

Kristine Castillo

Professor Hera Naguib

5 November, 2018

ENC 2135

### **Wounded Elephant**

I define my stomach piercing as my Declaration of Independence: a formal assertion of disownment; the consequence of incongruence. The piercing, to me, is representative of one of my many facets, being my coming of age in ascertaining a freedom found in my individuality. To do something for myself without the consultation of others, to, not only dip my toes, but jump wholeheartedly, feet first, into the “real world”. My piercing was my external affront, my act of rebellion against anything that challenged this new-found cognizance that I was not simply delineated by a four-letter ENTP classification or a BuzzFeed quiz that sorted me into the House of Slytherin. Though piercings are removable from the skin, the permanence of my piercing to me transcends the physical jewelry, leaving a mark on myself due to the meaning and the value I placed behind it and continue to sustain. If the significance is lost, all that is left is a hole, more even, a wound where something once so acutely perforated into my life (quite literally in the context of a piercing, as well). The elephant, the national animal in Thailand, has been significant in Thai culture. The notable cultural value of elephants in Thailand can be traced back to ancient times, in which the contribution of elephants in warfare and their relationship to Buddhist tradition prompted the overall sentiment that elephants were to be respected and properly treated. However, there is a noticeable transition in the significance of the elephant as a

cultural symbol to, instead, a commodity, due to their incorporation in the tourism industry. This commodification raises debate on the treatment of the animal and, thus, the cultural aspects behind the animal. Therefore, the current value placed on the elephant as a means of economic gain, seen with their integration into Thailand's tourism industry, engenders poor elephant welfare, and ultimately, triggers the degradation of the elephant being held as a national, cultural icon.

The first account of a Thai elephant is dated back to a stone inscription circa 1277-1317 A.D.. King Ramkhamhaeng fought on an elephants back against the ruler of Chod, who attempted to invade the Sukhothai Kingdom, ending with King Ramkhamhaeng emerging as the victor. His father, acknowledging his sons ability, trusted in him the task to expand the territory of the Sukhothai Kingdom. With the newly expanded territory, the inscription recalled the Sukhothai Kingdom as "the city [being] wide and immense with so many elephants." ("The Great Kings of Siam" 2). From there, elephants were integrated into the position as war vessels in Thailand, precipitating their representation in a cultural sense as one of staunch vehemence, taking on only the most respected of roles, even being a symbol of royalty (Buckley et al. 6). Aside from the role of elephants in warfare in Thailand, their cultural value is also noted with their profound relationship to Buddhism, the predominant religion in Thailand, in which the white elephant is perceived to be a symbol of good luck or good fortune, as the birth mother of the Buddha, Queen Māyā of Sakya, recounted a dream during her pregnancy that lucidly included a white elephant, contributing, too, to the image of the elephants as a powerful creature ("Queen Maha Maya's Dream" 1), (Trainor 24).

However, the Thai people began to perceive the elephant as proving much more merit in the historical Thai logging industry, presenting one of the first indicators of the elephants shift away from their initial position in Thai culture. According to a publication titled *Giants in our Hands* by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific in Bangkok, Thailand, with the introduction of Western firearms, the presence of the elephant in the battlefield waned, however, their contribution in Thai society did not fade, rather, their duties were instead placed to that of industrial work. The Thai recognized the inability of elephants to carry substantial weight on their backs, however, they found that elephants were apt in pulling 1000-2000 kg, equaling to roughly half of their weight, and once this skill was noticed, their assimilation into the logging industry took route. However, Thailand experienced a period of flash floods due to massive deforestation from the 1960's. This led the Thai government to impose an emergency logging ban in 1989 in order to maintain the remaining forests, which amounted to a mere 15 percent of Thailand's land ("Giants on Our Hands" 46). The Forest Industry Organisation (FIO), which held a good 60 percent of the 306 logging licenses in Thailand, most notably felt the negative outcomes. The failure of the logging industry to provide a secure place for the elephants in Thai society, as a result, instigated the problem of half of the mahouts being laid off of work ("The 1989 Logging Ban" 1).

The effects of the 1989 logging ban were not only restricted to the mahouts but were also, as expected, felt by their elephants. An immediate outcome of the government's imposition of the ban was that the elephant's became a massive financial strain, contrasting with the previous perception of the elephant as a significant source of income for the mahouts, and, even more so, diverged radically from the initial view of the elephant as a respected cultural symbol in Thai

culture. According to an academic report published by the Worcester Polytechnic Institute, about 70 percent of the elephants that had previously worked in the logging industry became unemployed (Alegbeleye et al. 5). Because of the mahouts financial insecurity, mahouts began to take their elephants to the streets as an alternative means of earning wages. Rosaleen Duffy and Lorraine Moore, from Manchester University's Department of Politics, stated that due to the logging ban, there was "the phenomenon of "street wandering elephants"- unemployed elephants and mahouts coming to big cities and tourist areas to beg on the streets," (Duffy et al. 1).

According to the scholarly journal article titled *Elephants in Thailand Vol I: Mahouts and Their Cultures Today*, in the northeastern province of Surin, most notably did the mahouts roam the streets as their main source of income, maintaining a lack of inclination to search for another alternative to the latter, "claim[ing] that income is too low." Accordingly, in order for the mahouts to gain revenue from their elephants, elephants were expected to perform tricks, attracting the attention of ongoing spectators, prompting the rise in elephant tourism. (Schliesinger 21). However, their integration into the tourism industry has insinuated problems of elephant welfare, which can be divided into two groups: health and quality of living.

One of these problems lay in health issues that the elephants may face. This problem is even more pressing as, according to Dr Jan Schmidt-Burbach, World Animal Protections Senior Wildlife and Veterinary Advisor, elephants rarely get visitations from veterinarians (Schmidt-Burbach 31). A large aspect of elephant tourism in Thailand is seen in trekking, an aspect where the majority of elephants are found. Trekking involves tourists being able to ride the creature. Even before the governmental imposition of logging bans in 1989, elephants pulled half their weight, however, it was known by regular Thai locals and the elephants mahouts, alike,

that they could not carry large weights on their backs. Yet, this realization, though recognized, is disregarded, with the elephants mahouts feigning ignorance, and elephants are left walking the wearing hours, fatigue culminating, carrying the burdensome loads of tourists on their backs. With the exhausting work comes the common wounds to the elephants physical body. According to an academic research article titled “Illuminare: A Student Journal in Recreation, Parks, and Leisure Studies”, published by Rebecca Dick of Concordia University, the wearing of the feet of the creature prompts blisters and joint issues, and if the elephant dared to make the bold and rash decision to slow down, or worse, stop for a quick break, they are prodded by an ankhu, a bullhook, by their mahouts. Also, the onerous load of a seat strapped to their backs along with the weight of a tourist riding the elephant precipitate irreversible spinal abnormalities (Dick 6). Furthermore, there are concerns of the elephants mental health due to issues of psychological trauma. In an article detailing a 2017 research briefing published by Tourism Concern, “elephants socialise, have families, form friendship groups, feel pain, and have a full spectrum of emotions”, exhibiting human-like tendencies. However, due to the captive setting of trekking camps, elephants live in solidarity from each other, preventing elephants from behaving naturally (Animals in Tourism 6). Also, elephants are forced to stand up on their two front legs or on small boxes due to the demands of visiting tourists, contributing to bone disorders of the elephants as they age (“Giants on Our Hands” 234). Further, issues are seen in another aspect of the elephant tourism industry, being elephants painting. Tourists visiting elephant camps can find young elephants painting elephants, however, in order to cast the direction of each finely detailed stroke, the mahouts place knives or nails into their trunks. Frequent repetition of the moving of the brush, too, generates stress (“Painting & Shows” 1).

Another welfare issue that arises from the integration of the elephants into the tourist industry is seen in the unsatisfactory conditions that the elephants are kept and work in. A 2010 study was conducted by World Animal Protection, whose aim was to measure the state of welfare of elephants in Thailand's elephant tourism industry, drawing a pool of data from 1688 elephants from 106 tourist venues. The results indicated that the overwhelming majority of the venues that the elephants were held in had conditions that proved less than favorable ("Wildlife on a Tightrope" 40). Though some venues did provide the elephants with a sufficient quality of care, the issue still persists as only a small number of venues put forth the effort to provide the elephants with satisfactory living conditions. Furthermore, when the elephants are not performing for tourists, they are kept shackled in chains, enclosed in cramped spaces that are uncomfortable for the animal to be in during the long working hours, prompting the unfortunate consequence of the elephants developing neurotic temperaments, such as swaying their heads all day as if they are dancing ("Giants in Our Hands" 234). As a result, the elephants develop the long term consequence of adopting unnatural habits. Also, the animal are rarely fed, even though they go through strenuous working hours. The National Elephant Center states: "Elephants may spend 12-18 hours a day feeding. Adult elephants can eat between 200-600 pounds of food a day. As herbivores, elephants consume grasses, tree foliage, bark, twigs, and other vegetation daily. Elephants can also drink up to 50 gallons of water a day about as much as a standard bathtub holds," ("Elephant Basics" 1). However, the demanding diet of the elephants is unfortunately not upheld by their mahouts. In a National Geographic publication by Jay Simpson, Digital Storyteller and National Geographic Young Explorer conducting research on the relationship of wildlife and interventions in human-wildlife conflicts, and contributor Rafa

Salvador, lawyer in the general practice firm GarcíaPetit Abogados with experience in global law, comparative law, and international business law, the estimated cost to prepare food for the captive elephants amounts to roughly 2910 Thai Baht, or 80 USD. Mahouts had previously avoided the large expenses that feeding the elephants entailed by allowing the elephants to roam forests in order to collect their food, however, due to the deforestation of Thailand caused by the logging industry, elephants can no longer forage their food and, thus, issues of malnutrition arises (Simpson 1). Another issue is the excessive punishment of the elephants. In order to discipline the elephants, they are put in cuffs, donned with large, piercing spikes (*Giants in Our Hands* 233). One of the most notable means of disciplining the elephant comes with the use of an ankhu, as described previously. The mahout uses the ankhu to jab the elephant, indicating “no welfare understanding” of the elephants in regard to animal management (“Wildlife on a Tightrope 47). Also, elephants that work in specifically the trekking aspect of the elephant tourism industry travel the long distances of up to 300 kms. These trekking camps fail to give the elephants access to food, shade, and water, making the work much more tolling on the elephants (“Painting & Shows” 1).

Through the increase in elephant tourism, the Thai people are victim to the human zoo effect, provoking the prostitution and exploitation of a significant aspect of their culture, in this case, the elephants. Tourists visit the Southeast Asian countries due to their perception of it being in “happy poverty,” seeking to submerge themselves into “exotic” third-world countries (Thiercy 49). The mahouts dispersed to various regions in Thailand, placing their elephants in elephant camps due to the increasing attraction to elephant tourism, paying no heed to the significance that the elephants had once held in Thailand (*Giants in Our Hands* 157). This is

due to the monetary gain that elephant exploitation through the tourism industry guarantees for the mahouts. And with each passing generation, Thai children grow believing that the mistreatment and exploitation of the elephants is the norm, and so, the value of the elephant as an acclaimed national symbol is lost.

Initially, elephants were distinguished as one of the deeply rooted facets in what constitutes the identity of Thailand. Once held as a symbol of power and royalty, the elephant is debased, noted with their poor welfare in both health and standard of living. Yet, as seen with the defilement of the cultural icon through the acts of mistreatment detailed, the elephants are, therefore, seen as a disposable commodity, as the significance of the elephant is placed in their economic contributions. Ultimately, the larger relevancy is presented: Thailand is experiencing the degradation of a national symbol. The issue extends itself to, not just that of a wounded elephant, but that of a wounded culture.



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Alegbeleye, Laura-Ashley, et al. "The Urban Elephant: Sustainable Roles in a Changing Society." Worcester Polytechnic Institute, Worcester Polytechnic Institute, pp. 1–84.

Baker, Ilijas, and Masakazu Kashio. "Giants on Our Hands: Proceedings of the National Workshop on the Domesticated Asian Elephant." FAO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, pp. 1-278.

Buckley, Dana, et al. "THAI ELEPHANTS: An Evaluative Study of Contemporary Living Conditions for the Betterment of Asian Elephants in Thai Culture." Worcester Polytechnic Institute, Worcester Polytechnic Institute, 2011, pp. 1–188.

Dick, Rebecca. "The Use of Elephants in Leisure and its Negative Effects." *Illuminare: A Student Journal in Recreation, Parks, and Leisure Studies*, vol. 14, 2016, pp. 1-9.

"Elephant Basics." The National Elephant Center, NationalElephantCenter, <http://www.nationalelephantcenter.org/learn/>. Accessed 6 November 2018.

HP331 Conversation Psychology. Nanyang Technological University. <https://blogs.ntu.edu.sg/hp331-2012-shiyun/threats/logging-ban/>. Accessed 6 November 2018.

“Painting & Shows.” Eleemotion Foundation, Eleemotion,

<http://www.eleemotion.org/elephant-tourism/painting-shows-2/>. Accessed 6 November 2018.

“Life of Buddha: Queen Maha Maya's Dream (Part 1).” BuddhaNet, Buddha Dharma Education Association & BuddhaNet, 2008,

[www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/buddhism/lifebuddha/1lbud.htm](http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/buddhism/lifebuddha/1lbud.htm). Accessed 6 November 2015.

Schliesinger, Joachim. “Elephants in Thailand.” Booksmango, vol. 1, 2015, pp. 1-231.

Schmidt-Burbach, Jan. “Taken for a ride The conditions for elephants used in tourism in Asia.”

World Animal Protection., pp. 1-54.

Simpson, Jay. “How Much Food Does a Thai Elephant Eat in a Day?” National Geographic, 2 Feb. 2016,

<https://blog.nationalgeographic.org/2016/02/02/how-much-food-does-a-thai-elephant-eat-in-a-day/>. Accessed 6 November 2018.

“Street Elephants.” EleAid, EleAid,

<http://www.eleaid.com/elephant-conservation/street-elephants/>. Accessed 6 November 2018.

Thiercy, Mattieu. “Promoting Southeast Asia as an Exotic Destination: Viable Asset of a Short-Term Perspective?” Université de Toulon et du Var, no. 1, 2009, pp. 1-85.

“The Great Kings of Siam.” Thai Laws, Thai Laws,  
[www.thailaws.com/download/thailand/thegreatkingsofsiam.pdf](http://www.thailaws.com/download/thailand/thegreatkingsofsiam.pdf). Accessed 6 November 2015.

Trainor, Kevin. “Buddhism: The Illustrated Guide.” illustrated, reprint ed., Oxford University Press, 2004.