

# FACE TO FACE

Tattooed faces of women belonging to a remote tribal group in Myanmar have allowed Jens Uwe Parkitny to build up a cultural portrait

TEXT ADELE WONG PHOTOS JIMMY LUK



Jens Uwe Parkitny and his wife from Myanmar, Swe Yi, visit the country a couple of times a year.



**Jens Uwe Parkitny is working hard to document the remnants of what he is convinced will soon be a lost art form.**

During an emotional, ad hoc journey into some of the more remote parts of west Myanmar in 1999, the managing director of online travel guru Expedia had stumbled across various pockets of tribal women, young and old, with delicate ink patterns etched on their faces – patterns that the women were fiercely proud of, and that held the fascination of Parkitny for years to come. But this facial art form is fast disappearing as the tribes become increasingly more developed and abandon traditional values in favour of modernisation.


Since his first encounter with the strangely beautiful Chin women of Myanmar more than a decade ago, Parkitny now averages a handful of trips a year back to the country, to capture the intricate tattoos on their faces, while enjoying a break from the real world.

The eternal facial markings are proof of status in certain tribes of Myanmar, and different patterns – inspired perhaps by the flora and fauna of their surroundings – distinguish one tribe from another, Parkitny tells *The PEAK* at a recent exhibit of his work,



hosted by Asia Fine Art Gallery at Pacific Place Three. For instance, the more lines there are on a woman's face, the more esteemed she is in society and the more respect she gains. These and other tidbits, Parkitny had gathered during his dialogues with the locals. No written documentation of this cultural practice exists that he knows of, and this makes Parkitny's work all the more vital.

Even among the women who bear these lifelong brandings on their cheeks, foreheads, noses – even among these women themselves, it is no longer clear what the abstract lines on their faces symbolise, or whether there was any symbolism to begin with. All they know for sure is that the etching of permanent colours on one's skin is worth the pain, the blood, the tears. They can secure men, they can secure wealth, they can secure meaning in their lives, all through these telltale facial scars.

Parkitny's goal now, is to at the very least, let the rest of the world know that this special and painstaking practice exists before it becomes extinct. 

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The Chin women of Myanmar denote their social status through facial markings

