management workshop for activists from Burma. Siphoung has spent weeks working hard to organize this stress management workshop, trying to manage the logistics of bringing activists from Burma safely, as well as managing the needs of those who will be staying in Chiang Mai as it's no longer safe for them in Burma. "I know it's not the most important thing," she says in reference to the stress management workshop. "But also—people from Burma, they also deserve this chance to get away from the situation we are facing there."

The workshop takes place on the top floor of a hotel in Chiang Mai. From the meeting room, through one wall of panoramic windows, we can see the undulating forest and hills of Doi Suthep. Rainy season in Chiang Mai brings patches of light grey and white clouds suspended over the mountain, turned emerald-green by the rain. The meeting room itself is a large 1970s style room with artificial light and dark wood panelling, podiums with plastic flowers, brown and

blue striped carpeting and banquet tables with cream sheets arranged in a U shape. The AC is not quite powerful enough to cool down the room, a sign of Chiang Mai's hurting tourism industry post-pandemic. Tea and coffee are set up on long banquet tables the side of the room, with small bright green square shaped cakes with pandan cream served on individual plates.

At the workshop, those living at the safe house share that they are unable to sleep at night and having nightmares. Naturally, they are worried about being in Thailand without speaking the language, and they are worried about jobs, their future, their children's education, everything. Those who will go back to Burma are preoccupied with worrying about passing the airport checkpoint, and whether they will be detained or investigated for having come to Thailand. The trainer shares with them different relaxation and stress release techniques, and the opportunity to talk through and come up with some solutions, including ideas for jobs and education, helps relieve some of the tension in the room.

At the same time, Siphoung is making her way through a mountain of receipts for the workshop in order to write the financial report. One participant gets a severe ear infection, and we are all worried whether or not it is safe to take her to the clinic as she's still in the process of getting her work permit; finally, another colleague raised in Thailand assures us that a private clinic will be fine whether or not she has documents. The stress management workshop turned out to be pretty stressful, Siphoung and I laugh with each other ruefully. This is simply what it means to be an activist under these circumstances.

Yet, while it's hard—everything is hard—there is so much love present. It's love that drives Siphoung to work hard to find an office, set up the safe house, and make this trauma healing training happen. It's love that drives myself and my husband to help out wherever we can. It's really challenging—there's no minimizing how difficult this situation is—but no one is

attacking, fighting or hurting each other, despite the unfolding tragedy. It's these acts of decolonial love that keep the community together despite the strains and pain, it's these acts of love that are keeping things holding together by a thread.

Decolonizing Healing and Decolonial Love

In this section I will discuss how the forms of stress and trauma discussed in the previous section are continually responded to by women activists through acts of decolonial love, including love expressed in community and for each other, and also self-love. Moving away from the pathology model of trauma intervention towards decolonial healing for Indigenous peoples includes centering decolonial love, justice, and sovereignty as integral to healing. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson in *Islands of Decolonial Love* explores decolonial love as love that liberates from the “legacy of colonial violence” and that embraces “connection in the face of utter disconnection” (2013, 103). Decolonial love is love for ourselves and our communities, in the face of colonialism, violence and oppression.

Here, I will talk about how *everyday acts of decolonial love*, an idea that comes from *everyday acts of resurgence* (Corntassel, Alfred, Goodyear-Ka'ōpua, et al. 2018) within Indigenous women's movements in Chiang Mai, are ongoing ways of resisting and showing agency in the face of state violence. This act of focusing on the everyday can be seen as a challenge to heteropatriarchal, masculinist and colonial forms of thinking which over-value high profile and direct acts of resistance such as “rallies, protests and...publicized events” (Corntassel, Alfred, Ka'ōpua, et al. 2018, 18). When we focus exclusively on forms of public confrontation with the state as the most significant forms of resistance to be studied and applauded, there is a risk of privileging certain groups most able to participate on the frontlines,

especially those who identify as male, cisgendered, young, without children, able bodied, and/or with citizenship (Corntassel et al 2018, 18).³

Everyday acts of decolonial love may include private, everyday small actions such as always bringing food to share with each other during gatherings; staying up late to help a friend finish a proposal; going out drinking together; playing music and singing together; cooking meals and food for each other; and helping edit a report, as well as larger, public actions of solidarity and support such as writing statements of solidarity, going to other groups' protests, and grassroots fundraising to support each other's movements. During the pandemic, these everyday actions of decolonial love included distributing masks and medicine to communities; post-coup it has involved the type of actions I talk about in the story above, including helping other activists find safety, organizing healing workshops, cooking and playing music together. These private, everyday acts of decolonial love are especially important and take on a political meaning when working in authoritarian contexts where public expressions of solidarity or protests may be too dangerous.

Decolonial love does not mean having to love *everybody*; decolonial love can be turned towards those who one decides to be in community with. Dory Nason affirms Indigenous women's love for "their families, their lands, their nations, and themselves as Indigenous people"; their focus is on their love for Indigenous peoples, lands and nations, not necessarily others (Nason 2014). One of the biggest concerns about decolonial love as a discourse is that it may be used by oppressors to expect love and forgiveness and only exalt those who choose to

³ Of course, women, trans communities, elders, people with children, disabilities and undocumented peoples also participate in and lead protests, but the focus on the everyday also allows us to see the *other* ways they also engage in resistance and resurgence.

forgive them (Flowers 2015). I do not think decolonial love means that you have to love or forgive your oppressors, including and especially when they are hurting you. In the context of Thailand and Burma, I speak of decolonial love in terms of actions of love within communities of resistance, not love directed towards the state or other oppressors.

Decolonial love does not mean rejecting anger and rage, but rather directing them at the right people and institutions. As Rachel Flowers writes in reclaiming “space for Indigenous women’s rage” (2015, 33) “it is because of our profound love for one another and our lands that we are full of rage. Anger and love are not always mutually exclusive emotions” (2015, 40–41). In speaking of decolonial love, we should be careful not to police other peoples’ emotions and exalt love and other “positive” emotions as superior to rage, anger, or sadness. That being said, while rage and anger are natural, useful, and powerful responses to oppression, if we are not careful where we direct it, they can end up being used to turn on each other rather than the root causes of oppression. As Audre Lorde writes, “I know how much of my life as a powerfully feeling woman is laced through with this net of rage...*how to train that anger with accuracy* rather than deny it has been one of the major tasks of my life” (2007, 145, emphasis added).

In the context of Indigenous women’s activism in Northern Thailand and *Mekong Women for Peace*, decolonial love is expressed through acts of love in both community and individual settings. In community, it is often expressed through food. I have shared so many meals with friends and colleagues where food is used to share our love and appreciation for each other, as well as parts of our cultures. Every time that I have gathered with other activists in Chiang Mai, whether for work, socializing, or the purposes of this research, it has always been with food. I am thinking of the banquet of Vietnamese food, spring rolls and ban xiao, that one of my closest friends and colleagues, Hseng and her husband, took myself and our families out to eat to

welcome us back to Chiang Mai for our first reunion after the pandemic. I am also reminded of all the planning meetings with activist friends that have taken place over café yen (iced coffee) and cheesecake in the numerous coffee shops around Chiang Mai. And I am recalling all the times gathered in the previous *Mekong Women for Peace* office, sharing hot pot at the dining table or baking chocolate chip cookies together in a toaster oven in the evening after working together in the day. Those moments of cooking for each other and sharing food together are small acts of resistance, of finding joy and pleasure in life together even under extremely challenging circumstances.

As well as acts of decolonial love which take place in community with others, decolonial love can also mean acts of self-love. Self-care and self-love have become commercialized, appropriated, and associated with whiteness for many. While this has turned many people off the terms, I think we should reclaim them. The issue is that without being used in a broader community and political context, self-care and self-love can become empty rhetoric, inward facing, and tied with the consumption of products such a bath bomb, particularly in the way that the four-trillion-dollar wellness industry employs them (Cyca 2022).

Looking at the meditation and wellness industry today, bell hooks' warning seems more prescient than ever about the "dangerous narcissism fostered by spiritual rhetoric that pays so much attention to individual self-improvement and so little to the practice of love within the context of community" (2000, 76). While we can and should critique the white-dominated wellness industry, we should also take care to assure women from marginalized communities that they are not selfish if they choose to practice self-care. As Shawn Arango Ricks writes, we need a "counter-narrative" to normalized chaos in the lives of Black women and women of color.

These counter-narratives include “the concept of rest, embedded within self-care and self-love, and not as an act of selfishness” (Ricks 2018, 345).

Similarly to many others around the world, the pandemic and being forced to stay at home helped some women activists re-prioritize their lives and work to focus more on self-care.

As Mai, a Tai activist in her thirties stated:

COVID bring a lot of changes, changed a lot of ways of thinking...I mean, like during the COVID...I was struggling a lot, maybe around three months. And I cannot like, focus on my work. So I have to go for...counselling, trauma workshop and then get away from everything. And I've been like, crying, depressed. And a good lesson learned from the COVID era, I will say, that this let me know about myself and what is my priority, and what I need to focus on.

That's why...I'm really like, put my wellbeing for the top of that, and after that, security is very important for me, and a good lesson learned...we can build a good relationship with our family because we have more time to ourselves. Yeah, to spread the love to your family, or your friends, or colleagues that you think that is important to them...Okay, this is a good time for us to know about ourselves (Mai and Saekue 2022).

After COVID and her experience with depression, Mai realized the importance of work-life balance so that she would not burnout in her work:

So, I tried to set up, okay, between work hour and then focus on my work, and then beside that, when give some time for my family or, some time, like for myself...Because, unless I'm happy and healthy, and then I can, I guess, focus on my work...then the work is not good, happy. So, the first thing you have to taking care of yourself, doing exercise or doing the thing that you love to, and yeah, and during the weekend, like one day I will give time for myself. The other day, like maybe friends, being socialized, because you also need to have a network to meet with your friends, catch up. I think so. I think, I do quite well with that [laughter] (Mai and Saekue 2022).

It is possible to pay attention to loving and valuing oneself without being selfish or self-centered, which is something that I found hard to understand in the past. In fact, practicing self-love is unlikely to have much effect without also working on being in loving and supportive community with others. As hooks writes, “self-love cannot flourish in isolation...When we see

love as a combination of trust, commitment, care, respect, knowledge and responsibility, we can work on developing these qualities, or if they are already a part of who we are, we can learn to extend them to ourselves” (hooks 2000, 54).

Self-love is probably the hardest part of the journey for those of us to take who have been hurt by the state, by society’s messages and acts of violence, but learning to love ourselves allows us to become better at loving others also. I believe that learning to value ourselves and each other from a place of decolonial love rather than Western individualism, can help us be in “good relationship” with each other (McCaslin and Breton 2008, 516), especially for women of color and marginalized women. As Lorde writes, we as women of color sometimes turn on each other “because that was all that was allowed us” (2007, 165). Lorde states so simply yet poignantly, “we do not love ourselves, therefore we cannot love each other” (2007, 155). I have seen this myself many times in activist movements, that sometimes it is a struggle for marginalized women and women of color not to turn on each other, or act in competition with each other, especially when we are among the few present in a group. Decolonial self-love is the love that allows us to be a better person for others that we choose to be in community with; Lorde writes, “when I can recognize my worth, I can recognize yours” (2007, 168). Love for ourselves, our communities, and each other go hand in hand together in decolonial love.

Conclusion: Resilience and Resistance

The story of *Mekong Women for Peace* is one of community and conflict; of trauma and healing; of love and loss, and also of resilience and resistance. Resilience and resistance, though, for Indigenous activists under authoritarian rule, does not always mean acts of *direct* resistance. It includes simply continuing in the work, and sometimes simply continuing to exist, despite all

the challenges faced. Resilience and resistance under authoritarian rule can include engaging in acts of decolonial love in community and for oneself, and advocacy for justice and sovereignty.

As Wanda McCaslin and Denise Breton demonstrate, working for Indigenous sovereignty and justice should always be included in a decolonial approach to healing. Addressing the underlying structures of domination means centering justice and sovereignty as integral to healing. McCaslin and Breton call for “nation-to-nation relationships, land return, reparations, restitution, return of resources...adherence to treaties, and hence the return of our sovereign jurisdiction over our homelands and ancestral land bases” (2008, 529).

In the context of Northern Thailand and Shan State, justice is most often articulated as calling for an end to war and violence against Indigenous peoples and women (Shan Women’s Action Network 2002, 2; Women’s League of Burma 2016, 26), ending land grabbing and destructive development projects and foregrounding Indigenous women’s leadership for land, women’s rights and peace (Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact 2014; Indigenous Women Network of Thailand and Manushya Foundation 2019; Mekong Women for Peace 2022; Vaddhanaphuti et al. 2019). Indigenous sovereignty is expressed most often through calls for respecting Indigenous land rights, language and culture, in the context of Thailand, and for a federal system of government that respects Indigenous rights, in the case of Burma.

As the following chapters will discuss more, all the women in our network center justice in their work, whether it is fighting against hydropower development projects, organizing for gender justice, or organizing against the Burmese military dictatorship. However, it is also important to remember that in authoritarian contexts, Indigenous groups may or may not choose to engage in acts of overt resistance, as it is not always safe to do so. The next chapter will discuss how Indigenous women activists employ multiple strategies to address intersectional

discrimination and work for justice for themselves and their communities. These include running education and activist training programs, using shifting forms of protest, and engaging in covert forms of resistance to colonial and authoritarian rule.

Since the founding of *Mekong Women for Peace* almost ten years ago in 2014, our team has faced harassment from authoritarian regimes, a few interpersonal conflicts, and lack of stable funding. Our members have survived a pandemic, two military coups in Thailand and Burma, and we are surrounded by increasingly authoritarian, misogynistic rule. And yet, we are all still here. We still meet for coffee, and try a new bakery together. We still cook noodle soup together, and edit a press release, and apply for a grant in the evening after the kids have gone to sleep. We still meet online when we are not in the same place, and post photos of our recent outings to parks, playgrounds, waterfalls or coffee shops together. We still help organize those in our network who are at risk of arrest to find safety. We still organize trauma healing workshops for activists who have been in hiding, send funds to the resistance movement in Burma, and finish the day with a drink with a friend, where we inevitably end up talking about some way that we can collaborate together in our work. We do all this and for those who have children, we still bring our kids to play together, wash babies, put kids to sleep, or have our partners take care of the kids while we work or fall asleep early from tiredness. Despite it all, we still continue to live.

Portrait: Mwe

One of the first times I met Mwe over a decade ago, she told me a story of when she got stopped by the Thai police at a checkpoint. “My heart was beating so fast. But because I can speak Thai, I just pretended that I’m Thai and acted very angry at them for stopping me until they left me alone,” she laughed. It was obvious to me then that Mwe is a person who knows how to survive and fight strategically, as someone who has spent most of her life moving back and forth between Burma and Thailand due to war and the military government.

In 2022, we reunited in Chiang Mai, where she is now living again after having spent the past four years in Burma. Mwe is Tai, wears round colored glasses, in her thirties, and has shoulder length straight hair and a wry smile. She was born in Burma, but has spent most of her life in Thailand. Over iced coffees, we catch up about her life in the past four years, from adjusting to living in Burma, the pandemic, coup, and her recent return to Chiang Mai. Mwe is smart, incisive, and direct: a truth teller who tells it like it is. She doesn’t hesitate to jump in telling her story.

After graduating with a degree in International Relations and Development, Mwe was able to get an internship at the women’s organization where she is still working now. At the time of the 2021 coup, Mwe was working at their office in Burma, focusing on political empowerment for young Indigenous women. As soon as the coup occurred, they immediately abandoned their office, knowing they were being tracked by government agents:

Even there is no coup, the special police they always track us, even before coup, they always keep their eye on [our organization] all the time. As soon as the coup, I think everything...even the office, we just left the office because we don't want to enter, because most of the time, and then most of the SP [Special Police] also stand by around there (Mwe 2022).

After a few months, they moved slowly out of their office, being extremely cautious and strategic as they saw many of their partner groups' offices get raided by the military.

Hannah: Yeah. So you just kind of left the office.

Mwe: Just left it for a while. Maybe around three or four months. At that time we tried to move slowly, move out from that area.

Hannah: And then came back to Chiang Mai...?

Mwe: Not yet...but some of our [partner] organization, at the time the...military, involved like, go and charge into their office and took some laptop or whatever. Very risky. They have to like run [away] when the coup happened. So as a [network], if one...organization got impact something, is impact all (Mwe 2022).

A few months after the coup, they started mobilizing their staff to leave Burma, and Mwe left Burma to set up their office in Chiang Mai again:

So we trying to still...at that time before we move to Chiang Mai into 2021 and try to change another plan, like move, especially for the security, organization security and staff security. So we try to adapt at that time, also try to adapt and then everything, and then we try to let our staff got out [from Burma], for example for me I'm not a spoke [sperson] so I do not appear on the online, media social media. So it's a little bit okay, no one noticed that.

So for me, I left Myanmar on [date removed], at that time I'm joined one of...short course at [a Thai institute]. At that time we came out [from Burma] with like one of women organization...they organize... a special program, because they want to take out women activist inside [Burma] to come this side, so some women activists we came together from this one. So from [my organization] I'm the one who arrived in Thailand first (Mwe 2022).

Even being in Thailand, Mwe shared the way that her work and life is still impacted by militarism, including concern about informants from Burma being present in Chiang Mai:

Hannah: Everybody has to adapt, like yeah, too many changes. Yes...and so did you guys open an office here?

Mwe: Here we just have a small [office] but we still work from home. Okay. The reason is, like, at for right now, lots of people in Myanmar arrive here. We don't know who is, kind of, sometimes maybe our same side and sometime might be opposite side.

Hannah: You want to be careful...to think about all of these things. Yeah. It's too much.

Mwe: Too much to manage (Mwe 2022).

Although Mwe has experienced many disruptions and stresses due to the coup and pandemic, I also asked her about her strengths or accomplishments. She shared that she felt she had become stronger and built up her leadership skills from living through these crises:

As COVID happened, coup happened, my leadership skill, I think, is increased a lot...especially for the management skills, for example, in 2021 a lot of other program coordinator, some because of their security, because of the coup, their family couldn't stay in Myanmar...So it just left me alone. Because my position is, as a coordinator, I have to draft all the proposal, activity, donor report...

So, I think, in 2021, I had to try to draft the proposal, around eight or nine proposal. And then four or five, like donor report, at the same time I have to organize and implement, like you know, for the workshop...in the past, we mostly, our target group is women area, or ERO [ethnic resistance organization] ethnic area but right now we try to expand with the lower Burma, especially the young women, also youth, strike committee, or kind of like that. So, [I] kind of have to do a lot of networking. And also, manage like, the project or the program. So, I'm so proud for that I can do it [laughs] (Mwe 2022).

In addition to becoming personally stronger, Mwe also talked about how the crisis of the coup had led to a strategic opening for more ethnic minority and women's issues to be talked about rather than a sole focus on the pro-democracy movement:

But sometime within in the crisis, they have some opportunity for women. Because, the first they demonstrate, they just call for like, you know, release our leader, like, you know, we need democracy or whatever. But at the same time, maybe around just one or two months of protests, and then some ethnic minority start to call for abolish 2008 constitution. We need a federal or kind of like that. So as soon as this message come out, like other inequality issue raised up, especially the women you saw that like longyi, they hold the longyi and demonstrate. So, in Spring Revolution, this is also another one wave or movement for women in Myanmar. I see that this is one of an opportunity (Mwe 2022).

Mwe thinks strategically about inclusivity not only in broader social movements but also her own organization. She shared about how she had fought within her own organization to update their policies to be more inclusive and allow women from outside their network to join as staff.

We talked about bringing that activist spirit to pointing out injustices within our movements:

Mwe: In my head sometimes...we think, I might be a negative person because I'm trying to point out everything that is not, I'm feeling injustice or whatever. I try to point it out...maybe other people don't like it, but later on I saw the policy shift, move better and better. So, whatever, maybe other people might look on me, that's very aggressive or very talkative. But I proud, that, it's can shape—

Hannah: No, no, you're just a strong woman that's all [laughter].

Mwe: They said, "You are just a fighter!" [laughter]

Hannah: That's good, you're an activist!

Mwe: Yeah, yeah, I learned that when we're talking leadership, you don't need to go to be a president or whatever. Sometimes leadership is in everywhere (Mwe 2022).

After our talk, Mwe and I drive by motorbike to a nearby restaurant to meet my husband and son for her to catch up with them also. Driving down a small soi, we see three large, angrily barking dogs blocking the road ahead of us. Thinking I know at this point how to manage street dogs, I suggest we continue and drive through slowly, a strategy that usually works for me. She agrees slightly dubiously. I watch in dismay as one of the dogs gets closer and closer, eventually jumping up towards me and putting their teeth on my leg. I scream and lose my cool; my strategy was a total failure. Luckily, the bite doesn't go through my jeans or draw any blood.

Afterwards, we laugh about it, my heart still racing from the shock. "Usually, if I see dogs like that, I just stop the motorbike," Mwe says. "Really?" I ask. "You just stop in the road?" "Yes," she says, "Stop and then let them come to you, then they see that you are not going to be

chased by them. Otherwise, they get excited about chasing you.” “Oh,” I say. “Stop and wait.” It occurs to me that this is one of Mwe’s strengths: she knows when to be loud and fight back, when to be quiet, and when to stop completely and wait for the right moment. She is a strategic thinker. Mwe knows how to navigate all the threats, challenges and opportunities that life has brought her in order to become a woman leader.

CHAPTER 4

Intersectional Brilliance and Indigenous Women Activists' Adaptive Strengths and Strategies

Introduction

Chapter One sought to ground this dissertation in local context and place and to make space for Indigenous feminisms in Asia, while Chapter Two outlined the intersectional contexts and challenges that Indigenous women face in the region. Chapter Three has shown both the strengths and challenges that Indigenous women experience in the emotional aspects of activism, including decolonial love, trauma, and healing. Throughout this process, it has been important to me to avoid painting a narrative which portrays Indigenous women as victims or lacking in agency (Tuck 2009), yet while still at the same time needing to acknowledge the challenges and constraints that Indigenous women activists in Thailand and Burma face. In this chapter, I focus on the questions “What is good?”, “What is working?” and “What are the strengths?” in Indigenous women’s activism even under the most restrictive of political circumstances. In focusing on positives, this approach, in line with a portraiture approach (Goodyear-Ka’ōpua 2013; Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 1997), aims to counteract portrayals of Indigenous women as victims “in need of salvation” (Tuck and Yang 2014, 245) by instead highlighting their already existing strengths and abilities. As Noelani Goodyear-Ka’ōpua writes, focusing “on strengths is particularly important for communities that have been pathologized, minimized, and marginalized by researchers in the past” in order to create a “counternarrative” to dominant stories of marginalized women as helpless victims (2013, 44).

However, it should be said that focusing on positives and strengths does not mean taking an equally one-dimension uncritical or “excessively optimistic” approach either (Bebbington

2004, 729). As Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot and Jessica Hoffman Davis state, portraiture is a process of searching “for what is good and healthy and assumes that the expression of goodness will always be laced with imperfections” (1997, 9). It is possible to focus on strengths without claiming that people are perfect. Furthermore, focusing on strengths should be distinguished from characterizing Indigenous women as one-dimensionally “strong” or as “superwomen”; portrayals that have been critiqued in the case of Black women for causing undue pressure to suppress emotions, constantly excel, and project strength at all times (A. M. Allen et al. 2019; Manke 2019). Having strengths, to me, means the ability to find solutions, access strategies of support and find ways to persevere even under hardship. In contrast, “being strong” is a static and oppressive quality of superhuman endurance and stoicism which is sometimes expected of marginalized women, especially Black women and Indigenous women, in order to make the best of an oppressive status quo (A. M. Allen et al. 2019; Manke 2019). Here I highlight strengths in activism without claiming that Indigenous women and women of color activists are, or ought to be, strong all the time.

Intersectional Brilliance

The framework of intersectionality (Combahee River Collective 1977; Crenshaw 1991) which I used in Chapter Two, helps us to see the political context and multiple, shifting layers of discrimination that Indigenous women activists in Northern Thailand and Shan State have to address and navigate. The recognition that intersectionality brings of the multiplicity of oppressions is much needed for women of color and Indigenous women, in order to understand that our problems are multi-dimensional and require different solutions than those that may work for other groups. At the same time, intersectionality by its nature, is a framework which can lend itself to focusing primarily on experiences of oppression experienced by women of color. For

this reason, I feel it is important for women of color and other women who have experienced marginalization to also have strengths-based ways of understanding ourselves so that we do not feel totally hopeless or disempowered.

A workshop I attended in my early twenties illustrates this point. In one exercise related to racial identity, we were asked to identify and rank our intersectional areas of privilege and oppression. Facing particularly difficult circumstances at that time, I found myself categorized as oppressed in most of the categories listed. Sharing this with the other members of my group, it felt that the purpose of the exercise had served to show everyone that I was the most powerless person in the room. Perhaps it worked to help the others understand their own privilege better, but their understanding came at my expense. I felt that my sense of alienation, isolation and disempowerment was only entrenched by being reminded of every way that I was oppressed as a young woman of color, and I left the room in tears. Of course, other women of color might react differently to an exercise such as this, and this was, in retrospect, a particularly insensitive way of teaching about intersectionality. Nevertheless, the point I wish to make is that as a young woman of color, I personally could have used a reminder of the fact that I was not entirely powerless in that moment of being made aware of my intersectional oppression.

For this reason, I have always sought ways to teach about the intersectional nature of oppression that also highlight marginalized women's strengths. To be clear, this is not a critique of intersectionality, which I consider to be an essential framework for women of color feminism. My goal here instead is to consider how we can *build* upon intersectionality and find ways to also highlight the ways that marginalized women do have power—while at the same time without minimizing or downplaying the very real intersectional discrimination that we do face.

During the early days of my dissertation research, I was feeling despondent after reading yet another round of articles that depicted Asian women, Indigenous women and women in the Global South as “neglected” and “in danger of dying out” (Ong 2011, 41), and as “[cumulatively] disadvantaged” and victims of violence (Burnette and Renner 2017). While violence and oppression are realities in the lives of a number of women in the Global South, when these are the *only* stories told about Asian and Indigenous women, there is a danger of reinforcing the trope of the “average Third World woman” (Mohanty 2003, 22). This stereotypical woman, as Chandra Talpade Mohanty explains in reference to Western feminist scholarship, and I would add, sometimes in Asian studies as well, is portrayed as leading a tragic, “essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender...and her being ‘Third World’ (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc.)” (2003, 22). The disempowerment of this woman, of course, lies in juxtaposition to the empowered and liberated Western or ethnic majority woman (Mohanty 2003; 1988).

The “Third World woman” trope is so different from the complex reality that I saw every day among colleagues, myself, my friends and family: one that included many moments of others trying to take our power away, yes, but also finding ways to negotiate and build our power and strengths back up again. Reflecting upon Goodyear-Ka‘ōpua’s focus on “strengths” (2013, 44) and Lawrence-Lightfoot’s focus on “goodness” (1997, 9) in communities in their research, I asked myself, “What is *good* about being a woman of color?” And of course, in the context of this research, the relevant question was also, “What is good about being an Indigenous woman activist in Chiang Mai?” Inspired by Goodyear-Ka‘ōpua and Lawrence-Lightfoot’s works as well as heeding Eve Tuck’s call for a moratorium on “damage centered research” (Tuck 2009,

422) I also wanted my research to focus on highlighting positives and all the strengths that I saw around me.

I know that I have no desire to change my identity, nor do the Indigenous women interviewed in this dissertation show any interest in assimilating or giving up their identities. Even though in my case, I can imagine my life might be easier as a white woman, I have no desire *not* to be a woman of color. That means there must be something good, something positive about being a woman of color. This led me to reflect upon the ways that women of color and Indigenous women are brilliant and talented in so many ways—in the relationships we build, in the way we find ways to persevere and continue under great challenges, in our work to preserve and maintain our cultures and retell histories, just to name a few examples. I wanted to express that we are not defined solely by our oppression.

For these reasons, in this chapter I focus on the strengths and brilliance of Indigenous women and women of color activists. I use the phrase *intersectional brilliance* to refer to the strategies that women and people living at the intersection of multiple forms of oppression use to resist and transform our circumstances. The inclusion of the term *intersectionality* is to show that these strategies take place in a context of intersectionality—that they are strategies that women of color use in large part (although not exclusively) *because* of our identity and intersectional experiences of discrimination. The word *brilliance* highlights a strengths-based approach and recognizes and appreciates the vision, creative thinking and other abilities it takes for women of color and Indigenous women activists to find ways to overcome our challenges and continue our work.

However, at the same time, if brilliance brings forth the image of shining,¹ it also recalls that objects that shine brightly can eventually fade, lose their lustre or burnout, especially when they do not receive the care and attention that they need. Similarly, Indigenous women and women of color may also face exhaustion, depletion and burnout from having to be strong, resilient and constantly come up with creative and brilliant strategies in order to continue our work. Therefore, while this chapter acknowledges the good and the brilliance of Indigenous women's activism in Northern Thailand, it also recognizes that there can be a certain price paid for this brilliance. As Chapter Three has discussed, this price can be the health and wellbeing of women activists, especially if we do not receive the support that we need.

Unlike intersectionality, there is no fixed framework or list of traits for what I am referring to as intersectional brilliance or intersectional strengths here. I am speaking of *learned strategies*, not inherent traits. I am not claiming that women of color possess ingrained extraordinary or superhuman abilities. Furthermore, I don't claim that intersectional brilliance is some kind of universal trait; the situation of women of color and Indigenous women is so different depending on the circumstances. Every individual responds to their own life circumstances differently. Not everyone will choose, or have the option, to resist their circumstances of oppression. Furthermore, our own ability, interest or desire to enact strategies of intersectional brilliance may be strengthened or lessened depending on our current circumstances and networks of support.

By *learned strategies*, I refer to those that are collectively developed within and between communities living at the margins. A Western way of thinking focuses on individual talent and

¹ I use the words brilliance and shining here; I would not consider them as interchangeable with lightness or light, which are terms that can feed into colorism and anti-Blackness (Enomoto 2017). In contrast, the darkest night sky and deep brown and black of all shades can shine brilliantly.

achievement and pits women of color against each other for who can be the best, most charismatic, and self-actualized boss-babe woman of color. This way of thinking about women of color's brilliance is exhausting, sets us up for burnout, and does not build community power. I speak here instead of brilliance as knowledge and strategies that are developed within marginalized communities, passed down, exchanged, and transformed over time as circumstances change and adapt. For example, my own experiences of receiving support and mentorship from woman of color mentors helped me learn what a life-changing strategy this could be for women of color; I now try to continue and pass down this strategy by mentoring and supporting young women of color myself. I did not come up with this strategy myself, it was collectively developed over time between women of color under different circumstances.

Like the above example, the phrase intersectional brilliance itself did not appear out of nowhere either. In this chapter, I seek to learn from and contribute to the scholarship of other women of color and Indigenous scholars who are also doing strengths-based research. As well as being based on Kimberlé Crenshaw's work on intersectionality (1991; 1989), this chapter has been especially influenced by Goodyear-Ka'ōpua and Lawrence-Lightfoot's use of *portraiture* as method in writing about strengths and goodness in schools (2013; 1997). In addition, other strengths-based frameworks in Indigenous scholarship include *survivance*, which Gerald Vizenor defines as "a native sense of presence, the motion of sovereignty and the will to resist dominance... not just survival but also resistance" (1998, 93). Building upon this, Tuck, in rejecting deficit-based research, argues in favour of more *desire-based research* which account "for the loss and despair, but also the hope, the visions, the wisdom of lived lives and communities" (2009, 416). And among Black women, the concept and phrase *Black Girl Magic*, which is commonly attributed to CaShawn Thompson, has become a way of highlighting

Black women's strength and abilities (Lamar-Becker 2022). The poet and writer Idrissa Simmonds states, "when a Black woman dares to speak her truth...her voice echoes out, disrupting and delegitimizing tired stereotypes and tropes. In short, there is magic...a conjuring that is specific to the Black woman" (Simmonds 2018). Especially in the past decade, Black women, Indigenous women, and women of color are at the forefront of developing new names and concepts to highlight the strengths we have always known that we have.

Depending on the circumstances, ways that women of color and Indigenous women express our intersectional brilliance and challenge our circumstances of discrimination might include connecting with our own culture and heritage; joining activist networks; enacting strategies of refusal; building community with other women, or seeking the mentorship of other women of color. These acts of intersectional brilliance may also shift and change over time, as political contexts change, and also in response to new tools and technologies. However, what they have in common is that they are ways that we build up our strength and find ways to continue our work even under great hardship. Ultimately, intersectional brilliance recognizes the strengths and abilities of women of color and Indigenous women who continue to exist, survive and sometimes thrive under highly challenging circumstances.

In this chapter, I discuss two significant ways that Indigenous women activists based in Chiang Mai from Thailand and Shan State enact intersectional brilliance and demonstrate and build their strengths under the current context and circumstances. The first is the use of *education-based resistance*, which are acts that are grounded in mentoring, educating, and empowering oneself as well as future generations of young activists. *Education-based resistance* is often the first step in strategies of intersectional brilliance for Indigenous women activists in Chiang Mai as it is seen as a way of building one's strength and confidence as an activist.

The second way that Indigenous women enact intersectional brilliance is through the ways that they are able to *continue* to do their work no matter the challenges faced once they are engaged in the struggle. I refer to this here as *political agility* or the ability to quickly adapt and shift one's work according to shifting political circumstances of authoritarianism and colonialism. As examples of *political agility*, I discuss Indigenous women's adaptive responses to both the COVID-19 crisis and military coup in Shan State. Finally, I discuss the use of political agility by Indigenous women in both Thailand and Burma as a tool to adapt to authoritarian and neo-colonial contexts by shifting to covert methods of resistance, including the use of tactics such as *strategic accommodations* and *covert communications* (Silva 2004). Ultimately, these strategies are the ways that Indigenous women have found to continue their work under repression and conditions of authoritarianism. They are complex strategies that can also be very stressful and tiring to employ; being an activist, especially in an authoritarian context means constantly being on alert and having to think on one's feet.

Finally, some of the strategies that I talk about here are very low profile by design, because most of the Indigenous activists interviewed here do their work anonymously and at risk of arrest. Throughout this chapter, I have tried to walk the line between sharing the work of these activists without sharing any details or information that could be used against activists working in authoritarian contexts. For this reason, much of the information in this chapter and the following chapter is anonymized and generalized, without naming specific organizations or locations. When referring to protests, rather than using photographs from personal sources, I have primarily used images that are already publicly available on the internet. While my aim in this chapter is to highlight the strengths of Indigenous women's activism, I also need to navigate a tightrope of what can and cannot be said. Overall, this chapter aims to show the resiliency of

Indigenous women's activism, and the ability to survive, thrive and adapt to all of life's circumstances, yet without downplaying how very real and significant the challenges faced here are.

Education-Based Resistance

As a foundational strategy of intersectional brilliance, Indigenous women activists based in Chiang Mai often focus on educating and empowering themselves and other young women activists through accessing education and training programs. I argue here that *education-based resistance* is a significant way that Indigenous women activists respond to the intersectional challenges they face and demonstrate intersectional brilliance under authoritarianism. Education as resistance is an important example of intersectional brilliance because it is a strategy that seeks to transform the intersectional challenges that young Indigenous women face through building their knowledge, power, status and skills—both for themselves and their communities.

In contrast to more confrontational or overt forms of resistance, these education-based forms of resistance focus on supporting other young Indigenous people to gain access to education, knowledge and skills development. In practice, these often look like running education, empowerment, and leadership training programs that seek to nurture and grow the next generation of activists. This focus on education is also a long-term strategy in that it recognizes that while direct action and resistance may not always be possible now, it is still possible to focus on building the next generation of activists to be ready for when circumstances change in the future.

Here I will discuss two forms of education-based resistance that Indigenous women activists in Northern Thailand and Shan State engage in; the first is promoting schooling and university education for Indigenous women activists, and the second comes through non-formal

activist education and leadership programs. Whether or not these forms of education involve direct, oppositional resistance to authoritarian or colonial rule, it is important to understand the act of accessing education and empowerment in this context as *inherently* involving resistance to the limitations that authoritarian regimes in the region try to impose upon Indigenous peoples.

As Tracey Banivanua Mar notes, one of the ways that colonial rulers attempt to cement their power is “through a reductive transformation of peoples” (2016, 45) including limiting Indigenous peoples’ access to “the world and its information” (2016, 84). In the case of Thailand and Burma, this often looks like limiting Indigenous peoples’ access to formal schooling and higher education in Thailand through denial of citizenship rights (Indigenous Women Network of Thailand and Manushya Foundation 2019, 33-34), restricting Indigenous peoples’ freedom of movement needed to access educational opportunities in Thailand (Indigenous Women Network of Thailand and Manushya Foundation 2019, 29) and closing universities and limiting the subjects available to study in Burma (Fink 2009, 180-181). Therefore, accessing education, whether through formal or informal channels, for Indigenous women activists in Northern Thailand and Shan State can be in itself an act of resistance and empowerment.

Promoting Schooling and University Education

The focus on education and training is in one sense also an adaptive strategy in that “educational” programs are less likely to come under scrutiny by authoritarian regimes, and also a response to the intersectional challenges and forms of discrimination that Indigenous women have faced themselves. For example, Tzarm was born in Shan State but moved to Thailand as a young child due to the war in Burma. She faced many challenges accessing and completing her education as she was categorized as stateless and denied citizenship as a Tai person from a

conflict zone area in Shan State. She shared about how her own experiences with lack of access to education motivated her own passion to educate other Indigenous youth:

Tzarm: Yeah, maybe when I was young, I did not have the opportunity to go to school. When I was a kid, after my aunt grabbed me to the school, and later on, there was a forced relocation, we had to move out. And after that, I didn't have to have any chance to go to school anymore. Until I fled to Thailand, and I was brought to the orphanage. I started to learn how to read and write there.

Hannah: So your parents stayed in Shan State?

Tzarm: Yeah. They got divorced before I came here. And then they just stay apart. Then my brother and I, we came to Thailand. My aunt sent us to Thailand, to the border, and then later on, our relatives at the border, sent us to the orphanage. But my brother, he was brought to the border, to the IDP [Internally Displaced Persons] camp, and I was brought to another orphanage in Chiang Mai. So, we were in different ways, and we have learned different things from the surroundings. When I came here, I think I was just like nine or ten years old. And then my relatives, they just didn't know what to do with us because we were still kids, and we could not work...because they just worked in the farm. And they could not just bring us every day [to the farm]. But, if they would send us to the school, they didn't have enough income to support us. That's why they sent us to the orphanage, both of us [my brother and I] we stayed far away from our families since then (Tzarm 2022).

Tzarm focused on how the experience of living in an orphanage had strengthened her and helped her learn to live independently. We discussed how our different family circumstances had led us to live apart from our families since we were young children:

Hannah: You have to be very strong to do that.

Tzarm: Yeah. Because we had no choice, but we felt like, happy that we were like that. Because it is strengthen us to be like this, and then to be strong. Today, we can stay on our own. And we don't have to rely on our family all the time.

Hannah: But, yeah, make your own life. Yeah, I also lived away from my family when I was young. They sent me to, it's a very different situation of course. But because...my dad...there's a lot of like, racism, discrimination [in England]. Yeah. So he couldn't find a job, especially at that time. This was like thirty years ago. So he went to Saudi Arabia to work there. Him and my mom. So they left us in England and in the school there. So most of my childhood I was in, like a boarding school there. But yeah...as you said, it definitely makes you very independent.

Tzarm: Yeah. And stronger.

Hannah: And live and like, travel by yourself...So you were saying that maybe that's why your focus was education.

Tzarm: I feel that education is so important. Yes. I feel like because I could not access to education when I was a kid and when I was in Shan State. So that makes me and inspires me to continue my study. And until today, I still want to learn new things. So that I can share with other people who lack of opportunities (Tzarm 2022).

Tzarm's experience with lack of access to education as a child made her passionate about pursuing higher education as her own tool of empowerment and strength. It also shaped her career choices, choosing to work as a teacher for an NGO that provides educational opportunities to young people from Burma. She shared how she also persuaded her relatives, in particular her uncle, to see the value of education where they had previously been doubtful:

When I was young, I feel like my relatives, they didn't agree with me to continue studying higher and higher, like to continue my education...Especially my uncle said, "Oh, you are getting older, you better find a job and earn some money for yourself and your family. Why do you have to continue studying?" Yeah, but I feel like that's my dream. I have to follow it. And I have to complete it. So, I didn't listen to them.

And later on, they realized that, oh yeah, *now you have...your own property, which no one can take away from you, which is your knowledge, the education you have* [emphasis added]. Even though you don't have a lot of money, but you have this kind of thing you can, *you can never lose it again* [emphasis added]. And then you can find any job anytime because you have the skills and abilities, and now, "Ah, okay," now he like, he's realized the importance of education (Tzarm 2022).

For Tzarm, her pursuit of education became her own way of enacting a strategy of intersectional brilliance. With the understanding that many things in life such as land, safety, and citizenship status could be taken away from Indigenous women living under authoritarian rule, education and knowledge were things she found that could always be held onto. Similarly, Mai and Pojong Saekue who were raised in Shan State and Northern Thailand in Tai and Hmong

communities respectively, wanted to share how important they saw education as the key to other young Indigenous women's futures.

Pojong Saekue: For me, it was really hard to get education, we had to fight a lot, like my grandma and grandpa, they...need to get married. When I was young, but I didn't want to get married, I had to fight a lot for my education. And then my father said that *I don't have much money or don't have land to provide to you. The thing I can give you is education [emphasis added]*. You can study, very high what you want, na. So that make us try to study...So it's difficult to find and get education, but now some young people, I don't know, they don't think about the future.

Hannah: You want them to care about the education.

Mai: That is the way that can bring them to a brighter future for the community *and to protect themselves as well* [emphasis added] (Mai and Saekue 2022).

For both Mai and Pojong Saekue, education was something that Indigenous women could always find a way to access (albeit even if there were struggles along the way), even if the state took away land rights or their home. Importantly, education was also something that would provide protection to Indigenous women; education meant being able to access jobs and being able to support their families and communities as well.

At the same time, it should be recognized that engaging with state-run systems of education such as schools and universities is always “complex and contradictory” for Indigenous peoples (Leepreecha and Meixi 2019, 707). Indigenous activists recognize that schools and universities within the Thai and Burmese states are sites of assimilation and colonial administration, where only ethnic majority languages are taught and many textbooks perpetuate stereotypes of Indigenous peoples (Leepreecha and Meixi 2019, 711). Many Indigenous women still engage with this system as a way of building knowledge, skills and status, with an understanding and awareness of its problematic nature. For this reason, as the next section will

discuss, many groups also seek to focus instead on education-based resistance through activist or non-formal forms of education either instead of, or in addition to, seeking mainstream education.

Activist Leadership and Training

Rather than mainstream education, many Indigenous women's groups in Northern Thailand focus instead on non-formal forms of education-based resistance, in particular running leadership and training programs that seek to mentor the next generation of young activists and community organizers. As mentioned above, these are first of all less directly oppositional and threatening to authoritarian regimes than more confrontational and public tactics such as protests or strikes. Furthermore, they also align with the values of activists such as Tzarm, who see education and training as a form of building power and strength that cannot be taken away by authoritarian regimes. It is important to recognize these forms of resistance, such as education and empowerment, as ways of resisting authoritarianism under restricted political conditions, especially for Indigenous women.

For these reasons, some Indigenous women activists in this region either eschew the rights-based activist approach or supplement it with their own education and leadership-based methodologies instead. Ginger Norwood and Cheery Zahau work with the International Women's Partnership for Peace and Justice and the Women's League of Chinland transnationally across Thailand, Burma and India. They write that a rights-based approach felt "distant, theoretical, and abstract" and disempowering for women living under military dictatorships to pursue, as rights-based approaches entail advocacy towards national governments that may be impossible to reach (Norwood and Zahau 2011, 229).

Norwood and Zahau instead used a feminist leadership methodology in their work with other Indigenous women activists which “uses power to nurture people and to build communities, prioritizes the voices and needs of grassroots, rural women...is transparent in decision-making processes, and seeks economic, social and political equity between genders” (2011, 237). This methodology focuses on equality and non-hierarchy between participants and facilitators, understanding oppression and structural violence as systemic, and focuses on women’s empowerment and liberation through a holistic approach starting at the individual but also incorporating community and systemic liberation (Norwood and Zahau 2011).

Similarly, at *Mekong Women for Peace* we chose to employ a rights-based approach only on a limited basis, in circumstances where there was a possibility of success. Otherwise, as Norwood and Zahau found, it felt disempowering and lacking in local grounding to use a rights framework in contexts where there was no possibility of rights being respected by militarized and authoritarian regimes. During my time working for *Mekong Women for Peace*, we used a feminist leadership model based on non-hierarchy and a focus on education, training, empowering and facilitating exchange and learning between women. This included multifaceted ways of building relationships with Indigenous and minority women across borders, including within the staff and organizational structure, with training and exchange programs, and alumni programs. Our focus was not to be prescriptive but to support women with the knowledge, skills and material items that they needed in order to be activists and enact change in their communities using whatever tools and methods worked best for them in their cultural and political contexts.

First, within our staff and organizational structure, we used internship and staff positions as opportunities for Indigenous and minority young women to learn, grow and build leadership skills. This is in contrast to Western and capitalistic ways of thinking about hiring and staff,

where the focus is usually to hire the person with the highest level of qualifications and experience so that they can produce the most valuable labor. We instead hired young women, some of whom had faced difficulty finding positions in other organizations due to discrimination, and used the internship and staff positions to connect them with trainings and skills development that they wished to access.

Second, within our training and leadership development programs, we organized workshops that brought together primarily Indigenous and minority young women to learn about and exchange their knowledge with each other on many different topics including gender and feminism, community organizing and campaigning, peacebuilding, environment, water and land rights, video documentation and facilitation skills. These workshops provided both the education and knowledge building that participants asked for, but were also ways of building deep relationships between participants as we stayed together in residential retreats, eating, laughing, and cooking together.

Finally, our alumni programs were also ways of nurturing our own forms of education-based resistance. After attending the training programs, our participants became part of our alumni network, where they could continue to be connected with each other and learn about each other's struggles and strategies across borders. We also provided small grants to alumni, so that Indigenous and minority young women could gain more experience running their own programs and activities in their communities. Unlike in Western models of grant making, these grants were provided with as minimal requirements of reporting as possible, and without any limitation on the type of activities supported. This model, based on feminist principles, was our way of supporting young women activists to work in their communities using the tools and skills learned, but applying them to their own individual contexts; we never sought to universalize or

control what types of activities took place in our program. That meant that in some highly restrictive authoritarian contexts, young women might use funds to initiate garbage management or cultural activities, whereas in places with more political opportunities some participants organized human rights documentation, advocacy, or more oppositional activities towards the state. Given the variety of issues and types of work that we supported, it was often difficult for outsiders, especially Western donors, to understand that we sought to support multiple tactics and forms of resistance according to what was possible on the ground.

Like *Mekong Women for Peace*, Siphoung's organization in Shan State, Burma also focused on educating, supporting, and building the skills and leadership of young Indigenous community activists. Siphoung shared how her organization's focus had shifted over time towards an intensive focus on educating and supporting youth, based on the feedback they kept receiving:

At first, for example, our organization, we really focus on the [name removed] river issue...Since then, we move to [name of town removed] and many people from the [name removed] River Basin they are interested in this kind of leadership training. So, at first our focus will be along the river basin, then gradually based on their feedback, because every time we finish the training, we have evaluation form, we ask them in person...so, we really ask them and they keep saying the important aspect in Shan State what is they need...[is] training program.

Then we develop to like, in fact alumni program we already plan, but aside from that, some alumni said they really want to be with us for the long term. So, they wanted to volunteer, from volunteer and like a step by step, they find a way, how to say, we also find a way to make them more improve. The thing is, whatever the work that we are doing, not for just project, but we are, we are really looking for the long term and sustainability especially for people who get involved (Siphoung 2022).

While her organization continued to campaign around river issues, they found from listening to the participants of their programs that what they really wanted was support to build up their skills and knowledge as activists and community organizers. In response, they shifted

their programs to focus on gradually supporting young activists, step by step, in building their skills via attending trainings, implementing small community-based activities, and then participating in their internship and then fellowship program. Siphoung details this process below:

And so, that's why the organization kind of having a lot of people...started from students, and then after that, we help them to apply their skill and to build their confidence through the small activity, and we also provide a small grant and...connect with our organization to work, to learn from them, also working together as a team. And after that, when they come back and they want to do intern, after internship, they can do many things, but during that time, we cannot provide them any resources. Then it is a need for our interns who complete intern, they should do something, then we create a fellowship—fellowship means they can be have skills, they can do by themselves.

They just need some advice, like a gradually, like the next step after they finish fellow and if they really know how to develop their own...project. Yeah, then we help them link with some other organization like for example, [name of organization removed] that is they always provide a small, even small grant it is very big. Yeah, it is six thousand [dollars]. So, three or four of them, they organize and they make similar project like [names removed] that they started from this small project, then bigger and bigger and later on they became staff. Yeah. Build them up (Siphoung 2022).

As Siphoung articulates, their organization focused on building up the skills and abilities of young activists through giving them progressively increasing responsibility. Through this methodology of educating, supporting and training young activists, they were able to support other young Indigenous activists to become leaders in their communities on issues from dams to river rights to women's empowerment. This way of thinking focuses on building up activists in the long term rather than focusing solely on short term campaigns or goals. Mai from Shan State stated on this topic:

I will say that, I'm not, I'm consider myself an activist. But sometimes, I'm not really the person who gonna be go for demonstrations. I would like to be like, the one who...support them in the back and in some way it will last longer. Yes, being an activist, what I'm thinking, it's very challenging and really stressful. We can imagine like, during the COVID and then the coup happening right now in our country, and

most of Indigenous people, they need a lot of support like, wellbeing, physical, mental emotional, that has happened to them, but they don't know how to explain it. Also, if we can support this type of thing to them it will make the work to move further (Mai and Saekue 2022).

This strategy of focusing on activist leadership and empowerment is enacted with the intention to build up more young Indigenous women as activist leaders. It is rooted in a belief that activism is fundamentally about supporting people, and that if we support young activists to grow and learn, that our work and movements will be more sustainable.

In conclusion, Indigenous women and people of color have known for a long time that focusing on education, whether through formal or non-formal channels, is an important strategy in building up the strengths and power of marginalized peoples. I have argued here that this strategy of promoting education, leadership and empowering other young women is a form of intersectional brilliance particularly used by Indigenous women activists in authoritarian contexts. While this strategy is less likely than protests and acts of direct resistance to be lauded by the Western media and academics, it is no less important in that it focuses on building long term movements and supporting Indigenous young activists to grow as people, not to be means to an end goal. Furthermore, it is a strategy that involves working within the current circumstances and political possibilities. In times when direct resistance and outward activism is no longer possible, the inner sphere of relationships and supporting others to develop their skills and knowledge can become another way to continue to engage in covert resistance and build long term movements. By supporting other young Indigenous women to access education, learn skills, and build their network with others across borders, Indigenous women's groups in Chiang Mai are continuing to find ways to build their strength, power and agency even under restricted conditions.

Political Agility

As the previous section has shown, Indigenous women activists in Chiang Mai engage in *education-based resistance* as a strategy of intersectional brilliance in order to build up their knowledge, strength, confidence and skills. In addition to this, once working as activist leaders, Indigenous women also enact intersectional brilliance through what I refer to here as *political agility*, which is a skill that allows them to be able to *continue* to engage in activist work under authoritarian and neocolonial contexts. *Political agility* is the ability to quickly adapt and transform strategies and methods under rapidly changing political and social circumstances. This is a skill born of necessity, particularly when working under conditions of unstable funding and authoritarian regimes. It is a form of survival and adaptation, a nimbleness. It is the ability to transform ones' work, sometimes overnight, when the circumstances dictate it. Although this adaptive ability is born out of challenging circumstances, political agility shows that Indigenous women activists continue to find ways to resist, fight back, and adapt to their circumstances.

Here I will talk about several of the many ways that Indigenous women and their collaborators have lived political agility as both a strategy and as a way of life as an activist. It is important to say that these strategies are not just enacted in order to win goals or campaign objectives (Goodwin and Jasper 2015); they are also ways of taking care of each other, of staying connected, of keeping each other safe, and of building community. I will share here three examples of ways that Indigenous women activists in Northern Thailand and Shan State have enacted and demonstrated political agility. The first example takes place during the COVID-19 pandemic; here I will share some of the ways Indigenous women activists rapidly adapted to their changing circumstances and challenges faced in their work. In the second example, I will discuss the many ways Indigenous activists have continued to adapt their work in order to

engage in overt resistance after the 2021 military coup in Burma, including through shifting forms of protest and utilizing activist security strategies. Finally, I will discuss several examples of more covert resistance in both Thailand and Burma which demonstrate Indigenous women's ability to adapt their work to authoritarian and neo-colonial contexts, including through the use of *strategic accommodations* and *covert communications* (Silva 2004).

Pandemic Adaptations

When the COVID-19 virus began spreading around the world in early 2020, the majority of the world's population faced stay-at-home orders, mask mandates, fear, and a new way of living under social distancing. Due to rapid advancements in online technology in the past decade, many of those working in fields such as education and the NGO sector quickly took up using video conferencing technology in order to continue working while social distancing. While almost every person on earth had to learn how to adapt in some way or another to the pandemic, Indigenous and grassroots activists in Chiang Mai and Shan State faced additional challenges and circumstances that required creative forms of adaptation and resistance. These challenges included simultaneously coping with the increasingly restrictive political context in Burma even pre-coup; working in rural communities often without access to internet; and dealing with the lack of healthcare support and protective equipment available for Indigenous communities in Burma. Despite these multiple challenges, Indigenous activists quickly found ways to adapt and address these circumstances.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, many educational groups, schools and NGOs around the world had to adapt to conducting online trainings instead of meeting in-person. Indigenous women activists in Burma, however, had to adapt to many additional challenges beyond simply learning how to use new technologies, including lack of internet access and

ensuring participants' security online and in person. For Mwe, who works for a women's activist organization that was previously based in Burma, she found that it was simply not tenable or safe to organize online trainings:

Hannah: So how did you guys adapt to the...pandemic situation, were you still able to keep...doing your work?

Mwe: Yes, still keep doing and then we changed, for example, I am empowerment program, mainly we have a lot of outdoor or in person meetings or conferences...lots of event we have to change, and some projects have to postpone. For example, for...women leadership school...during the pandemic, because of rule and regulations and travel, and many things we couldn't bring them to [name of city removed].

That's why we trying to adapt, in, like, online class. We try one or two months, yeah, but it doesn't work for us...because our, our target groups are mainly living in the remote area, where they couldn't access the internet. Is become their challenge, when they have the class because...they have to travel to the place that they get the internet, phone, so this is become a challenge for them. In some cases, very far, and then, like, the security at a time, even there is no coup, there's a lot of checkpoints from the Burmese military, the gate or something like that.

That's not really, they face this kind of challenges...and then okay we try, *we just stop it. We do not continue it because it's not very effective* [emphasis added]. And if they have faced any challenges, we couldn't fix anything [because of the pandemic], we just postpone it...So mostly, we conduct research because we just interview by phone or like that. So, I think we run mostly in 2020 is really difficult for us. And sometimes, also challenge for that communication to work from home because some of our staff is to go back to their hometown, where is the lack to access to internet and kind of like, that everything had to change and adapt even those strategy are kind of like that (Mwe 2022).

As Mwe shared, the participants for their women's leadership training came from Indigenous communities in rural areas, sometimes without access to electricity, internet or cell service. In their case, some of their participants were having to travel and cross military checkpoints to be able to get online to join their trainings. This situation, combined with the fact that their organization would have been unable due to the pandemic to travel to help the women if they were arrested or detained, meant that their group decided that online trainings were

simply too dangerous for them to conduct during the pandemic. They instead chose to shift their focus and conduct research with women in grassroots communities using telephone calls. To stop doing something is also a form of adaptation; and in this case their organization enacted an adaptive strategy of *refusal* (Tuck and Yang 2014). Although they were receiving pressure to keep conducting trainings online by a funding organization, they refused to do so:

Mwe: Yeah, yeah. And then, I, you know, at that time [during the pandemic], we also have to deal with donor. They even said, “Eh, why don’t you implement that...”; they keep asking.

Hannah: Really?

Mwe: Yeah, they keep asking. And, yeah, I mean, they said that they understand, but the way they question us is, “Actually, you can do this, why don’t you do that.” But yes, of course we can do if our target group is just, like people who...can access electricity or whatever, that’s very easy. We just do online and whatever...But our target group is kind of remote area where there’s no electricity or whatever (Mwe 2022).

As well as refusal, other Indigenous women’s groups found ways that worked for them to adapt and continue their work under the pandemic circumstances. For Siphoung’s organization in Shan State, the communities they were organizing in were able to get online to access meetings and trainings, but needed support to learn how to use the technology:

We always find alternative, for example, after the coup, after the COVID, and many organizations cannot work, *but we always find a way* [emphasis added]. We can learn very quickly about how to use [name of program removed], how to use the online and even the first month and then everything goes down, but we continue. And some community member, they cannot do, then we send the leader, like the woman leader. Because we also have a lot of research activity, then asked her to organize in the community, because people within the community can do it. And just go in. And we also have regular communication meetings, through the [online] meeting, and also include the community member together with a leader, that’s how we are doing (Siphoung 2022).

For Siphoung’s organization, they were able to draw upon their political agility to quickly adapt to the pandemic circumstances and continue their work. Finding that the communities they

worked with needed support getting online, they came up with the solution of sending women leaders to organize and support the community members so that they could get online and continue their research, training and activism.

Finally, dealing with both the COVID-19 pandemic and military coup in Burma, Indigenous communities faced a healthcare crisis due to the combination of lack of governmental support, hospital shutdowns as healthcare workers joined the Civil Disobedience Movement and the military junta's arrests and targeting of healthcare workers (Han et al. 2021). In response to this situation, Indigenous women in Shan State and transnationally in Thailand quickly adapted and mobilized to raise funds and distribute masks, medicine and other needed supplies within their communities. In one example, through raising funds online, using social media networks, *Mekong Women for Peace* was able to raise enough funds from Thailand, Burma, and the U.S. to buy needed supplies for seven communities in Shan State. This was another example of political agility as Indigenous women quickly stepped in to help keep communities safe and healthy when the official healthcare system collapsed in Burma.

Post-Coup Adaptations: Shifting Strategies of Overt Resistance

Indigenous activists have continued to enact their political agility in order to adapt to authoritarian and militarized political repression in both Thailand and Burma in recent years. Here I will focus on shifting strategies of overt forms of resistance, such as creative forms of protesting, and enacting digital activist security strategies in order to continue to resist the regime more safely; the following section will discuss more covert forms of resistance used.

Creative and Adaptive Forms of Protest

As Chapter Two discusses in detail, after the 2021 military coup in Burma mass protests with hundreds of thousands of participants took place across the country. However, following military crackdowns killing over seven hundred protestors in February and March of 2021 (Frontier Myanmar 2021b), activists changed tactics from mass mobilization on the streets to less dangerous forms of resistance and demonstrated their political agility. Here I will share chronologically how Indigenous activists adapted and shifted their protest strategies under rapidly shifting and increasingly authoritarian contexts throughout 2021 and 2022.

Within a few weeks of the Spring Revolution protests, activists quickly saw that the police were willing to use lethal force against protestors. At this time, in February 2021, both Indigenous and Burman activists still felt safe enough to protest on the streets, but they used creative strategies to avoid arrest and attack by the police. These included tactics such as blocking the road with cars that they pretended had broken down, stopping traffic by pretending to drop vegetables and groceries on the road, and protestors simultaneously stopping to tie their shoelaces at intersections. One protestor, Kan (name changed), explained the broken-down car tactic as follows:

It's very creative. I don't know who started it but it's funny and it made me proud. I feel like I have hope. This is not the only way to block the police, we have several ways: we pretend our car engines stopped and we just park it on the main road. When the police come to ask us to move we say 'Oh no, it's broken' or 'There's no fuel left.' We give a lame excuse just to block the road. People also cross the road again and again, circling around the road. Police can't do anything because they're crossing the road peacefully (Brody 2021).

While protestors in Yangon used cars to block traffic, Indigenous activists in Inle Lake, Shan State used boats to organize a simultaneous water-protest:



Figure 6. Water-protest at Inle Lake in February 2021. Photograph by Sittthar.
<https://www.facebook.com/ElevenMediaEnglishEdition/posts/2067884836687521>

These strategies allowed protestors to continue to fight the regime overtly, while reducing their chance of arrest, detainment and killing by the police. These tactics which drew upon humour and creative thinking as resources, helped activists not only stay safe but also feel a renewed sense of hope and power in mocking the police and the regime at a time when protestors were beginning to get killed by the regime (E. Smith 2021).



Figure 7. Artwork produced for the longyi protest in March 2021. Text says “Our longyi, our flag, our victory.” Drawing by Kue Cool. <https://inspire.gallery/artists/kue-cool/>

Indigenous and Burman woman protestors also utilized adaptive forms of protest at this time which simultaneously served to mock the patriarchy and the military, and as a tactic to stay safe. In early March, women protestors across the country made use of their longyi (sarong) and underwear as tactics to stay safe and to criticize the patriarchy. This references the idea among some men in Burma, particularly among the Tatmadaw, that women’s underwear and longyi are bad luck for men and take away their power. For this reason, some men believe it is bad luck to walk under or touch a woman’s hanging longyi or underwear. In response, women protestors hung their longyi, underwear, and in some cases used sanitary pads as flags and also barricades on the street. This both served to call out a patriarchal belief and also as a strategy of staying safe, as in some cases the military would slow down their advancement on protestors in order to take down the longyi barricades to avoid passing under them (Linn 2021). This was a moment of both crisis and “opportunity” in making space for Indigenous women’s activism in Burma, as Mwe stated in her portrait in the previous chapter (Mwe 2022). While the longyi protests were

controversial among some men and women protestors, many men also showed their solidarity with women protestors by wrapping longyi around their heads (Frontier Myanmar 2021a).

By April 2021, violent crackdowns on protestors meant that most activists no longer felt safe gathering in public. Activists continued to overtly show their dissent by shifting tactics again. These included a “Green day strike” where protestors painted messages on leaves and an “Easter egg strike” where activists painted slogans on eggs (Frontier Myanmar 2021b).



Figure 8. Protest slogans painted on eggs at Easter in a market in Shan State. Photograph by Anonymous/AFP/Getty Images. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/gallery/2021/apr/12/paint-easter-eggs-and-watermelons-myanmars-creative-protests-in-pictures>

Overt resistance at this time took place both on social media and on the streets. Activists in Shan State still found ways to make their opposition to the coup known publicly without endangering themselves by gathering in mass numbers. They used creative and inventive

strategies including covertly leaving rows of empty shoes to symbolize their presence at protest sites and to honor those killed by the military during protests. Activists also splattered red paint on roads and signs to show the bloodshed and brutality of the military.



Figure 9. Red paint splattered to symbolize the bloodshed of protestors killed by the regime in Taunggyi, Shan State. Photograph by Handout/Kanbawza News.
<https://www.channelstv.com/2021/04/06/myanmar-activists-splash-red-paint-to-protest-junta-bloodshed/>



Figure 10. Activists honor those killed and protest without gathering by leaving shoes at protest sites in Taunggyi, Shan State. Photograph by RFA.

<https://www.rfa.org/english/multimedia/myanmar-shoe-protest-gallery-04082021170026.html>

By May 2021 with violent crackdowns, arrests and torture of protestors taking place across the country, protestors stopped using these tactics for the most part, although public protests continue to still take place sporadically. However, activists have still continued to show their dissent overtly through the use of “Silent Strikes” where participants stay home and do not go to work, school, or participate in the economy. These have taken place sporadically and especially on dates such as the first and second anniversary of the coup.



Figure 11. Images collected from across Shan State show empty streets for a Silent Strike on Human Rights Day, the 10th of December 2021. Photographs by Little Activist/anonymous sources. <https://twitter.com/ActivistLittle/status/1469262884270002178>

While it is very dangerous at this time to overtly protest in Burma, Indigenous activists still continue to resist. As Chapter Two discussed in detail, many are currently doing so through having joined the People's Defense Force and are using armed resistance as a tactic. Others have left Burma and are now continuing their activism in exile in Thailand, the United States, Japan and other countries around the world. And some continue to protest inside Burma through silent strikes and the occasional public protest, risking their lives in the process.

Activist Security Strategies

Even without being able to openly dissent, it is still important for many Indigenous women activists from Burma to express their opposition to the regime. In order to find a way to do so without risking arrest, activists have utilized digital activist security strategies including encryption technology and anonymizing strategies in order to share their stories and voices of opposition to the regime without being identifiable.

In the case of *Mekong Women for Peace* and the community-based research conducted in collaboration with this PhD, we used online encryption technology to communicate with participants. Participants wrote their own stories rather than interviewing others, and we had a videographer train participants in how to take their own photographs and film themselves so that participants could collect their own stories and material while staying at home and then send it in to us. This was both due to the pandemic as well as to reduce the risk that would come with involving anyone else in the project. Participants also learned and experimented with different ways of recording and photographing that would allow them to express themselves and share their stories while still protecting their anonymity, including voice distortion, not showing their faces, blurring their faces, and using symbolic photographs and images that did not reveal their face or location.



Figure 12. One of the participants in the collective storytelling shows images from the Spring Revolution that still preserve activists' anonymity. Photograph by anonymous source.

All of this required a great deal of thought, effort and adaptation to work under the twin circumstances of the pandemic and military coup. However, it was important to the participants to find a way to tell their stories about what was happening in their communities in Burma and resist the regime.

I wrote here some of my reflections on the online community research process and what it felt like to use these strategies:

We met online in [date removed] 2021 for our video/photography skills training. The idea of this training was to support the participants to learn skills in photo and video so that they can record their own lives and their answers to the research questions. I was nervous about the training and I think [name of staff removed] was too. Trying to set up the technicalities of multiple forms of translation needed, making sure that we were using the right kind of encryption and that we wouldn't be compromising peoples' safety, and the unknowns of the situation in Burma in terms of internet and peoples' safety. But, actually, the training went really well. First, seeing [names removed] faces even briefly was so nice. I've come to realize over the last two years [of the pandemic] how important it is for me to see peoples' faces. I get almost depressed without it...those video calls where everyone has their camera off and I'm looking at a wall of black screens really bother me in particular. It just feels so hard to connect.

When the workshop started and people began to join it was a powerful feeling to finally be face to face (even through video) with friends I've been missing for such a long time and to meet new people in Thailand and Burma too. There was [name removed], our trainer, wearing huge noise cancelling headphones; there was [name removed] with a wide smile and her long hair pulled back in a ponytail; a moment of laughter when her toddler son popped up on the camera. Another participant with glasses and cropped hair; and then the cameras are off to keep the internet connection going and we're back to the black screens, although it doesn't feel so bad after that moment of connection.

I think the training went well because [name of trainer removed] was a great trainer—in my opinion. He went slowly and patiently, and gave the participants exercises to do to keep them engaged, like going out and taking their own photos, then sharing them with the group. Being in a training on a relatively innocuous topic like photography skills gave me a feeling of normalcy for a moment, but of course there were undercurrents and flashes of reality every so often. [name removed] joined from a boat on [location removed], and showing us her video of the long tail boat and islands of green surrounded by water, our group had a collective sigh. As we were talking about photos that make us feel, [name of trainer removed] said “anyone who has been to [name of location removed] will feel something right now.” For...those being outside of Burma, the feeling of not being able to go there must be especially poignant.

We also saw [name removed]'s green protective mask on, reminding us in that moment that COVID is still real and exists. And [name removed] pointed out that she wasn't comfortable going outside to take photos, because she was in [location removed] with active fighting and someone else had just been killed recently. Of course, we told the participants from the beginning that they could just take photos at their home, of themselves, and that they didn't need to interview other people. So that's the way that we tried to manage those concerns and the security situation.

Through collective discussions and brainstorming, our team of staff and participants were able to find ways to continue to engage in the collective storytelling project despite the pandemic and coup. However, it was not easy to do so at all, and it took much longer than it would have otherwise. Despite these facts, it was an important moment of intersectional brilliance and political agility that the Indigenous women in our network engaged in, to find ways to have their voices and perspectives heard and show their resistance to the regime even in the midst of a pandemic and political crackdown.

“We Have to Adapt, na”: Covert Strategies of Indigenous Resistance under Authoritarian and Neocolonial Contexts

As well as overt strategies of resistance, Indigenous and minority women activists have also adapted to their changing political contexts using various forms of *covert* resistance. These include the use of *strategic accommodation* and *covert communications* (Silva 2004). Here I will discuss several examples of these covert forms of resistance, which demonstrate Indigenous activists’ political agility and ability to adapt their work to authoritarian and neocolonial contexts. As this is quite a sensitive topic, I have only given a few brief examples here that are both general and anonymized in order to avoid putting any groups at risk.

Strategic Accommodations

Silva introduces the idea of “strategic accommodation” in order to resist colonialism in Hawai’i in *Aloha Betrayed* (2004, 10). In order to resist Western colonialism, both the mō‘ī and ali‘i nui as well as resistance organizations such as the Hui Aloha ‘Āina strategically adopted forms of Western government and organization, the language of constitutional rights and Western dress and writing in order to make their case against annexation. Yet, as Silva notes, this was not a case of assimilation but rather a tactical strategy to be seen as “legitimate” in the eyes

of the West as an equal, sovereign and Christian nation. Silva demonstrates that the adoption of Western norms by the Kanaka Maoli was not due to a capitulation or acceptance of the superiority of Western culture and forms of governance but rather as a strategic tactic to avoid full annexation (Silva 2004, 37–39).

This tactic of “strategic accommodation” is also used by Indigenous activists in the Thai-Burma border context. In their case, this includes both strategic accommodation of Western donors in the neocolonial context, as well as strategic accommodation of authoritarian regimes when needed. This is a salient point as a great deal of literature on transnational activists and global South NGOs by Western scholars often either overly idealizes or excessively critiques these groups as tools of neo-imperialism (Bebbington 2004; Narayanaswamy 2014). Yet, Silva’s description of the Kanaka Maoli using the colonizer’s tools as instruments to advocate for their self-determination has parallels with NGOs in Thailand and Burma. Such organizations, while participating in a hegemonic Western system, are neither passive victims nor imperial agents, but rather, groups who strategically use the funding, norms and access to power accorded by participation in the NGO system in order to advocate for their own values and goals, which may or may not be in alignment with Western norms. For example, one anonymous interviewee shared here how they found ways to use funds from donors towards their own purposes, including supporting the revolution in Burma:

Yeah, like in fact, it is really important time to support the youth who are moving back to the...like moving to the jungle, forest.... And then we still find a way to support them, like, we want to do the...training...training is okay during that time. And then we just support, in fact, they want to use something else, but we put under the category of...training, they must do it three days or six days it depends on them, according to the proposal, and they use, they have all the record, all the money and the participant list. What we require they can provide us but all the money, they don't use, like for one meal, let's say one dollar, two dollars. They don't spend at all, they just take all the

money and they just put it in a common fund of revolution, something like that. So, it is a way to just adapt it very quickly (Anonymous 2022).

Speaking the language of Western donors, who would be able to understand, for example, a training, but wouldn't be willing to use money to support a revolutionary cause, their organization conducted the training—which was in fact needed on the ground—but also donated the funds allocated for per diem towards supporting the revolution. Of course, they could have simply used the funds for themselves to have a meal out, but they instead collectively pooled their money towards the revolution. Other activists also do the same with the funds that they put in their donor budget line items for salaries, stipends or consultant fees; they willingly divert these funds towards more needed items that donors are not willing to fund, or share their salaries with other people in order to create more jobs. They cannot be accused of misusing funds as they are simply donating their own salary or meal stipends for work they have already done. It is a way of collective thinking that allows the benefits of the funding to be more widely distributed. This is just one example of how Indigenous activists use *strategic accommodation* as a tactic to fulfil Western donor requirements whilst still also working towards their own goals which are not in alignment with Western norms.

As well as using the tactic of strategic accommodation towards Western donor organizations, this is also a tactic that is quite often employed vis-a-vis authoritarian regimes in the Mekong region, and particularly outside of Burma. Although I personally would not use the term “weak,” James Scott shows that marginalized peoples may engage in everyday forms of resistance to authority, such as feigned compliance, euphemisms, and evasion through what he terms “weapons of the weak” (Scott 1985). Strategic accommodation in the context of Indigenous activism in some Mekong region countries might look like finding ways to

strategically build relationships with government authorities and gain their trust. Explaining these in any more detail would run the risk of exposing these strategies, so suffice to say that groups are often able to find creative and innovative ways to continue their work under authoritarian regimes, in some cases with the knowledge of individuals in the government.

Covert Communications

As well as *strategic accommodation*, Indigenous activists also make careful use of language in their work to avoid antagonizing or coming under investigation by authoritarian regimes. In this strategy, Silva's term *covert communications* is helpful in understanding how activists employ language as a way of adapting their work to authoritarian contexts. Covert communications guides us to consider other ways that women engage in resistance beyond direct methods of communications. In referring to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, rather than concluding that the subaltern cannot speak, Silva instead challenges us to consider "in the situations in which the subaltern cannot speak overtly, in what ways do they speak? And in what ways do we listen?" (2004, 8).

Silva shows in discussing the concept of covert communications in Hawai'i that Kanaka Maoli women showed their opposition to U.S. annexation through subtly subversive acts of resistance including methods such as mo'olelo, songs, poetry, clothing and quilting (2004, 8). In Chiang Mai and the Thai-Burma border context, covert communications take place through the use of mainstream, non-threatening language to describe one's work. This is one way that activists are able to continue to operate and do their work without coming under investigation. This is an important point to make because some feminist activists critique this type of language usage and do not see it as radical enough. For example, on this topic Kamla Bhasin critiques the trend of "slowly giving up the use of words like patriarchy, feminism, structural violence, and

exploitation” and argues that “our analysis, our writing and our language should not be diluted in order to please donors or people in power” (2012, 6).

While I fully agree that language should not be diluted simply for the desires of donors or people in power where it can be avoided, if we are talking about contexts where using radical language or the language of rights and activism means arrest or disappearance, it seems like a way of simply being prudent and finding ways to survive and adapt. I argue here instead that the use of mainstream language is one strategy that activists in authoritarian contexts use to be able to continue to do their work and adapt to the circumstances that they face. For this reason, some Indigenous activists may use terms such as “responsibilities” rather than “rights” or “sustainable development” rather than “environmental justice” to describe their work. For example, one Indigenous activist who works under highly authoritarian conditions stated,

We don't use the rights. But we teach people we are going to have a workshop or meeting, we teach villagers to respect yourself first, know your duty, teach them how to respect themselves and respect others, that actually means rights, but we don't use the word rights, we use the word respect each other, it's a kind of practical way (Anonymous 2022).

In her case, to use the term Indigenous rights would mean putting herself and the community at risk of investigation and arrest. Her organization instead found a way to still conduct their trainings and share the knowledge that they wished to with the local community by changing their terminology. This strategic employing of language is a form of covert communications that seeks to adapt and continue resistance work under authoritarian contexts.

As well as the shifting use of language as a form of covert communications, activists also made adaptations to their focus and work according to what they were able to do under shifting political circumstances. This sometimes involved shifting one's work entirely, or using one type

of work as a front to carry out other, more risky activities. In a focus group discussion with Indigenous activists still working inside Burma, activists also discussed how they shifted their focus to COVID relief, sexual health trainings and staff development in order to adapt to the post-coup context.

Cherry: Currently our team cannot work further because of this situation [referring to the coup] and that this moment what we are doing is for the staff capacity development and also all the members, now they are trying to develop their own capacity and send our staff or our members to other organizations for capacity building and join the training, and for the individual of our team, some of them are doing volunteer work, and some of us are supporting the revolution.

Hannah: So, at this time you cannot do the regular activities, right?

Siphoung: I think at this time, many organizations has to close down. We also temporarily close down, yeah, but just start again. But for many organization, has to shut down because of the security.

Cherry: Nowadays, many organizations they focus more on sexual health issues. Seems that it is not too much sensitive, that's why. And also, other organizations who are working on this field, so it will still connect each other.

Hannah: It's the way you can continue which is less sensitive, right?

Siphoung: Yes, sensitive, and also able to work, and still contribute. Yeah, *we have to adapt, na* [emphasis added].

Cherry: Like for [name of organization removed], we still going and supporting IDP [Internally Displaced Persons]. At the same time, raising awareness about COVID-19, because this one is less sensitive. That's why we use this channel to continue supports to IDP. Through the COVID awareness (Cherry, Saw Kalyar, Siho, Siphoung and Thin 2022).

Although in these cases, activists from Burma sometimes had to shift the focus of their work in order to adapt to their circumstances, they still felt that this was a way that allowed them to continue their work and support communities in the way that they were able. For example, in Cherry's case, her organization continued to support IDPs who are Indigenous peoples displaced by the military, through framing their work as COVID awareness, which is a less sensitive term

than IDP to the Burmese military and less likely to come under scrutiny. These tactics involved using language and adaptive use of terminology in order to covertly resist authoritarian rule.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has discussed some of the strategies that Indigenous women activists are using in Northern Thailand and the Thai/Burma border region in order to resist and transform circumstances of intersectional discrimination. In this chapter, I have referred to these strategies as acts of intersectional brilliance in order to highlight that these are strategies developed by those living at the intersection of multiple forms of discrimination, and that to continue one's work under such circumstances requires creativity, adaptability and brilliance.

To challenge authoritarianism and heteropatriarchy, Indigenous women activists have used a plethora of tactics, starting first of all with self and community empowerment through education, training and feminist leadership programs. They have also flexed political agility through the ability to quickly adapt to changing political circumstances, including the COVID-19 pandemic, military coup, and increasing authoritarianism. In addition, Indigenous women's groups use both *strategic accommodations* and *covert communications* when dealing simultaneously with neo-colonial funding agencies and authoritarian regimes in order to continue their work strategically and covertly. Furthermore, the following and final chapter of this dissertation will also show how Indigenous women activists in Chiang Mai and the bordering regions engage in transnational and trans-Indigenous acts of solidarity and resistance as ways of enacting intersectional brilliance. As all of these acts show, Indigenous women activists in Thailand and Burma are actively engaged in strategically "challenging the limits" (Leepreecha, McCaskill, and Buadaeng 2008, 2) of state authoritarianism and control, even under the most challenging of circumstances.

Portrait: Hseng

The first time I met Hseng, she was six months pregnant. She now has two young children and I also have a three-year-old boy. Our kids love each other, our husbands get along, and we feel comfortable in each other's company: in short, it's one of those rare friendships you find in life where everyone loves each other and enjoys being together. For this reason, I find writing a portrait of Hseng more difficult than any other portrait in this dissertation. Somehow, it's harder to convey the essence of someone that you know well, or perhaps I feel more worried about whether I can get it right.

Hseng and I have met hundreds of times either for work or as friends. On the day we meet for an interview in August 2022, we decide to meet at a coffee shop away from our rambunctious kids in the Old City of Chiang Mai. Hseng is in her thirties and has short hair that she has recently cut into a fringe. She's wearing blue jeans, a grey t-shirt and a blue polka dot hat on the day we meet. Her life has been one of living, working, and loving across borders. Hseng was born in Shan State and wrote her story in the *Mekong Women for Peace* participatory storytelling project. She wrote about her childhood growing up in a revolutionary family:

“On a bright full-moon day of the twelfth lunar month at five in the morning of Tuesday, I first saw the face of my youngest daughter.” That was what my father recorded in his diary.

My father thought I would be the youngest child, so he gave me this name...I was born in a jungle of Shan State while there were wars everywhere and the Shan State was on fire. The wars happened because the only group of people who called themselves "Tatmadaw" (Burma Army) wanted to rule the country with their brutal ways of governance (Hseng 2022b, 5).

After spending much of her childhood moving around the forest in Shan State as her father was a soldier for one of the ethnic armies, her family moved to the Thai/Burma border.

There was a school that was built by the Shan Army. It gave us the opportunity to learn our own language which we did not have the opportunity to study in the big cities of Shan State. Actually, at that time, not only studying our own language, but also listening to political music was considered illegal. Even though I did not have to live in the forest like when I was a baby, my life at the border was still messing with wars and conflicts. Some days, the Burma Army attacked the camp with warplanes over the houses in the community which was in the control area of the Shan military. As a result, every house in the camp must build a bunker for the safety of their family (Hseng 2022b, 6).

Despite these challenges, Hseng shared that she also had happy memories of her childhood:

My parents decided to build a small house next to a small river. I did not know how many houses we had built since all the other houses were burned by the Burmese Army. The daily routine with my eldest sister was to collect edible ferns and wild vegetables at the riverbanks. We also caught fish and cicadas. On a hot day, if we wanted to jump into the river, we could do so immediately. For me, life in Shan State at the border was a happy time (Hseng 2022b, 6).

Later, her father left the army to join a different faction; this meant that it was no longer safe for Hseng and her family to live in Shan State, so they moved to Chiang Mai, Thailand as migrant workers. For this reason, she has been stateless since leaving Shan State. However, due to recent changes in the law she will be able to apply for Thai citizenship in the next five years. She talked more about her life growing up as a stateless person:

Hseng: Like before, my card, I cannot buy motorbike, I cannot buy car, or even apply the driving license, but after they change the law, change the policy, I can do.

Hannah: And when was that that they changed it?

Hseng: I think in my case, let's say less than ten years ago. Like if I come to Chiang Mai, I have to get permission right, last time, but now they allow me to travel in Chiang Mai province. But if I go to another province, I have to get permission.

Hannah: Still have to get permission.

Hseng: Yeah. But it's like...it's better [laughs a little].

Hannah: Better than before.

Hseng: Yeah, something like that (Hseng 2022a).

Hseng is clear that the root cause of her challenges in life is due to authoritarianism:

I always tell myself that the reason I have to live as a stateless person like so many other people is because of the Burmese military dictatorship. Without the Burma Army, I would probably grow up in a good society and live peacefully in Shan State (Hseng 2022b, 8-9).

Due to these difficulties living in Thailand, and because she married someone from Burma, Hseng had been making plans before the coup to settle in Burma with her family although she worried how she would manage without being able to speak Burmese. Hseng speaks Thai, Tai and English but she did not learn Burmese because she went to school in Thailand.

“Our hearts were broken after we heard about the military coup.” Hseng spoke of the first of February 2021 when the military launched a coup in Burma. “We are angry, we are not happy, angry, upset, but we cannot do anything because they hold the power,” Hseng said in an online workshop a few months after the coup. Despite her words, Hseng worked hard to resist the military government through fundraising for people in Burma and supporting activists from Burma who have now found themselves in exile in Thailand.

For Hseng, her transnational experiences on both sides of the border have become sources of strength as she can go between and bridge Thai and Burma activist groups. She chose to align herself more with Burma groups, rather than assimilating into Thai society like some other Tai people that she knows:

Hseng: I'm Shan but I grew up here, but I can read Thai. I moved to Thailand long, long, time ago...I think most Shan people, like my age, and then they move to Thailand

like me, they are more Thai. Because of me, like me and [name removed] we work with people from Burma, that's why keep our selves connect. But for most of the Shan they are more Thai, they still listen Shan music but not really interest about Shan issue much, or Burma.

Some they even change their identity, change their surname, it happened to some people. I think for my case...I feel more part of Burma groups, because I'm working with [name removed] and work with people from Burma...But maybe because I'm from the border, too, that's why I feel I connect more with the Burma side more and [laughs] the environment around me is NGO groups from Burma, from Shan State.

But if have chance to work with Thai side, I can work. When I work with [name removed] magazine at that time, I connect with many Thai groups. But for feeling, I think I feel more [Burma side]...

Hannah: I think you are really the person who connects across the border.

Hseng: [Laughs] I think now, maybe more connect, na (Hseng 2022a).

Hseng's trans-border and transnational experiences and knowledge became a source of strength and support for other activists newly arriving from Burma. She supported newly arriving activists with learning the Thai language and practical matters such as accounting, healthcare, banking and getting a driver's license. These transnational acts of support were acts of political solidarity in that they helped keep activists escaping arrest in Burma safe in Thailand and to access the funds that they needed. They were not flashy or high-profile, but Hseng often shows her leadership and support by working behind the scenes to do what needs to be done.

With the option no longer available to settle in Burma, Hseng is now instead focusing on a pathway to Thai citizenship for herself and her children, which is now possible in the next five years for her. The work she is doing is not easy, and she is tired: she has talked many times about quitting her NGO job, perhaps to sell dried bananas from her hometown, or open a bakery. But up until now, she continues working with NGOs, supporting activists from Burma in Thailand despite the challenges and risks involved. The full moon that was shining brilliantly on the night

she was born knew no borders. It must have glowed in the sky in both Shan State and Northern Thailand. So too, Hseng and other women activists in Chiang Mai are continuing to shine their solidarity with communities on both sides of the border through acts of daily support and resistance. As Hseng writes in her own words in concluding her story, “together with the people in Myanmar, I will be a small part of the changes to work forward the better changes by making their voice heard” (Hseng 2022b, 9).²

² To read Hseng’s story in full from the collaborative storytelling project, please visit https://drive.google.com/file/d/18yIgpK_ehIWa7OqexaBJHdM2IF1Fwan/view?usp=sharing



Figure 13. Image of the full moon from Hseng's story in the Voices of Women Project. Image courtesy of *Mekong Women for Peace*.

CHAPTER 5

Crossing Borders to Build Power: Transnational and Trans-Indigenous Connections

Introduction

As the previous chapter has shown, Indigenous women activists working both in Chiang Mai as well as across the border in Shan State use various strategies in order to build and express their power in response to circumstances of intersectional discrimination. In Chapter Four, I have called these strategies forms of *intersectional brilliance*, where Indigenous women find ways to resist and transform their circumstances. These include engaging in education and training as a form of resistance, and using political agility to adapt to the pandemic, coup and increasingly authoritarian conditions.

Another important way that Indigenous women express intersectional brilliance in Chiang Mai and across the region is through drawing upon *trans-Indigenous and trans-border connections* in order to increase their power and networks. In this final chapter, I discuss how Indigenous women activists use and develop trans-Indigenous and cross-border connections in order to build their strength and agency, access opportunities, and provide mutual support to each other.

In this chapter, I start by discussing how trans-Indigeneity and Indigenous transnationalism are challenges to colonial rule and the state's attempts to control Indigenous peoples. I also discuss some critiques of transnational literature on social movements and consider more expansive ways of thinking about transnationalism, including trans-Indigeneity, South-South transnationalism and transnational and Indigenous feminisms.

Next, I will share some stories and examples of trans-Indigeneity and transnationalism in Indigenous women's activism in Chiang Mai and the Mekong region from my research. These include individual acts of trans-Indigenous learning and self and community empowerment, transnational acts of solidarity at the Thai-Burma borderlands, and regional transnational campaigns to protect the Mekong and Salween Rivers and fight against authoritarian rule. As this chapter will show, these acts of trans-Indigeneity and transnationalism include *both* interior, everyday acts of mutual support across borders, as well as more public exterior campaigns and shows of solidarity. Ultimately, these acts of transnational and trans-Indigenous relationship building and solidarity create spaces of learning, connection and empowerment for Indigenous women in Chiang Mai.

Decolonization, Indigenous Transnationalism and Trans-Indigeneity

In *Decolonisation and the Pacific*, Tracey Banivanua Mar demonstrates that Indigenous transnationalism is a direct challenge to the colonial and state impositions placed upon Indigenous and minority peoples. This includes the “immobility and shrinking of worlds” experienced by Indigenous peoples under colonialism through colonial constructs such as borders, nation-states, passports, travel restrictions, blood quantum, and incarceration (Banivanua Mar 2016, 38). In Thailand, Olivier Evrard and Prasit Leepreecha similarly note that mobility and Indigeneity are entwined in colonialism and state control; “the mobility of some privileged people (either foreigners or domestic tourists) necessitates the immobility of others and keeps them in their marginal position” (2009, 316). This is done through logics of control including the tiered citizenship system which denies many Indigenous peoples full citizenship and freedom of movement within Thailand, as well as other state attempts to limit Indigenous peoples' movement such as through border controls and refugee camps.

Therefore, the very existence of Indigenous transnationalism is contrary to the goals of the neocolonial nation-state that imposes borders and controls on the movement of Indigenous and Global South peoples and their ideas. As Banivanua Mar writes, “if isolation had empowered colonial states...mobility and solidarity eroded those borders, allowing a transnational, global connectedness that conversely empowered the colonised” (Banivanua Mar 2016, 194). While isolation empowers the state, colonized peoples in turn often find strength and power through connectedness, exchange, and movement (although this is not to say that staying in one place is always disempowering). This allows the development of hope and alternative futures to colonialism through the creation of “new networks of identity in unexpected ways” and the establishment of “novel relations across peoples and places in movements and flows” (Soguk 2011, 51).

Trans-Indigeneity goes beyond transnationalism in its call to de-center the state and nation and re-center Indigenous futurities (Aikau 2015). As Chadwick Allen writes in *Trans-Indigenous: Methodologies for Global Literary Native Studies*, trans-Indigeneity means starting by “acknowledg[ing] the mobility and multiple interactions of Indigenous peoples, cultures, histories and texts” throughout history and into the present day (C. Allen 2012, xiv). Furthermore, unlike transnationalism, trans-Indigeneity is a specifically decolonial framework; Hōkūlani Aikau writes, “the embrace of the transnational, postnational, international, or global frameworks... on their own...do not call for an end to US Empire, decolonization, deoccupation, and settler colonialism” (2015, 658). Aikau’s work shows that unlike transnationalism, trans-Indigeneity requires an understanding of the challenges of re-building trans-Indigenous connections in the context of over five hundred years of colonialism, especially how “to strive for reconnection after disconnection, misunderstanding, and miscommunication” (2015, 658).

The works of Allen, Aikau, Banivanua Mar, and Nevzat Soguk, which focus on Indigenous and Global South relationalities, are in direct contrast to Western scholars of transnational social movements whose work often shows a tendency towards Eurocentrism. Much of the literature on transnational activism “privilege[s] transnational relationships between the metropole and colony” (Banivanua Mar 2016, 9) or between the Global North and South. The North continues to be the center in the eyes of many writers on transnational activism, where international is often conflated with the West, and transnational activism is assumed to either be led by or targeted towards U.S. and European institutions, including international organizations, U.N. bodies or Western governments (Bob 2005; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Tilly 2007).

One example of this type of Eurocentric bias in transnational literature is *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics*. Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink’s work assumes a relationality to the West for all transnational NGOs and social movements. In *Activists Beyond Borders*, not only is transnational advocacy portrayed as Western-centric, it is also Western-led. In the examples given of transnational advocacy, the international campaign to end footbinding in China was initiated by missionaries, women’s suffrage originated in Britain and the United States, and the campaign against female genital mutilation in Kenya was initiated by Protestant missionaries (Keck and Sikkink 1998). The way these stories are written, as well as the stories chosen to be told, results in the erasure of the engagement and leadership of those from the global South and people of color in transnational advocacy.

Another work, *The Marketing of Rebellion* by Clifford Bob does acknowledge the global inequities of transnational social movements and NGOs. Yet, it still demonstrates a type of

Eurocentric thinking where it is assumed that the goal of transnationalism is to capture the attention and resources of the West (Bob 2005). However, transnational activism and relationships across the Global South and between Indigenous and minority women, are not only rising and growing in strength and impact, they have also existed long prior to colonial times (Banivanua Mar 2016). For this reason, my research here focuses on highlighting transnationalism within the Global South, specifically within Asia, rather than the West; in particular between Indigenous activists as well as some ethnic majority activists in Thailand, Burma and across the Mekong region of Southeast Asia.

Third World, Indigenous and Transnational Feminisms

Another way of thinking about cross-border and transnational solidarity and exchange, especially between women, comes from feminist literature. In the fields of Third World, Indigenous and transnational feminisms, a commitment to solidarity across colonial borders and de-centering the West is much more apparent. Women of color in the 1980s used the identifier Third World women to align themselves with women in the Global South. Chela Sandoval writes, “U.S. Third World feminism provided access to a different way of conceptualizing not just feminist consciousness but oppositional activity in general: it comprised a formulation capable of aligning U.S. movements for social justice not only with each other, but with global movements towards decolonization” (2000, 41). As Cherríe Moraga wrote in *This Bridge Called My Back*, “as women (people) of color in the united states, we also used “third world” to align ourselves with countries bearing colonial histories and still suffering their effects, much of today’s global south. We saw ourselves as ‘internally’ colonized in the United States” (Anzaldúa and Moraga 1983, xxv).

M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty are often credited with an instrumental role in developing the language of transnational feminism. They write in *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, “we develop these tools in order to better understand and engage with the world, and in order to bring about revolutionary change” (Alexander and Mohanty 1996, ix). This comes out of their experiences with anticolonial struggles against the British as well as immigration to the U.S., stating “our own experiences of the multiple sites of racism in the U.S. have also convinced us that we must understand the local as well as the global manifestations of power” (Alexander and Mohanty 1996, xiv). Mohanty’s commitment to working across borders while also rejecting the “global sisterhood” version of global white feminism is also expressed in *Feminism Without Borders*, writing “our most expansive and inclusive visions of feminism need to be attentive to borders while learning to transcend them” (Mohanty 2003, 2).

As a theory, transnational feminism is useful because it can function as an “analytic that helps us see how processes like migration, NGO-ization, or environmental degradation cross international borders” (Blackwell, Briggs, and Chiu 2015, 3). Further, Mignonette Chu writes that transnational feminism challenges liberalism, neoliberalism and global forms of structural violence; through this exposition, transnational feminism “is a politics from which a radically different future can be imagined” (Blackwell, Briggs, and Chiu 2015, 11).

Although authors like Alexander, Mohanty, Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan are often credited in developing transnational feminism, Indigenous feminists have questioned this genealogy, however, pointing out that Indigenous feminisms have always been transnational. Luana Ross affirms that Indigenous/feminisms are “transnational by definition because we are

nations” (2009, 47–48). Similarly, Maylei Blackwell argues that Indigenous feminism is already transnational due to Indigenous nation-to-nation commitments (Blackwell, Briggs, and Chiu 2015, 4). In addition, Indigenous feminists have critiqued transnational feminism. In particular, the focus on transnationalism sometimes means an evasion of local issues, especially those which impact Indigenous peoples. Ross notes that “while we are encouraged to think globally, many times it is at the expense of the local issues and the Indigenous peoples and their problems” (2009, 50). Ross points out that this evasion of the local may be dangerous in its avoidance of addressing settler colonialism through calls for global or transnational solidarity.

Women of color feminists also are concerned about the way transnationalism has been employed. As women of color feminists note, the transnational became the name of fundable positions at universities, and thus transnational became institutionalized, and women of color feminism remained marginalized (Blackwell, Briggs, and Chiu 2015). Somewhat ironically, given its own grounding in critique of neoliberalism, transnational feminism became “global capitalism’s fellow traveler” (Blackwell, Briggs, and Chiu 2015, 3). In thinking towards solutions, Aikau states that decolonizing transnational feminism means we must “localize the struggle before scaling up the analysis to a regional or global scale” (Aikau et al. 2015, 85). Furthermore, transnational feminists should be willing to identify as settlers and talk about settler colonialism in their work (Aikau et al. 2015). Finally, Mishuana Goeman argues for de-centering human relationships, suggesting “what if in conceiving of a trans-Indigeneity rather than transnationalism as our model we centered our goals on relationships to land and water?” (Aikau et al. 2015, 86).

In order to address these critiques, throughout this section and the whole of the dissertation, I have sought to ground my research in a specific place and local struggle and write openly about my identity and positionality. While my main focus is on human relationships, I also briefly discuss trans-Indigenous relationships and campaigns related to the Mekong and Salween Rivers. I am supportive and aware of the importance of trans-Indigenous relationships with land, rivers, animals and non-humans. However, it is beyond the scope and abilities of my research to talk in detail about this aspect of trans-Indigeneity in this dissertation. There are a number of Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars that have published in more depth on the topic of Indigenous relations with the Mekong and Salween Rivers which I would direct readers of this dissertation towards (e.g. Ka Ji Jia 2019; Deetes 2019; Fung and Lamb 2023; Hongsuwan 2011).

While Indigenous, Third World and transnational feminisms have their points of difference and conflicts, the commonality that they share is a commitment to building relationships across all forms of colonial borders and divides. In my research, transnational feminism and trans-Indigeneity are both useful frameworks when discussing Indigenous women's organizing in Northern Thailand. These frameworks are useful for looking at the transnational networks that Indigenous women are building in the region, the context of globalization and neoliberalism that they take place in, and considering how trans-Indigenous relationships are being built in the region, as well as the impact that colonialism may have had on these relationships historically.

In terms of terminology, in line with my understanding of Allen and Aikau's definitions, I use trans-Indigenous throughout this section to refer to exchanges, mobility and interactions

that take place between Indigenous peoples, lands and water, whereas I use the terms transnationalism and Indigenous transnationalism to refer to exchanges and mobilities that involve collaborations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples or lands (Aikau et al. 2015). I also make use of terms that are more commonly understood and used by activists in the region, including cross-border (usually used in reference to Thai-Burma collaborations and exchanges) and regional (for example, in referring to Mekong region collaborations such as between activists in Burma, Cambodia and Thailand).

Trans-Indigeneity and Indigenous Transnationalism in Chiang Mai and Across the Mekong region

In the following sections I will discuss how Indigenous women activists engage in trans-Indigenous and transnational organizing as strategies of intersectional brilliance. As the following sections will demonstrate, engaging in cross-border and regional connections, relationships and experiences is an important way that Indigenous women activists are able to build connections, strengthen their skills and knowledge, and engage in acts of solidarity across borders in order to transform circumstances of oppression.

These acts of trans-Indigenous and transnational relationship building and learning between colonized peoples are acts of resistance to the limitations and borders imposed by the neo-colonial Thai and Burmese states. In many cases, Indigenous activists must overcome significant barriers to their travel in order to attend these activities, including difficulties with obtaining a visa as well as in the case of Thailand, limitations placed on the freedom of movement of stateless Indigenous peoples within Thailand (Indigenous Women Network of Thailand and Manushya Foundation 2019, 29). The logic of containment that underlies neo-colonial control rests upon limiting Indigenous peoples' access to mobility, information and

spaces of decision making; in both Thailand and Burma, Indigenous peoples face travel restrictions and significant barriers to accessing education, particularly in their own languages (Indigenous Women Network of Thailand and Manushya Foundation 2019, 33-34; Women's League of Burma 2002, 6). Yet, Indigenous activists continue to find creative ways to overcome these difficulties. This shows how valued and important transnational and trans-Indigenous exchange are within Indigenous activist movements in Northern Thailand and Shan State.

Here, I will first discuss how trans-Indigeneity is used as a tool of personal and community empowerment, as well as to engage in regional exchange and solidarity building between Indigenous peoples. I will then discuss several examples of Indigenous transnational activism and campaigns, including Thai-Burma solidarity activities, regional campaigns to protect the Mekong and Salween Rivers, and transnational anti-authoritarian activist alliances.

Movement as Freedom: Trans-Indigeneity as Self and Community Empowerment

Indigenous women activists in Northern Thailand and Shan State draw upon trans-Indigenous strategies in order to empower themselves and their communities, often seeking out opportunities to go new places to learn, exchange, and build their skills, knowledge and networks. In a conversation with two Tai and Hmong women activists in their thirties, they discussed the importance to them of leaving their communities for a while in order to learn from other Indigenous groups and peoples and build up their knowledge and education. This process often involved travelling away from their own communities in Shan State or Northern Thailand to Chiang Mai or other places where they built up their connections and knowledge through attending trainings and working in trans-Indigenous and transnational spaces. In the context of Chiang Mai, as I discussed in detail in Chapter One, it is important to understand the city as a meeting point for Indigenous peoples and activists from across Asia.

This process was, first of all, a tool of personal political empowerment for young women within their own communities. Mai, an activist in her thirties from Shan State discussed her own engagement in education as a means of empowerment:

Mai: I mean, in our community [in Shan State], when you are well educated, and then even you are woman, you have the power to say something and then make a decision. Is more focus on the education.

Hannah: Education will give you more position, maybe?

Mai: Position, and to be a part of the society as well.

Hannah: I see, yeah, education is really important for women, right?

Mai: Even, it might take longer but it's more sustainable. People will not accept you right now, but in ten years, they will and they have to, according to what you have been doing. It's not immediately like, effectiveness, but for long term effectiveness, it's the best way (Mai and Saekue 2022).

It is important to note here that education refers not only to formal education, but also experiences and knowledge built up through attending activist workshops and training programs, as the previous chapter discussed in more detail. Mai shared more about her own personal story and how she had engaged in trans-border movement and built trans-Indigenous networks through travelling from Shan State to attend a workshop in Chiang Mai for young Indigenous women activists from across the Mekong region:

In 2015 it was my first time like, coming to join the workshop...It was a turning point for me. That is my first experience like, go live in a workshop and I have learned a lot, it was one step up of turning point of my life, as well get to know more people, and get to see things broader and more clearly (Mai and Saekue 2022).

P’Noraerii, a Karen activist from Huay E-Kang community in Northern Thailand, shared her own experience with coming from her community to Chiang Mai as a tool of her own empowerment and confidence building.

Hannah: How did you get involved to become an Indigenous women activist?

Noraerii: I felt there was something wrong, why can't I make decisions, why can't I build up my skills. I had a feeling that I wanted to be able to do this kind of thing freely. I got to know IMPECT [Inter Mountain Peoples Education and Culture in Thailand Association] and joined their program which focused on capacity building for Indigenous women. Then, I worked with IMPECT to share this knowledge with other Indigenous women.

At the beginning I had a language barrier, because I felt I couldn't speak Thai well to communicate with others, but after a while I built my confidence up. I felt that living in the community, women don't have space. If we go out and learn something, it will create more space for women and also myself (Noraerii 2022).

Due to their experiences with intersectional discrimination as Indigenous women, the women interviewed here felt that they needed to come to Chiang Mai in order to further educate themselves and build up their strength and power. However, this was not only for their own personal empowerment but also to build networks so that they could connect with others and share and advocate on the issues they were facing in their communities. As Mai states on this topic:

It is very difficult to access proper education and is very less opportunity for people, for Indigenous people...to expand the network or...to go further to connect with...the outsider to share our issue, to learn our voice to be heard. So, I think the only thing is...if we empower ourselves, and if we have more network around, like regional or global, there is one way that can bring our voice to be heard to national and international level.

And we have...some network who can support us going up...the main challenge is, like me, compared to other people, we have less opportunity to access to everything. That is...the first step. So, we have to get out, off from that comfort zone, to find a way to empower ourselves, so that it can be a sustainable movement. I will say that because...if we have more network, we can go further (Mai and Saekue 2022).

As well as building her own knowledge and personal networks, Mai articulated that her experiences outside of her own community have always been rooted in a commitment to community and going back at some point to share her gained skills and knowledge.

Even we are stay here [in Chiang Mai] right now, we still support our community, some way, somehow. From here, you can make this network then, you can access more support for your communities too...For sure, eventually we will go back to our home, because it's our home, our place and *we love it* [says with emphasis] Right now it is just, like a process that we find something to...getting stronger. We gotta (Mai and Saekue 2022).

In addition to supporting her own community, these acts of trans-Indigenous learning and exchange also helped activists such as Mwe build stronger relationships and broader understandings of trans-Indigenous solidarity. Mwe, working for an organization which includes women of various ethnic backgrounds from Burma, also explained how her own understanding of other Indigenous communities and power dynamics with Indigenous communities had shifted:

After I worked with [name of organization removed], as I have said, I really understand other ethnic minority group, minority within minority, for example we have Ta'ang people, Intha and also Kuki, kind of very minority. So, I can learn and more understand, you know, my mind also changed. In the past like is kind of, because of the structure, system, violence of Myanmar. Kind of Burmanization, we are the best, we are great, we have the king or whatever, kind like that. But as soon as, after I work with [name of organization removed], mostly I can learn about the politics, especially I'm very proud, proud to work with them. And also myself, I love to learn. So, I'm not a person who if I don't know, I just give up. I don't give up. I'm trying to get it, until I get it [laughs] (Mwe 2022).

These acts of movement of Indigenous women to access spaces of learning in places such as Chiang Mai are types of trans-Indigenous strategies. Chiang Mai is one significant place where Indigenous women travel to build broader trans-Indigenous networks with activists from Thailand, Burma, across Asia and other places around the world including Latin America, Africa, the U.S. and Europe. These spaces of learning and exchange also occurred in other places such as Yangon, Mae Sot, and in communities along the border. Of course, this is not to claim

here that trans-Indigenous learning only happens in cities and towns; local communities are also spaces of trans-Indigenous exchange and learning. Although it is beyond the scope of this research to discuss this in detail, conversely, Indigenous and non-Indigenous activists living and studying in cities also often travel to local communities such as Huay E-Kang and Kaeng Suea Ten in Northern Thailand in order to exchange and learn from their community strategies of resistance.

Building Spaces of Solidarity and Exchange: Trans-Indigenous Networks and Trainings

Both within and across nation-state boundaries, trans-Indigenous trainings, network building and exchanges take place in Chiang Mai and regionally as spaces of Indigenous solidarity and exchange. Within the Thai and Burmese nation boundaries, Indigenous women's groups organized trans-Indigenous networks such as the Indigenous Women Network of Thailand (IWNT). P'Noraerii introduces their work here, which is based in Chiang Mai:

We are an all-volunteer network and don't have any staff. We also have some Shan women in our network...not many staff, but we have many committee members. Our network is not only Karen, we have fifteen different Indigenous groups represented, including Tai, Kayah, Akha, Kachin, Lisu, Hmong, many groups (Noraerii 2022).

As well as working within Thailand, Indigenous women's groups in Chiang Mai such as IWNT have also organized regional workshops and exchanges as a way of learning and building trans-Indigenous relationships. For example, P'Noraerii discussed her experiences and learning from exchanging with Indigenous women from other Mekong countries:

We have a network through AIPP [Asia Indigenous People's Pact], which connects us to women in Vietnam, Laos, Burma. We have network...through AIPP, we exchange sometimes, and from Myanmar side they also came and learned about environment management and women's power. I think in Myanmar they have less power than Indigenous women in Thailand because of the Burmese government and system. Women here feel more safe, people in Thailand can speak freely, but the government

says we don't understand. The Thai government doesn't care, they just ignore (Noraerii 2022).

By connecting with the regional organization Asia Indigenous People's Pact, P'Noraerii's group was able to build connections and learn about Indigenous women's lives and organizing in neighboring countries. She was able to share her own experiences of women's empowerment and organizing in her community of Huay E-Kang with Indigenous women from Burma, and she reflects upon the different ways that the state controls Indigenous peoples in Thailand and Burma.

For many Indigenous groups, including Karen, Tai, Lisu and Akha communities, organizing even when it takes place within one's own ethnic group is still transborder by nature due to the colonial borders which have divided historical territories and places of settlement for Indigenous communities. In the case of the Mekong Akha Network for Peace, they work across colonial borders to connect Akha people living in Thailand, Burma, Vietnam, China and Laos. P'Miju, the chairperson of the network, shared more about their network structure:

The Mekong Akha Network for Peace is based in Chiang Mai. We have an office in Myanmar too, working with Akha people there, and in Vietnam too. We have been working for twenty years on education and culture. We have a meeting yearly, and for the money we don't have any donor, but we use their own money, we share it. If we have a meeting in China, the China Akha people are responsible. In Burma, we have a very strong network in Kengtung, with an office based in Tachilek, Eastern Shan State for our Akha living in Shan State. In China we also have a program in Sipsongpanna (Miju 2022).

The Mekong Akha Network for Peace is based on a shared system of learning and exchange, where the annual meeting is rotated each year and the country hosting takes responsibility for the costs and organizing, so they don't have to be reliant on outside donors. Their work continues to connect Akha people living across borders in order to build Akha language, culture and power.

These various forms of Indigenous women's networking across borders build solidarity and strength between women in the region. In addition, they also support Indigenous women to look at Indigenous women's rights in a broader political context. Mai, who works for a regional organization that brings primarily Indigenous activists together from various countries in Southeast Asia to learn about organizing and campaigning, shared her thoughts:

I mean, like, if you stay in your comfort zone, you will notice the only issue that you are facing with. But when you meet with people, like...you meet with... students from different countries, from different backgrounds. They all have their own issue what they are struggling with. But the goal and then that we want to achieve, it's quite the same, because being an Indigenous people, our rights are being violated in different form.

What we want is, we want the outsider or majority group people to be respect our rights, and then even our own land... you know, we don't have the right to, to possess it, right. They are like, facing with the big mega project that is violated...by different investment. Yeah, they are fighting for their right. I think that it is the same issue that we have been struggling with (Mai and Saekue 2022).

As Mai shared, learning about Indigenous peoples' struggles and campaigns across the region helped her see a commonality of shared experiences. These included large scale investment and development projects, land rights, and the need for the majority group to respect Indigenous rights in each country. By learning about other Indigenous communities' struggles and rights, she saw how the issues that her community was facing were connected to broader regional and global political dynamics, including globalization, multinational investment and Indigenous people's rights.

In conclusion, trans-Indigenous networks and trainings in Chiang Mai have served as spaces where Indigenous women can build connections with other Indigenous communities, learn about other Indigenous group's struggles, and build connections within Indigenous communities that have been divided by colonial borders. These acts of trans-border solidarity

and exchange build strength and power between Indigenous women across borders and have created new networks of trans-Indigenous resistance in the region.

Transnational Solidarity and Alliances

In the next two sections I will discuss how Indigenous activists also build transnational relationships of solidarity and mutual support with both Indigenous *and* non-Indigenous networks. I will discuss here examples of transnational solidarity between Thailand and Burma activists, whereas the final section will focus on examples of regional transnationalism including the Mekong and Salween dams campaigns and anti-authoritarian alliances.

Thai-Burma Transnational Solidarities

Transnational solidarity building with other Indigenous communities and women's groups on both sides of the Thai-Burma border is another key strategy used by cross-border Indigenous women activists. Pinkaew Laungaramsri argues that transnationalism in the Thai-Burma borderlands is a way of circumventing the heteropatriarchal ethnonationalist projects of the Thai and Burmese states. This allows Tai and other Indigenous women to create their own political spaces and coalitions. Laungaramsri writes, "for Shan exiles, transnationalizing the margin has allowed for a politicized intervention in transforming the temporal space into a meaningful and powerful site/source of identification and coalition" (2006, 59). In this section, I will first discuss the border between Thailand and Burma as a colonial construct, then give some examples of collaboration and exchange between Thai and Burmese activists, and finally discuss Thai-Burma activist transnationalism in the post-coup context.

Understanding the Thai-Burma border as a colonial construct helps to see acts of trans-Indigeneity in this region as part of a long history of movement, exchange and collaboration between Indigenous peoples. As Chayan Vaddhanabhuti states,

This region has been divided into nation states mostly after World War II and, as you know, prior to that in Thailand the border was not conceived of as a static or a concrete border. The borderline was imposed by the colonial powers. Since then, the border has become something that prevented connections between the countries in the region, preventing the movement of people and preventing the movement of goods despite the fact that people, who live in the borderland, share the same culture or a similar ethnic background and also trade with each other (Vaddhanabhuti 2011, 316).

Furthermore, the Thai-Burma borderlands are also a contested area, with many areas having been controlled by multiple forces in the past few decades, including the Thai military, Burmese military, and non-state armed groups run by Indigenous groups including the Karen National Union, Democratic Karen Buddhist Army and the Shan State Army-South (Vaddhanabhuti 2011, 30). Hseng, who was born on the Burmese side of the border and later moved to the Thai side due to the conflict, talked about some of the layers of movement and contestation in her village:

I can say in my village, before, it's part of Shan State. But, you know, Thailand, they try to expand, take territory. But before, no one live there, it's kind of forest. When the Shan army group they move, bring more people from inside Shan State, become a community. And then the Kuomintang, the Taiwanese army, they also move [laugh]. To my village. Have Chinese, Shan, Palaung, also Pa-O. They said the first group move to [name of village removed] is the cattle trader, right from Shan State, but very a few of them. But after the Shan army move, then more people came and joined. It's the same in [name of village removed]...after many Shan people came to different area, after they settle down and become a community (Hseng 2022a).

Hseng's village was previously part of Shan State and originally unpopulated until one of the Tai army groups moved and brought villagers to settle down there. In addition, Kuomintang soldiers leaving China after the Communist Revolution of 1949 also settled down in the area in the 1950s and 1960s. Later, this area was seized by the Thai armed forces and became part of Thailand and is now policed by the Thai military. Yet despite the Thai state's policing of the

border, there is still to this day a certain amount of fluidity and exchange, with many Indigenous women living cross-border lives. Through creative strategies including undocumented crossing or finding ways to obtain the necessary visas, many Indigenous women activists who have connections in both Thailand and Burma often travel back and forth for family, work, education, or personal reasons.

Acts of transnational support and collaboration between Thai and Burmese activist groups also often take place. These include workshops and facilitated exchanges between Thai and Burma-based activists, and also Thai and Thailand-based activists' support for Burmese activists settling in Thailand. The mobilization of trans-border resources in these cases are ways that Indigenous women have been able to increase their strength and continue their activist work under repressive contexts in Thailand and Burma. These acts of exchange and solidarity are not only one sided in the sense of Thai NGOs supporting Burmese groups, but also include Thai activists' learning from Burmese activists. Indigenous activists, especially Tai, Karen, Hmong, Pa'O and other activists who have lived and worked in both countries and have travelled back and forth also frequently support activists and communities on both sides of the border.

First, Indigenous women's groups have organized workshops in order to facilitate exchanges between Thai and Burma-based activists. Many of these take place in Thailand, with groups from Burma travelling to visit Chiang Mai, Bangkok, and communities that have been campaigning against development projects such as Mae Moh and Kaeng Sua Ten to learn from Thai protest strategies (Hindstrom 2017; Hom and Poe Htoo 2018). Politically, it has always been safer to organize activities in Thailand which is one of the main reasons why groups from Burma tend to come to Thailand rather than the other way around. However, prior to the coup, some Thai activists and Burmese activists based in Thailand also travelled to Burma to learn

from Burmese communities' activist organizing. Maew, who was born in Burma but has spent most of her life in Thailand, shared about her experience as an intern with a transnational organization operating in both Chiang Mai and Shan State. As part of her responsibilities, she traveled to Burma for the first time as an adult for a land grabbing workshop for activists from Burma and Cambodia:

Hannah: What kind of work did you do when you worked for [name of organization removed]?

Maew: Collecting information, learn more about how [name of organization removed] works, and helping with the land grabbing workshop, working with [name of organization removed] staff in [city in Shan State, Burma].

Hseng: Because we have three alumni from Cambodia, we plan to invite them.

Hseng: How did you feel when you went to Burma to organize the workshop?

Maew: In the beginning I felt nervous and excited because I traveled alone. Even though I was born in Burma, I grew up here [in Thailand] and most of my life lived here, so to travel it's the first time to another country, so quite nervous, but it's a really good experience for me, and to get to know people, staff from [name of organization removed]. I still contact with them (Maew 2022).

For Maew, the experience of travelling to Burma and building connections with activists in Shan State was empowering for her as she had spent most of her life away from Burma. During her time in Burma, she was able to learn about land grabbing issues and community activism against land grabbing in Shan State, and also facilitate transnational exchange between Burmese and Cambodian activists on land grabbing issues.

Furthermore, during the most recent military coups in Thailand and Burma in the past decade, acts of support and solidarity between Thailand and Burma-based activists have been important acts of Indigenous transnationalism. These have included support with fundraising to provide safety equipment and safe houses for Burmese activists, facilitating money transfers

from Thailand to Burma, and material acts of support with setting up offices and programs in exile in Thailand.

In the aftermath of the military coup in Burma, as the military began detaining, disappearing and torturing protestors, activists in Thailand who had recently experienced their own political crackdown and coup raised funds in solidarity with youth in Burma. In one example that I am aware of, students from a university in Northern Thailand raised money amongst themselves in order to send helmets and other safety equipment to student protestors under attack in Shan State. Several other groups from Bangkok and Chiang Mai also raised money anonymously to send to activists in Burma to help fund safe houses and protest equipment. These acts of solidarity were often facilitated via personal connections and friendships that had been fostered over years of trans-border organizing and attending trainings and exchanges. In many cases, friends set up their own fundraising either on online platforms or on social media, collected money from their own friend and personal networks, and then sent the funds to their friends in Burma in order to distribute accordingly. The people participating in fundraising included Thai, Tai people, and people from Burma living in Thailand. These were lateral, informal actions of solidarity and support which took place between friends living across borders.¹

Indigenous activists from Burma with friends, family and other and connections in Thailand were also able to mobilize these trans-border relationships in order to continue their

¹ I am not able to directly cite any examples of these fundraising campaigns as they were all done in private channels on social media and/or taken offline after their completion for security reasons. However, the International Crisis Group reports on this trend, stating that “since the coup [in Burma], individuals and (often pre-existing) community groups in the diaspora have raised millions of dollars...quietly, individuals and small networks abroad have also raised a significant amount of money. Although they can operate more openly than their counterparts in Myanmar, they often still shroud their activities in secrecy...They go through networks of trusted individuals and organisations, in order to avoid regime informants” (International Crisis Group 2022).

work in the post-coup environment. After the coup, it became extremely dangerous for groups to receive international bank transfers as it could cause them to come under investigation by the military regime. Siphoung, who founded an organization in Shan State, was able to find another way, using their connections in Thailand:

Siphoung: *We always find a way* [emphasis added] to adapt and to also support people who are really in need. And also like [pause] and also since the coup happen, so the bank system collapse and cannot transfer directly money to Myanmar, so then we find a way, right away to transfer money to the border. So, transfer money to Thailand first, then from Thailand, and transfer to the border and we can get cash in hand. So, no military, no police, no one can track us where the money come from. We still can do a lot of activities without tracking. So, we are working very low profile, because many big organization, they are followed by the bank, and they have to close down, like [name of organization removed], many big organizations.

Hannah: Yeah, they couldn't adapt, right?

Siphoung: Couldn't, I think so, because big, maybe they have a big fund they cannot do like us [laughter], I don't know. Yeah, yeah, for us, we are quite finding a way to transfer money, and many organizations have to close...because of cannot transfer directly to Myanmar. So maybe no connection, at someone who are in Thailand, or something like that (Siphoung 2022).

In an act of intersectional brilliance, Siphoung's group was able to use the resources which they had, which were their trans-border knowledge and relationships, in order to find a way to still bring money into Burma to continue their work even in the midst of a violent military crackdown and the military tracking of incoming bank transfers. As she notes, in their case, it was not only their relationship with communities in Thailand who supported them to transfer the money, but also their small scale and ability to quickly adapt that allowed them to survive under the post-coup circumstances. In contrast, many large INGOs had to shut down and cease all their operations in Burma after the coup, in part because they were more high-profile targets, but also in some cases because their bureaucratic systems did not allow them to use informal or adaptive methods such as transferring money via personal bank accounts.

In the past year as many groups from Burma have now settled in Thailand, acts of transnational solidarity and friendship between Thai, Thailand-based and Burmese activists have been an important way that Indigenous activists have been able to continue their work and maintain their strength under rapidly shifting and restrictive circumstances. As we experienced at *Mekong Women for Peace*, transnational collaboration with Thailand-based activists is integral for most Indigenous groups from Burma and other regional countries. Thai activists as well as activists from Burma settled in Thailand have provided support through material acts of solidarity including helping us open a bank account, signing the lease for the office, dealing with immigration officials, and support with learning Thai. As someone with experience working with both Thai and Burmese organizations, I asked Hseng how much support she had seen between Thai and Burmese activist groups, especially in the post-coup environment:

Hannah: Do the Thai groups work together, do they support each other? With the Burmese and Thai groups?

Hseng: Yeah, I think they work together, they support each other. Without Thai side, without Thai NGO support, something we cannot run by ourselves for Burmese NGOs. Like, [friend's name removed] case, no, she apply visa [name of institution removed].

Like refugee, they also have some Thai NGO they are helping at the border, they are helping refugee people, helping the schools, helping the temple at the border, the migrant...children. I think they are connect and helping each other. But if in media part, they also exchange information...they have kind of meeting, friends. Thai media invite ethnic media to join, something like that. It happened (Hseng 2022a).

Hseng gives several examples of transnational collaboration and solidarity. A mutual friend of ours from Burma had received a visa to live and study in Thailand through the support of a Thai institution; Thai NGOs also provided support to refugees and migrant children on the border; Thai and Burmese media groups also collaborated with each other to organize meetings to share information and learn from each other. At the same time, Hseng, who is Tai and was born in

Burma but raised in Thailand, was also herself a great provider of transnational support for activists newly arriving from Burma, by supporting these activists with learning Thai, getting documentation, and translating when needed, as her portrait before this chapter shows. These types of acts of transnational solidarity are not high profile and can easily go unrecognized, especially in Western media and academic literature which tends to give more attention to public displays of transnational solidarity such as statements on social media or protests such as the Milk Tea Alliance. However, these forms of material solidarity are just as, if not more, essential for the survival of activist groups.

The support from Thai and Thailand-based activists that I have discussed here did not magically materialize; in many cases, Indigenous activists from Burma were able to make use of longstanding trans-border friendships and working relationships with Thai and Thailand-based activists in order to build networks and get the support they needed to resettle in Thailand. Of course, these were not acts of using Thai and Thailand-based activists, but instances where Thai and Thailand-based activists were happy to support and act in solidarity with their friends and colleagues from Burma. In many cases, these Thai and Thailand-based activists had previously travelled to Burma and built their own connections and sense of solidarity with activists from Burma, had family ties in Burma, or had been born in Burma but raised in Thailand.

Siphoung shares here how her networks of friends and collaborators helped her move her staff from Burma to Thailand once her organization found themselves under threat in Burma. Activists such as Siphoung found that the more connections they had, the more they could gain strength and support from each other.

For her organization's case, once they were forced to move most of their staff to Thailand after the coup, her personal network of friends who could support them became invaluable:

Whenever friends, because when we meet in person, when they really help like connect, so and [Siphoung], "Oh, you should connect," then I connect. Then, from that event, I find another connection, and connect like this [laughs]. It's become very big connection, and we can start, here [in Thailand] like, to be more stability (Siphoung 2022).

These connections with Thai-based activists helped her with the process of securing visas, funding, and other educational and work opportunities in Thailand for activists from her organization who had to leave Burma for security reasons.

In conclusion, the Thai-Burma border has always been a space of collaboration, exchange, and learning between Indigenous peoples. This section has shown that beyond high-profile acts of political solidarity, individual and practical acts of support and knowledge exchange should also be recognized as important demonstrations of transnational Indigenous solidarity. These have included trans-border exchanges including activists from Burma, Thailand and Cambodia learning about each other's struggles and environmental campaigns. During the military coups in both Thailand and Burma, activists have also supported each other, including in fundraising for protestors and facilitating the transferring of funds via Thailand to Burma. Finally, activists based in Thailand have also provided material and practical support in acts of solidarity with activists from Burma who have now had to resettle in Thailand.

These acts of trans-border, trans-Indigenous solidarity have helped keep open political spaces and opportunities for Indigenous women activists, particularly in the post-coup, highly authoritarian environments in Thailand and Burma. They show the power of networking, and in particular, of friendship, for Indigenous women activists. Without high profile connections or access to large amounts of funds or other privileges, Indigenous women activists instead built

their strength and power and found ways to adapt and survive through calling upon support from personal networks. In times of need, friends showed up to support each other and provide strength to each other.

Trans-National Campaigns

While I have focused throughout this section, and generally in this dissertation, on less recognized, lower profile acts of solidarity and support, I also want to acknowledge and briefly discuss some of the ways that Indigenous women activists also mobilize transnational networks within Asia as part of public, higher profile activist campaigns. I will discuss three stories here of trans-Indigenous and transnational mobilization in regional campaigns against large scale dam projects as well as authoritarian rule. These three examples are all campaigns that involved Indigenous women as leaders or collaborators working together with other ethnic minority or majority communities in alliances within Asia. These do not all take place specifically in Chiang Mai, but involved activists living in Chiang Mai participating and often travelling to help organize these events and protests which took place across Thailand and Burma. I highlight these here as examples of South-South transnational campaigns involving Indigenous women's leadership that are neither primarily led nor targeted towards Western institutions or governments (Banivanua Mar 2016).

First, I will share about transnational anti-dam organizing in the case of the Mekong River. In this case, Indigenous and non-Indigenous activists from across the Mekong region have mobilized a regional, transnational Mekong identity in order to articulate solidarity against proposed dam projects on the Mekong River. Second, I will share about cross border campaigning and organizing between activists against the Salween River dams; the Salween River flows through multiple Indigenous lands across China, Burma and Thailand. Finally, I will

talk about transnational alliances and support between anti-authoritarian Indigenous and non-Indigenous activists in Burma, Thailand, Hong Kong and Taiwan, including online through the Milk Tea Alliance as well as on the ground solidarity networks.

Mekong Dam Campaigns

The Mekong is a particularly salient regional identity that many groups draw upon in bringing activists together to learn, exchange, and build their power and solidarity with each other. The Mekong region of Southeast Asia consists of the countries where the Mekong River flows through; starting from its source in the glacial streams of the Tibetan plateau, down to Yunnan Province in China, then running along the borders of Burma, Laos and Thailand, and through Cambodia before opening into the sea in the Vietnam delta.



Figure 14. Map of the Mekong River. Courtesy of Mackenzie Greene-Powell.

The Mekong River is a source of food, life, and transportation for the more than sixty million peoples who live on its banks (Tiếng Việt 2013). The English name Mekong comes from the Thai and Lao ‘Mae nam khong’ which means ‘mother river.’ Just as the Pacific Ocean unites and links the diverse peoples of the Pacific, the Mekong River is the life source and linkage that connects peoples across borders in this region in Southeast Asia. Many Indigenous communities live near its riverbanks and tributaries, including Tibetan, Naxi, Lisu, Akha, Dai, Hmong, Cham, Jarai, and Chong communities, as well as majority ethnic groups.

However, the health of the river and livelihood of those who live alongside its banks has been significantly damaged in the past two decades due to the construction of large-scale dams

on the Mekong. At present, thirteen dams have already been built in China and Laos, with another nine proposed in the lower Mekong mainstream (International Rivers 2023).

Activists in the region, seeing that the river knows no borders and that a dam built in any country would affect those living downstream, have mobilized and built solidarity and networks on the basis of a shared Mekong identity (Pomun 2021). These campaigns are an example of trans-border relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, lands and rivers (Aikau et al. 2015). The alliances against the Mekong River dams and the blasting of rapids on the Mekong River have included local affected communities, Indigenous women's groups and collaborators, non-Indigenous groups, academics, media platforms and international NGOs, including groups such as the Women's League of Burma, Mekong Youth Alliance, NGO Forum on Cambodia, International Rivers, EarthRights International, Mekong Community Institute and Living River Siam (International Rivers 2023).

As well as a shared sense of identity and understanding of the river's trans-boundary nature and impacts, transnational organizing against the Mekong dams also occurs in response to the transnational nature of these projects which are deeply linked with globalization, global and transnational financial institutions. This demonstrates the relationship between transnational social movements and globalization which some transnational feminists have written about (Blackwell, Briggs, and Chiu 2015). For example, the now-completed Xayaburi dam in Laos is backed by Thai bank investors and has been protested by both Thai and Lao activist groups (Suk 2019). The proposed Pak Beng dam in northern Laos is financed by China Datang Overseas Investment, which is a Chinese state-owned enterprise; if built, its waters would likely flood both Thai and Lao communities, which has caused activists to mobilize on both sides of the border (Pomun 2021).

As a result of regional organizing, at least two dams in Cambodia have been suspended and plans to blast rapids on the Thai-Lao border have been cancelled (International Rivers 2023). Throughout these campaigns, activists and local community members have also drawn upon trans-Indigenous connections both with Indigenous peoples living along the Mekong River as well as the river itself and the Mekong fish. The photo below shows activists praying to the Naga spirit guardians of the river to ask for protection and show their opposition to the Xayaburi dam.



Figure 15. Thai and Lao activists gather for a River Prayers ceremony against the Xayaburi dam in October 2019. Photograph by Wora Suk. <https://thediplomat.com/2019/11/peoples-power-anti-dam-movements-in-southeast-asia/>

Since the Xayaburi dam's completion, local community members have also been conducting khwan (soul, or spirit) ceremonies to bless and protect the fish of the Mekong River as the river's ecosystem is now under threat. In both the Mekong and Salween dams campaigns, prayer ceremonies are often used in addition or instead of protests, as I will also discuss in the next section.



Figure 16. A local community activist from Nong Khai at the Thai-Lao border, lights incense to honor the spirits of the Mekong River and protest the Xayaburi dam in October 2022. Photograph by Peerapon Boonyakiat/HaRDstories. <https://hardstories.org/stories/environmental-justice/reviving-the-soul-of-the-mekong>

Salween Dam Campaigns

The proposed dams on the Gyalmo Ngulchu/Nu Jiang/Nam Khone/Salawin/Thanlwin river² have also been another point of trans-Indigenous organizing and campaigning. The Salween River runs through the Tibetan plateau, Yunnan province, Northern Thailand, and Shan, Karenni, and Karen States. As the below map shows, at least twenty-one dams have been planned for this river which is currently the last free-flowing international river in the region.



Figure 17. Map of the proposed Salween River dams. Created by Salween Watch Coalition.
<https://www.internationalrivers.org/resources/11286>

² The Salween River is known as Gyalmo Ngulchu on the Tibetan plateau, Nu Jiang in Yunnan province, Salawin in Thailand, Nam Khone in Shan State, and Thanlwin in Karen State and throughout Burma.

In Burma, sixty thousand Indigenous peoples have already been forcibly relocated in preparation for the dams and tens of thousands more face relocation (International Rivers 2012). In order to stop these dams, Indigenous groups in Chiang Mai have brought together young people from the affected Indigenous communities in Burma and Thailand in order to learn about the dam impacts and strategies of anti-dam organizing. The cross-border organizing against the dams has included video documentation so that youth can record the importance of the region to them, EIA (Environmental Impact Assessment training) so that Indigenous women can engage with the companies planning these dams from a legal standpoint, and supporting youth projects to do awareness raising about the dam projects in the affected communities. Indigenous organizations have also brought Indigenous youth from Burma to learn from Indigenous communities in Thailand that have successfully stopped dam projects in their communities, so that they can learn from their successes (Suk 2019).

Activists living along and connected to the Salween River have joined exchange trips and exchanged with each other to learn about each other's campaigns. These include a successful campaign in China to suspend all dam projects on the Gyalmo Ngulchu/Nu Jiang/Salween River in China (El-Silimy 2019), as well as ongoing opposition in Burma to the proposed Salween dams, including the proposed Mong Ton and Hatgyi dams. Many Indigenous women's activist groups have also participated in these protests and exchanges, including the Shan Women's Action Network and Karen Women's Empowerment Group (Save the Salween Network 2015). These transnational exchanges and protests against dams on the Salween River continue to occur as projects are proposed or move forward. For example, every year for the International Day of Action for Rivers on March 14th, protests and awareness raising activities have been taking

place simultaneously along the Salween River in Sob Ngao, Thailand and in Karen State and Shan State, Burma (Deetes 2022).



Figure 18. Community members and activists gather to protest the Salween dams in Sop Moei District, Mae Hong Son Province, Northern Thailand for International Day of Action for Rivers 2023. https://transbordernews.in.th/home/?p=33538&fbclid=IwAR0T5DVR2I8-OMrDXxHA9R_0suMDkNtvshK8DW4qmIwhj47oZZstaSGAu8Y%20add%20citation

As in the case of the Mekong dams campaigns, these transnational and trans-Indigenous protests often explicitly link protest tactics with prayer ceremonies for the river. In Southern Shan State for the International Day of Rivers 2020 protest, villagers, monks and activists conducted a blessing ceremony at the banks of the Nam Khone/Thanlwin/Salween River and also made merit at the Ho Leung stupa to pray for the longevity of the river. In the Kunhing region, the Nam Khone/Thanlwin/Salween River is threatened by the Mong Ton dam project,

which is a joint transnational venture between the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT), the Burmese military junta and China's Three Gorges Corporation (Transborder News 2020). Activists and community members in this region have long recognized that these transnational, trans-border investment projects also necessitate transnational and trans-Indigenous responses from communities.



Figure 19. Kunhing community members and activists in Shan State, Burma gather to protest the Mong Ton dam project and participate in a prayer ceremony for the Nam Khone/Thanlwin/Salween River in March 2020. <https://transbordernews.in.th/home/?p=24638>

Anti-Authoritarian Transnational Alliances

Finally, both Indigenous and ethnic majority activists in Thailand and Burma have also drawn upon transnational alliances in order to express solidarity, share ideas, and provide on the ground support against authoritarian and military coups. Throughout the anti-coup protests in

Burma in 2021, young protestors used the three-fingered “Hunger Games” salute during both in person protests and online to show their opposition to military rule. The use of the salute originated in Thailand after the 2014 military coup, drawing from the book “The Hunger Games” which had been released on film the same year. In the book and series, which have been popular with young people, the salute represents opposition to tyranny, oppression and authoritarian domination. Since 2014, it has become a symbol of resistance to authoritarianism in the region, and used by protestors in Burma, Thailand and Hong Kong. Indigenous women led and participated in these protests together with ethnic majority activists in Shan State, across Burma, Northern Thailand and Bangkok from 2021-2022.



Figure 20. Activist artwork shows women in Burma protesting the regime using the Hunger Games salute. Art by Eh Soe.
https://www.instagram.com/p/CMCvD6UhoN1/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link



Figure 21. Protestors in Shan State (top) and Bangkok, Thailand (bottom) using the Hunger Games salute in 2021. Photograph by Handout (top) <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3120959/ethnic-chinese-lead-protests-northern-myanmar-unrest-spreads> and Adirach Toumlamoo (bottom) <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/milkteaalliance-no-more>

These transborder alliances and conversations between young activists in Thailand, Burma, Hong Kong, Taiwan and India on social media also became popularly known as the Milk Tea Alliance, with Twitter creating a milk tea emoji in solidarity with the youth protestors. Especially as milk tea and boba tea are popular drinks for young people across Asia, the Milk Tea Alliance concept symbolizes a new generation of young activists across Asia, especially youth-led opposition to dictatorship and the old-guard in Asia.



Figure 22. Milk Tea Alliance poster art showing solidarity among anti-authoritarian activists across Asia. Created by Sina Wittayawiroj. <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3120526/asias-milkteaalliance-has-new-target-brewing-generals-behind>

As well as the shared transnational symbols of the Hunger Games salute and milk tea, protestors have also exchanged ideas and tactics, including the use of umbrellas as a non-violent protest strategy to defend oneself against police attack during protests. Hong Kong manuals on protest tactics were also translated into Burmese and disseminated amongst activists in Burma

(Jacinto 2021). Young activists also organized protests in Taipei, Hong Kong and Thailand in solidarity with demonstrators in Burma in 2021 (Potkin and Tanakasempipat 2021).

The Milk Tea Alliance primarily took place online and has been less active in the past year. However, acts of material support, exchanges of knowledge and inspiration have continued to take place between activists from Burma and Thailand on the ground in opposition to both military regimes over the past two years. While anti-authoritarian protests in Thailand had become largely dormant by 2021 following mass protests the previous year, activists in Thailand were revived and inspired again in early 2021 to organize protests in solidarity with Burma and against the Thai regime, using the same tactic of banging pots and pans which had been employed in Burma since the coup (Duangdee 2021). Throughout 2022 and 2023, Indigenous activists from Burma have also been collaborating with Thai anti-authoritarian activists during their time in exile, including organizing joint protests in Chiang Mai together, such as for the anniversary of the 1988 student uprising in Burma which took place in August 2022.



Figure 23. Solidarity candlelight vigil in Chiang Mai with activists from Thailand and Burma to commemorate the 8888 student uprising and protest the Burmese military junta in August 2022. Photo by Prachatai. <https://prachataienglish.com/node/9956>

August is an activist from Shan State who is now based in Thailand. August shared about the experience of working together with Thai activists in Chiang Mai to organize solidarity protests against the Burmese military regime:

August: Yes...I love to share that experience. You know, in Myanmar, I was also a person who organized a protest, like silent protest, and flash mob or...we organized protests like hanging vinyl poster on some particular place, like in front of government official house or somewhere like that. And then we ran away. We inform the press, we ran away. These kind of protests, I have organized a lot in Burma, but in Thailand, it is quite different, they have freedom of movement, they have freedom of expression.

So, if they would like to organize an event or a protest, the way they organize is very systematic and open—you do not need to be afraid of anyone. You know, they meet at least two or three times for the preparation. As I experienced, we met two or three times before our final day, and then we prepare together such as agenda and detailed planning.

And then we connect to other resource persons, other human resources and media team and also security team. Yes, a lot of team to successfully organize an event or a protest. But in Burma we didn't know that we could prepare as such. Of course, even if we know, we don't have the capacity to do that because we don't know the tactics, principles, and methodology.

Hannah: Well you were in kind of a different, difficult situation too, but yeah.

August: And also, Thai activist, they are quite active and supportive. And they are pretty passionate to help our Myanmar pro-democracy activist. They don't...really charge us for any expense. They even help us with funding if we don't have enough fund to organize an event... Yeah, working together with them...is a precious opportunity, is a precious experience. I really love that and we need to thank (August 2023).

As August shared, the experiences of working transnationally together with pro-democracy activists in Thailand had helped activists from Burma learn from Thai strategies of organizing protests such as media and security teams. August and other activists from Burma in exile also felt encouraged by the support of Thai activists to support their work. These acts of transnational solidarity helped keep energy and hope alive for activists working under tough conditions.

In conclusion, this section has shown that transnational campaigns by Indigenous activists in Northern Thailand and Shan State are not always centered on making connections with Western institutions, INGOs or bodies such as the U.N., as they are often portrayed (Bob 2005; Laungaramsri 2006; Keck and Sikkink 1998). Transnational, cross-border campaigns between coalitions of Indigenous and non-Indigenous activists in the Global South have also been powerful sources of mobilization and strength against large scale dam development projects and in the fight against military dictatorships in the region. Furthermore, these transnational campaigns are important sources of solidarity and strength building between Indigenous women and other communities in Asia, which have resulted in some successful results including the cancellation of multiple dam projects on the Mekong and Salween Rivers.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown that Indigenous women activists in Chiang Mai and across the region engage in both trans-Indigeneity and transnationalism as strategic acts of intersectional brilliance. These include participating in spaces of trans-Indigenous learning and exchange in order to build their confidence, bring skills back to their communities, and create cross-border networks of support and solidarity between Indigenous peoples.

As well as organizing between Indigenous peoples, Indigenous women activists also engage in transnational alliances which include both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples working together in coalitions of solidarity. First, activists from Burma and Thailand frequently cross the border to learn from and support each other. This includes attending workshops and visiting each other's communities to learn about protest strategies. Furthermore, after the 2021 military coup in Burma, many activists from Burma traveled to Thailand to work in exile. Thailand-based activists stepped up to provide material support in fundraising and practical needs such as language assistance and securing housing for the newly arriving activists.

Finally, much of this dissertation has focused on everyday, interior acts of solidarity and between activists. However, in the final section of this chapter I have also described how Indigenous women activists participate in public transnational campaigns that involve relationships with activist communities across Asia. In sum, transnational and trans-Indigenous activism are powerful ways that Indigenous women build their strength and networks in Northern Thailand and at the Thai-Burma border. Through acts of transnationalism and trans-Indigeneity, Indigenous women are resisting colonial limitations, building solidarity between Indigenous communities who have experienced colonization, and creating collective movements for peace and justice in the region.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

A weaver brings together threads of different colors, beautiful individually, but “stronger together when combined” (Vaddhanaphuti et al. 2019, 293). In the same way, *Mekong Women for Peace* and the work of this dissertation are both acts of building strength through linking and weaving people, places and ideas. As an Indigenous and minority women’s network, *Mekong Women for Peace* creates linkages between Indigenous women across Asia and women of color around the world. Similarly, this dissertation has sought to weave together and bridge many seemingly disparate aspects into an imperfectly formed but no less special whole, one characterized by both similarities and differences. Throughout this dissertation, I have looked to bridge academia and activism; find commonalities and differences across Indigenous women and women of color’s experiences; and balance intellectual analysis, emotional recounting, and creative storytelling. Like the women activists portrayed in this dissertation, there is no single framework; no single story that can encapsulate their work or this research.

In the process of writing this dissertation, I have tried to be honest about the challenges faced in the region, and around the world for women activists. Authoritarianism and patriarchy are on the rise and pushing back hard against us. A decade ago, many activists, myself included, had a lot more confidence about the future. Although there were hard times, I still felt sure back then of Martin Luther King’s words that “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” When I first started working in Thailand in 2009, there was a sense of enthusiasm and momentum as we saw the rise of social movements across the region and events

such as the Arab Spring. My own optimism has been extremely challenged by events over the past decade, from the military coups in Thailand and Burma to the 2016 U.S. election.

Moreover, being an activist right now in Thailand and Burma, but probably also in most places in the world, means having to face traumatic circumstances. These include seeing friends get arrested, death threats, and the backsliding of laws we have fought for. We easily could give up under these circumstances, which sometimes feel hopeless. Yet activists persist in fighting, even though people in power keep trying to repress and silence our movements.

There is no denying that it is an especially challenging moment to be an activist. It seems that we are living in a time when people are increasingly choosing to *either* become more radical and politically engaged, *or* to disconnect completely from the messy and painful world of politics. Consumerism and capitalism are eager to offer those who can afford it ways to numb and disconnect, to focus only on ourselves and our wellbeing, and shut out the distressing times we live in. Yet, the stories I have shared throughout this dissertation show that the world needs people who are not willing to give up. If we stop trying, the future that lies ahead of us will be unimaginable. Conversely, if we are successful, we have the chance to create a future for ourselves and our future generations that the activists portrayed in this dissertation are already creating in their daily work and life; one that centers decolonial love, justice and care for each other. We can't give up on hope, even if we are all a little more worn out and broken down than a few years ago.

One of the ways that I have sought to hold onto hope in the writing of this dissertation is through the concept of *intersectional brilliance*. This concept seeks to highlight how women and people who experience intersectional oppression find ways to navigate, resist and challenge their circumstances. At the same time, intersectional brilliance fully acknowledges the reality of the

conditions of structural violence that marginalized groups must navigate, and it does not expect women to endure as “superwomen” and simply make the best of oppressive circumstances.

By highlighting these strategies of resistance, intersectional brilliance reminds those of us on the margins, in the words of Siphoung, that “we always find a way” (2022). Our ways may be covert or overt; public or private; and successful or not in achieving our goals. However, what matters most, to paraphrase Noenoe Silva, is that we *look for* and *listen* to the ways women and people on the margins do continuously speak and resist intersectional oppression (2004, 8). In this dissertation I have sought to draw attention to these strategies, which are sometimes loud and demonstrative, sometimes quiet or within the realm of relationships and families, and sometimes even silent, such as in the case of the Silent Strikes in Burma.

As a strengths-based framework for engaging with and analyzing Indigenous and women of color activism, using intersectional brilliance as a foundational concept of my dissertation has helped me highlight and focus on the strategies and adaptations that Indigenous women activists in Burma and Thailand have enacted in their work. In the stories shared here from Northern Thailand and Shan State, Indigenous women activists are continuing to find ways to show their strength and power and build new realities even under repressive circumstances through strategies of intersectional brilliance. These strategies include building strong relationships with each other and engaging in everyday acts of decolonial love, running activist education and training programs, and drawing upon transnational networks of solidarity and support. The women activists portrayed here keep finding ways to continue their work regardless of the challenges faced, whether they be a pandemic, multiple military coups, or growing authoritarianism across the region.

Through its focus on strengths and strategies, intersectional brilliance may offer new ideas and synergies to other activists facing similar circumstances of multiple oppressions around the world. Alternatively, it may affirm the work that activists are already doing, or serve to highlight the differing political circumstances that activists work under. Ultimately, intersectional brilliance shows how we can already create the future we want to live in—one that in that case of this community is full of creative thinking and adaptability, good food, love, care, and non-hierarchical relationships that nurture and support the next generations of activists—in the process of resisting and navigating our current realities.

The Asia Indigenous Peoples' Pact envisions that “the world will only be truly free if women and Indigenous peoples are not discriminated against” (Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact 2014, v). The examples of Indigenous women’s activism portrayed in this dissertation—of strengths, and hopes, and moments of love and care—are ones that we can all learn from and emulate, if we want to hold onto the hope of ever seeing a truly free world. Kamla Bhasin wrote that “the future of Asian feminism is as bright and strong as our determination” (2012, 1). As this dissertation has shown, the determination of Indigenous women activists under authoritarianism is still as strong to this day as ever, and will continue to exist, adapt and grow no matter the circumstances faced.

A Postscript: The End (For Now)

Chiang Mai, Thailand. August 2022

It's August 2022 and there are only a few weeks left before I need to leave Chiang Mai. My time has been far too short, delayed multiple times by the pandemic. I'm struggling with the idea of leaving, thinking about how I could stay longer, but eventually I don't have much choice. In another tragedy, my sister-in-law unexpectedly passes away soon after a cancer diagnosis, and I have to leave to be with family. I contribute what I can to the group while in shock and mourning before my departure.

The main need is money for the safe house for activists arriving from Burma, and together with Siphoung, Hseng, the rest of the safe house group and I, we raise enough funds to have a healthy budget to run the safe house for at least a year. The team at *Mekong Women for Peace* wants to support too. As one staff is leaving soon to study overseas, we realize one of the activists from the safe house would be a perfect fit for her job, while others can apply for the internship program. It's just another example of these acts of resistance and care, of helping each other out and supporting each other during hard times like these. We meet at a small retreat center and cafe just outside of Chiang Mai to talk through the details and plan our next steps.

The retreat space is truly the height of Chiang Mai cute. The center is an adobe building with arched walls and decorated dried flowers surrounded by a large garden. One of our team member's relatives works there and is also watching the kids while we try to talk. The sound of the children's screams and laughter as they chase each other through the cut-out doors in the adobe walls is both distracting and lovely. While we drink mint lattes served in charmingly misshapen ceramic mugs, the subjects we are talking about are extremely somber. Four activists have just been killed by the military junta; Siphoung shares that she could not stop crying this

morning for over an hour. It's jarring, painful and complicated to be in such pleasant surroundings while tragedy is taking place so nearby. But it's also somehow okay and necessary, even though it chafes a little, for activists to spend time in peaceful surroundings, to get to see beauty and nature and flowers. We never know what is around the corner.

Throughout our meeting, we talk through the future of the safe house, and it's clear that we can use some of the upcoming grant money to provide job and internship opportunities for the group of activists who have just arrived from Burma. It's the best solution for everyone; the current *Mekong Women for Peace* staff are burned out from the pandemic, while this group of young activists just arrived are both experienced and need jobs. At the same time, it's an act of transnational solidarity, care and resistance—the team finding ways to adapt to the new reality we are living in, and support those who need it the most at this time. As always, out of the crisis, a solution is found. A new reality is created, and the cycle of trauma, connection, adaptation and resistance continues. The kids continue to play in the garden, and it's just another day for a group of activists in Chiang Mai.

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