

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Constructing Symbolic Value in Marketing Silver Crafts of Iu Mien Entrepreneurs in Thailand

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ABSTRACT

Despite limited power and capital, ethnic entrepreneurs can develop effective marketing strategies. This article examines the marketing approach of two silver craft entrepreneurs from the Iu Mien ethnic group in Thailand's Nan Province. By engaging in cultural activities, such as gifting silver craft products to members of the Thai monarchy, offering a free dual vocational education program at their factory, and positioning their factory as a heritage tourism site, the entrepreneurs of Doi Silver Factory have made their economic objectives less apparent. Moreover, these activities create symbolic value for their enterprise, framing it as an act of “preserving heritage for the nation.” Anyone involved is also positioned as part of this preservation effort. Moving beyond a strictly Marxist interpretation that views this marketing approach as an advanced form of wealth accumulation, we argue that this practice is also a subtle form of ethnopolitics, where the entrepreneurs assert their place as contributors to the safeguarding of cultural heritage in Thailand, in contrast to being stereotyped as threats to national security. Therefore this marketing approach is both economically and socially oriented. This research contributes to the study of marketing strategies in ethnic entrepreneurship. The study is based on fieldwork conducted from 2020 to 2024.

1 | Introduction

The inferiority of ethnic populations does not always prevent them from engaging with capitalism, as evidenced by a body of literature related to ethnic entrepreneurship. This specific research field has emerged since the 19th century due to significant waves of ethnic migration seeking improved economic prospects, particularly from nonindustrial countries to industrial ones in Europe and the United States. These immigrant ethnic entrepreneurs included Jewish communities in the United States (Sombart 1914); Chinese, Japanese, and African American communities in the United States (Light 1972); Cubans in Miami (Wilson and Portes 1980); Romani in the United States; Koreans in Los Angeles; Chinese in New York; North Africans in Lyon; Pakistanis in Manchester; Turks in West Berlin; various immigrant groups in Suriname (Waldinger et al. 1990); and Latinos in

the United States (Verdaguer 2009). Only in recent decades has this research field expanded its scope to include other, nonimmigrant ethnic populations in other parts of the world, including those self-defined as Indigenous peoples. The non-immigrant entrepreneurs who have caught scholars' attention include the Bedouin in Israel (Degen 2007), the Saami in Sweden and Norway (Nilssen 2019), the Zulu in South Africa (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009), the Manangi in Nepal (Ratanapruck 2008), the Nuoso in China (Heberer 2007), the Yunnanese in Thailand (Lee 2017), the “hill tribes” in Thai towns (Leepreecha et al. 2003), and the Akha in Thailand (Geng 2023; Takaeng 2017). These studies have investigated the contexts, processes, and outcomes of different ethnic peoples in their choices for entrepreneurial self-employment. However, remaining largely understudied are the marketing approaches and strategies that largely determine ethnic entrepreneurs' long-term business success, social relationships,

and ethnic identity negotiations within mainstream society. This study, therefore, aimed to explore this issue of marketing. We ask two primary questions: How do marginalized ethnic entrepreneurs in mainstream society compete with others to market their products? Can we view their marketing strategies as a form of ethnopolitics?

In the past, ethnic entrepreneurs simply produced and brought their commodities directly to market without engaging in marketing activities. However, over the years, market competition has increased, and it has been observed that ethnic entrepreneurs now increasingly adopt marketing strategies to create or add specific value to their enterprises and commodities. Among the various marketing approaches employed by ethnic entrepreneurs, this article focuses on a specific approach conducted by two ethnic entrepreneurs from Doi Silver Factory Co. Ltd. (hereinafter referred to as Doi Silver) in Nan Province, Thailand. These two entrepreneurs are Somchai Rungrachatawanich and Pimporn Rungrachatawanich (husband and wife, hereinafter referred to as Somchai and Pimporn). They identify themselves ethnically as members of the Iu Mien or Yao—an ethnic group that has historically been marginalized in Thai society and labeled as the “others within” (Winichakul 2000) and “hill tribes” (Burutpat 1975). We have chosen these two entrepreneurs of Doi Silver mainly because of their unique approach to marketing, which is absent among other ethnic entrepreneurs.

Besides being involved in explicit marketing strategies, such as discounting, direct selling, and pricing tactics, Somchai and Pimporn also subtly employ an implicit marketing strategy to create symbolic value for their business and products. This symbolic value revolves around the notion of “preserving heritage for the nation,”¹ which is reinforced through various cultural practices. It is important to note that “preserving heritage for the nation” has a different meaning than “preserving the nation’s heritage.” The former includes a diverse array of local and ethnic elements that are preserved for the nation, which do not necessarily have to be considered “national heritage.” In contrast, the latter focuses primarily on the concept of national heritage itself. This former is interesting as it reflects the entrepreneurs’ efforts to use this phrase to market their craft commodities and reshape their ethnic identity.

The critical point here is that by emphasizing this specific symbolic value, the entrepreneurs obscure their pursuit of material interests, ultimately enhancing their opportunities for wealth accumulation. This phenomenon aligns with Bourdieu’s notion of the advanced form of modern capitalist economy (Bourdieu and Nice 1980). However, drawing from the experiences of the two entrepreneurs—who face a similar form of marginalization as other ethnic members in northern Thailand and beyond—we argue that the creation of such symbolic value is also deeply intertwined with their community’s collective efforts to reshape their ethnic relations and ethnic identity in Thailand. In other words, the creation of symbolic value parallels the collective ethnopolitics of the Iu Mien, which also takes other forms. For instance, Jonsson (2008) described the Iu Mien sports festival as a way for the Thai Iu Mien to show their sense of belonging in Thailand. They do this by playing sports that are popular both in Thailand and around the world, especially football, which is the most popular sport among Thai people. Similarly, the

marketing strategy employed by these Iu Mien entrepreneurs resonates with the Karen people’s construction of themselves as forest defenders (Hayami 2006) and their efforts to create a consensus on redefining their practice of rotational shifting cultivation as a sustainable, ecologically friendly, and subsistence-oriented form of agriculture—countering the state’s narrative that portrays them as contributors to environmental degradation (Walker 2001). Without such efforts, ethnic peoples’ rights, legitimacy, and dignity can be ignored, leading to resource conflicts and ethnic tensions, as seen in the recent case of entrepreneurial Hmong fruit farmers whose cultivation practices were blamed by Thai lowlanders as a primary cause of environmental problems (Wittayapak 2008). The negotiation of ethnic identity and the reshaping of ethnic relations are thus critical processes in which awakened ethnic members engage by using the means and resources available to them. In the case of the two Iu Mien silver craft entrepreneurs, their creation of symbolic value serves as a powerful marketing tool not only for branding their company and making their commodities marketable but also as a means of ethnopolitics reshaping their ethnic identity and social relationships with others. On the basis of these two parallel objectives of the entrepreneurs, we can see that their marketing approach is an art. To effectively investigate this art of marketing, we adopt the perspective of symbolic value creation.

2 | Perspective on Symbolic Value Creation

This section primarily reviews literature related to the perspective of symbolic value creation. Commodities in today’s world constitute three forms of value: use-value, exchange-value, and symbolic value (Bourdieu and Nice 1980), also referred to as sign-value (Baudrillard 2001). Marx’s ([1876] 1976) classic economic perspective already reflects that the goal of the capitalist mode of production is to create a state he called “commodity fetishism,” in which commodities are prioritized for their exchange-value rather than for the labor and social structures that produced them. For him, this process makes goods appear magical or metaphysical, as if their value is inherent rather than socially constructed. Through his concept of commodity fetishism, Marx sheds light on how capital alienates human labor and human relationships from the commodities and services they produce. Because of this, he perceived commodities as having a “strange” and “mysterious” character compared to those products that contain only use-value.

Building on Marx’s notion of commodity fetishism, Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Nice 1980) and Baudrillard (2001) further argue that even commodities containing symbolic value or sign value conceal labor alienation and class relations embedded within them through noneconomic activities, practices, or principles. Baudrillard (2016) highlights media-technological advancements as a potential means of marketing that can seduce people into sign consumption, whereas Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Nice 1980) sees culture and cultural practices as strategic approaches to creating symbolic value in commodities. For Bourdieu, culture/cultural capital² is as powerful as economic capital in Marxist theory, as cultural practices can be convertible to other interests, including economic ones. In other words, he argued that the pursuit of business interests often disguises itself in cultural forms, making economic

motives appear “disinterested” or hidden from view. Thus Bourdieu’s theoretical model focuses on the “disinterested” practices and principles that economic agents often employ to achieve their self-interested goals. He introduced several key strategies, including transforming the significant into the insignificant, displaying charisma or support to exert dominance, avoiding explicit calculation or treating calculation as taboo, making commercial activities appear pure and unrelated to wealth accumulation, and using humor or mockery to reject market demands.

Beyond these principles, Ayuttacorn and Ferguson (2018) assert that rituals related to sacralization, the construction of faith-based institutions, hosting communal gatherings, and redefining purchases as a form of merit making all contribute to the symbolic value of certain sacred commodities. In this respect, the creation of value for cultural commodities, therefore, cannot be separated from what Appadurai (1986) called the politics of diversion and display. The essential point is that these practices and politics function as marketing strategies. Once consumers are seduced by or misrecognize symbolic or sign-value, they may purchase and consume commodities unnecessarily and even discard them once they fall out of fashion. Hence, the symbolic value of commodities does not evolve naturally but is socially constructed and changeable over time. As Kopytoff (1986) has argued, the value, status, and biographies of things/commodities change over time, depending on context.

Guided by the preceding theoretical insights, especially by Bourdieu’s notion of making commercial activities appear pure and un- or less related to wealth accumulation, we aim to explore the cultural activities and principles employed by the owners of Doi Silver in their creation of the symbolic value of “preserving heritage for the nation” for their business firm and commodities. Therefore, instead of investigating their conventional marketing activities, we aim at the cultural practices, such as gifting, launching a free dual education program, building a museum, turning their factory into a tourist destination, and hosting public events. Notably, this theoretical approach also aligns with in-depth research methods.

3 | Research Methods

Data presented in this study were gathered primarily through ethnographic methods, deeply rooted in anthropology, involving prolonged engagement and careful observation at the research site, including the interpretation of collected data. This method included semistructured interviews and participant observation, both essential for thoroughly understanding interpersonal relationships and community dynamics. Semistructured interviews allowed for relaxed and engaging interactions with respondents, while participant observations effectively complemented interviews (Naidoo 2015). The first author’s ethnographic fieldwork at Doi Silver and its community took place from 2020 to 2023. During this period, she was physically present at the research site for 2 months in 2023, while at other times, she visited only for significant occasions related to Doi Silver and the Iu Mien community. The second author, on the other hand, is well known among the entrepreneurs of Doi Silver and the community, as he resided there in childhood and remains closely connected to the

community, has formally interviewed the owner and his wife, and has observed the business in January 2024.

As Hmong, or “Chan Pa Meo” in the Iu Mien language, we used primarily Thai and Kham Muang (northern Thai dialect) to conduct our semistructured interviews with the Iu Mien, local Thai officials, and Thai visitors. Meanwhile, the Hmong language was naturally used when engaging with Hmong individuals who have long-standing connections with the Iu Mien community. To examine the marketing approach of the two entrepreneurs of Doi Silver, the first author conducted a total of 13 interviews. These included with the two entrepreneurs of Doi Silver featured in this study, one Hmong entrepreneur of Phukha Silver, one craft designer/part-time lecturer at Doi Silver, one full-time teacher at Doi Silver, two craft students from Doi Silver, two senior craft producers at Doi Silver, two former silver craft producers from the Paklang community, and two provincial government officials (one was from the Nan Provincial Industry Office, and the other was from the Nan Provincial Commerce Office). We have conducted interviews with them mainly because they have been involved with Doi Silver directly or indirectly.

In terms of research ethics, all interviewees were informed of our research scope and objectives beforehand. The semistructured interview process took place only once an interviewee expressed their willingness to share their experiences and insights. In addition to the interviews, everyday conversations and observations at the research site (Doi Silver and Paklang community) and on social media, for example, the entrepreneurs’ and company’s Facebook pages, also provided valuable insights to our understanding of Doi Silver’s marketing approach.

4 | Results

“They have no established market ... They work in iron and silver, and they make paper with lime, but they are not experienced in any of these crafts” (Rangsiyanan and Naowakarn 1925, 88). This historical account of the Yao’s or Iu Mien’s silver forging in the hilltops of northern Thailand was recorded by two Thai officials under the ethnography guidelines designed by the Siam Society a century ago. The content clearly reveals the underdeveloped cultural craft making of the hill and marginalized Iu Mien people in Thailand. However, based on our fieldwork in Nan Province, it contrasts sharply with the contemporary high skills and marketing strategies of the Iu Mien silver craft entrepreneurs in Nan Province. Before exploring the marketing approach of Doi Silver, the focus area of this article, an introduction to the factory itself, along with its silver craft community and partners, is presented first.

4.1 | Birth of the Silver Community and Doi Silver

Doi Silver is a private, small-scale enterprise founded by an Iu Mien family resettled in Paklang, a lowland community established in late 1968 in the district of Pua, Nan Province, northern Thailand. *Doi* is a northern Thai term, literally meaning “mountain,” which signified their highland ethnic identity, despite the factory being in the lowland market of Pua District. From the time they were displaced from their

high, mountainous villages to this new lowland environment, their former opium and subsistence livelihoods were no longer possible. This community comprises members from three highland ethnic groups: the Iu Mien, Hmong, and H'tin. All resettled in highland areas prior to 1967. It was due to the political conflict between the Communist Party of Thailand and the Thai government during the Cold War era that the resettlement pattern of these ethnic populations shifted from the highlands to the lowlands (see Leepreecha et al. 2018). Elderly Hmong people in the community reflected that among the three ethnic groups in Paklang, members of the Iu Mien were the first to engage in the Thai mainstream market. This observation resonates with Kandre (1967), who noted that having been influenced by religious beliefs and practices related to silver, the Iu Mien are engaged in trade more than other highland ethnic groups.

One of the markets that has significantly transformed the livelihood and identity of the Iu Mien in this community is the silver craft market. Silver, *nyan* in the Iu Mien language, not only is a metal material of high economic value but also holds cultural significance in defining Iu Mien identity (see Chanbamrung 1991; Pourret 2002). Before resettling in Paklang, an elderly, deaf Iu Mien silversmith, Laopha Saetern, told us via his wife that he had crafted Iu Mien traditional silverwares for their own ethnic members' use before their relocation to this lowland community. It was only after some time being jobless and having limited economic opportunities in this community that his family and relatives began to adapt their traditional silver craftsmanship to produce various silver crafts, responding to broader market demands (Laopha Saetern, pers. comm., November 11, 2022). However, the silver craft livelihood did not go so well until after an entrepreneurial silversmith, Kamol Saetern, offered a gift of silver to King Rama IX on his visit to Paklang in 1976 (Leepreecha et al. 2018, 194), which was followed by Queen Sirikit calling on five Iu Mien silversmiths to work under her craft foundation in 1978 (Doi Silver 2016, 17). Unexpectedly, three of the silversmiths worked only for a short while and decided to return to working on their own quietly at the village for the open market. Kiri Sathawornwiwat (pers. comm., March 23, 2021) reflected,

We didn't know that they crafted silver and traded silver until we saw them build good homes. It was kept secret as it was their livelihood. They would never tell you where they traded. Only later due to high demand, they started to hire us by distributing their silver sterling³ to us and then we returned crafted products to them and got paid.

Gradually, the livelihood of the entire community started to change, especially from the 1980s, when some entrepreneurial craft workers hired by the first three Iu Mien entrepreneurs successfully became second-wave entrepreneurs, competing and also partnering with the first wave. This eventually transformed silver craftsmanship, originally a male-dominated activity, into a profession for all ages and genders. Srisombat (2016) asserted how the silver craft livelihood has facilitated women's agency in Iu Mien society. However, this study aims at exploring both genders' efforts in reshaping their

place in Thai society, not only in terms of making a living for economic survival.

Therefore, this study focuses mainly on the initiatives of two second-wave entrepreneurs—Somchai Rungrachathawanich and Pimporn Rungrachathawanich (husband and wife)—the owners of Doi Silver. As stated, second-wave Iu Mien entrepreneurs set up for themselves after selling their labor to the first-wave entrepreneurs. In the case of this couple, they worked for several years under two elder silver craft entrepreneurs in the village. One of the elder craftsmen was their uncle, Kamol Saetern, recognized as a master artisan (SUPPORT Arts and Crafts International Centre of Thailand 2012). It was only after accumulating sufficient craft skills and market knowledge that Somchai and Pimporn ventured into their own business, crafting by themselves and taking the finished products to attract retailer buyers over several journeys to Chiang Mai and, later, Chiang Rai and Bangkok. Their business journeys to buyers in these provinces were not easy:

In those days, I just put my products into bag and traveled by bus to show them to retail shops. All shops ignored me and my products. The only shop that was kind and allowed me to display my chain necklace products was Family Silver in Chiang Mai. There, I was told that I would be paid only when my products sold. I returned home with hope and soon later, a telegram sent to me that my products were sold, and the shop wanted more products from me. I told the owner to pay me first, only then I could afford to buy silver sterling to make the needed products. Bit by bit, we received numerous orders from the shop and later from others.

(Somchai, pers. comm., November 17, 2022)

Over time, as demand grew, they recruited their close relatives and friends both inside and outside the community to produce different craft products for them. This was the same period of the late 1980s to 1990s during which Charatsangpetch (1992) found that the Iu Mien in this community's silver craft trade were already depending on silver craft as their primary source of income. Undeniably, this growth of silver craft economy was a result of two favorable contexts: the rise of tourism in Thailand, through which silver became a sought-after souvenir for foreigners to bring home as gifts, and the increasing focus on exports during this time, which fueled the growth and development of Thailand's silver industry (see Gem and Jewelry Institute of Thailand, n.d., 4). As a result, most entrepreneurs in the community have fond memories of that period as the "golden time" for "making silver making money." Through this golden time, Somchai and Pimporn shifted their marketing strategy from "peddling silver crafts in bags" to opening a gift shop named Doi Pradup Ngoen in the city of Nan Province in 1991. Meanwhile, following other entrepreneurs, they started to offer silver craft commodities to members of the Thai monarchy starting in the early 1990s,⁴ especially to Her Majesty Queen Sirikit and Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn. Both are regarded by Iu Mien entrepreneurs as patrons of their silver craft commodities.



FIGURE 1 | Doi Silver Factory in 2023. Photograph by Prasit Leepreecha.

However, their initial startup in the city of Nan was not smooth, as rapid growth in the number of entrepreneurs led to intense competition and a subsequent drop in prices. To address these challenges, Somchai and 53 other entrepreneurs formed the cooperative Chompoo Phukha Silver and Handicrafts in 1993 to stabilize market prices. Although this cooperative was short-lived due to its perceived constraints on entrepreneurial opportunity, it laid the foundation for the recognition of Iu Mien entrepreneurship in silver craft under the name Phukha Silver. Following Somchai's withdrawal, a Hmong man and his Iu Mien wife took over the cooperative (T. Wannawiphusit, pers. comm., March 25, 2021). Subsequently, numerous silver craft firms gradually emerged, including Doi Silver, established in 1997,⁵ and began to hire other ethnic people to produce crafts for them, especially the H'tin, Hmong, Lue, and Khon Mueang. Hence, through the entrepreneurship of a few Iu Mien people, hundreds of families in Nan Province improved their livelihoods. "We no longer need to leave our community. Working locally allows us to save money and care for our children and elders at home" (On Yang, a Hmong craft producer, pers. comm., November 17, 2022). This sentiment underscores why Somchai and Pimporn have so often said that "silver is life" for them and their community.

Currently, numerous showrooms, shops, and factories are located both within the community and elsewhere. All of them have contributed to the rise of Nan Province as a significant source of high-quality silver craft products in Thailand, alongside Chiang Mai, Sukhothai, and Surin (Gem and Jewelry Institute of Thailand 2018, 4). However, only Doi Silver stands out, having been recognized as the best OTOP exporter at the 25th Prime Minister's Export Award 2016 by the Department of International Trade Promotion (2016, 15) of the Thai Ministry of Commerce, which highlighted the exceptional quality of its silver craft products. Moreover, Doi Silver has been regarded as a prototype for small and medium enterprises in Thailand, generating more than 36 million baht (approximately US\$989,000) from exporting its products abroad (Thairath TV Original 2016). In total, this enterprise generates approximately 100 million baht annually (approximately US\$2,749,000) (BLACK DOT 2024a). Owing to this economic power, Doi Silver has often been represented as the leading agent of Nan's "silver cluster" in collaboration with governmental agencies, promoting Nan as a silver craft

city since the 2010s (P. Baiya, head of policy and project at Nan Provincial Industry Office, pers. comm., November 11, 2022; T. Lueyot, academic specialist in community development, pers. comm., November 21, 2022). All these features invite us to examine how the entrepreneurs of this family-owned enterprise have sought to enhance the visibility of their company and commodities in the market and among the public.

4.2 | The Art of Marketing Doi Silver

Among the three waves of entrepreneurs, the second wave, exemplified by Doi Silver entrepreneurs, have employed the distinctive marketing approach of including cultural activities on their premises, such as by building a museum, opening the factory as a site of learning, and providing factory tours that allow visitors to explore how Doi Silver is "preserving heritage for the nation." According to Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Nice 1980), these cultural activities are conducted to make economic motives and interests less apparent and to create symbolic value. Among the various activities, we focus on two recently launched projects herein: turning the factory into learning spaces and touring Doi Silver.

4.2.1 | Turning the Factory Into Learning Spaces

Today, Doi Silver is markedly different from how it was in the past. A photograph taken a decade ago shows that Doi Silver was relatively small, consisting of a factory, a small compound for selling goods, a parking lot for workers' motorcycles, and a black cement wall at the entrance with the company's full name written in Thai. A fence also enclosed the factory (see Faculty of Industrial Technology Rajabhat Uttarakit 2003, 43). However, over the years, the factory has acquired more land in the surrounding area and established a dual educational program and museum, including the Go High'O Village (Figure 1). Consequently, Doi Silver has transformed into a destination for learning, attracting students and tourists. The black wall and fence have since been removed, revealing the Doi Silver Museum building, with its name clearly written in English. The museum is a landmark that emphasizes Doi Silver's significance beyond economic value.



FIGURE 2 | (Left) Pimporn Rungrachatawanich in her Iu Mien costume leading Nan's deputy governor, Wiboon Weawbandit, with others on a tour around Doi Silver Museum during the opening ceremony. (Right) A professional Thai model with the Bridge of Merit in the background. Photographs by Somchai Rungrachatawanich.

Doi Silver, as a manufacturer, has acted as a preserver of cultural craft heritage for decades. However, this position was not highlighted until recently, when the Doi Silver Museum, along with Go High'O Village—a business site providing drinks, coffee, and guesthouse services—was established in 2020. This development was a direct response to Nan's tourism boom since the mid-2010s (Kanatham 2021, 65). When the first author asked Pimporn (pers. comm., March 25, 2022) why Doi Silver decided to set up the museum, she did not mention any economic motives. Instead, she emphasized that the museum was initiated from her idea of safeguarding her family's old crafting tools, sharing their experiences of gifting silver crafts to members of the monarchy, and showcasing the Iu Mien's unique relationship with silver; the Go High'O Village was her husband, Somchai's, idea. These two projects were designed by an interior designer, whom they call "Ajarn Paiwet Bangbon." He was recruited to design the museum and decorate the business space, including a red bridge adapted from the Iu Mien's religious bridge, known by the Iu Mien as Gong Ta Jew—the Bridge of Merit.

The key point is that after these two building projects, Doi Silver has begun to invite people to visit the factory and presented their entrepreneurship in this craft capitalist economy as an effort of "preserving heritage for the nation." Starting from the opening ceremony on January 12, 2020—a groundbreaking event in Nan Province where the deputy governor of the Nan Provincial Office, Wiboon Weawbandit (who later became Nan governor), was invited as chairperson of the opening ceremony. Professional Thai models were hired to wear and show Doi Silver's products, and they walked across the Bridge of Merit as if it were a catwalk in a fashion show (Figure 2). The evening event was hosted under the theme "Night of Decorating Stars" (ราตรีประดับดาว), and the event was reported on and recorded via social media. Over time, Doi Silver has evolved into a recognized center for manufacturing and a site dedicated to the preservation of silver crafting heritage, acknowledged by the market, the public, and governmental agencies.

Furthermore, the symbolic value of Doi Silver as an agent of "preserving heritage for the nation" extends beyond the museum itself. This value is further enhanced by a complementary free dual vocational education program for marginalized students, established in 2014 in collaboration with the Royal Gold Jubilee College under the patronage of Princess Sirindhorn (Figure 3). The purpose of launching this free dual education program was to address the labor shortage in the factory. However, following the construction of the museum and the initiation of touring activities, this program has been redefined as part of the company's commitment to developing human resources for the country's economic growth and social well-being, as stated in a notice displayed within the museum. Additionally, Somchai also emphasized that this free education program is set free because he and his family want to make a redistribution of knowledge to the country, as Somchai expressed via social media:

"I am already the fourth generation of silversmith (of the lineage). We make a living in this land [nation], so we want to pay back the debt of gratitude [to the nation]. It is unable to donate huge amounts of money, but as we have wisdom and knowledge on silver craft, we want to pass it on to every interested person [as a payback to the nation]," said Somchai Rungrachatawanich.

(Indigenous Media Network 2022)

This education program has been free for students because Doi Silver covers all expenses related to students' fees, teachers' salaries, students' extra activities, food and accommodations, and student outings. In total, Doi Silver pays annually approximately 200,000 baht (approximately US\$5400) to cover all these expenses (Doi Silver Premium 2024). Each year, 10 students are shortlisted to join the program. However, most students usually resign after some time. Since 2014, only 23 students have completed the vocational diploma program, and only 11 of those, all H'tin, remain working for Doi Silver (Jeam, a full-time teacher,



FIGURE 3 | A poster of Somchai Rungrachatawanich with his words quoted in Thai. Courtesy of Indigenous Media Network.

pers. comm., December 1, 2022). Successful students of this program in 2020 expressed that without Doi Silver, they would not have had the opportunity to study and work in this craft field—a newly adopted profession among the H’tin population. Likewise, a group of students whom the first author met in 2022 shared that because of poverty, their parents could not support their higher education, and the only option left for them was to study in this free dual vocational program. One student said that without this program, she would have been married, had kids, and farmed in the sun and rain, like most of her friends at home. Indeed, Doi Silver has been key to these young people’s struggle to move beyond their limitations. Recently, with support from Doi Silver, four students under this program were recognized for their innovative craft products with the Thailand Inventors Award 2024. This recognition not only pushes the students forward but benefits Doi Silver as well.

Having included and promoted these learning spaces on its premises, Doi Silver is no longer seen solely as an economic actor seeking material gain; it is now seen as a business benefactor with a social role in promoting the livelihood of the community, as well as preserving high cultural craft heritage for the nation. Owing to this marketing approach, not only regular customers are enticed to visit and support Doi Silver but so are high-ranking state officials, including Surayud Chulanont (former prime minister), Yingluck Shinawatra (former prime minister), Princess Ubolratana Rajakanya Sirivadhana Barnavadi, and other official authorities, along with well-known writers

and superstars. Meanwhile, visitors in groups also increasingly visit Doi Silver, to the extent that advance reservations are now needed.

4.2.2 | Touring Doi Silver

Silver craft factories in general are not easily accessible to outsiders. However, the case of Doi Silver is different. Our several visits from December 2020 to December 2023 have shown us how the entrepreneurs of Doi Silver take visitors on tours around their factory. This touring activity acts as an influence-building process, affecting visitors’ choice of purchase at the final stop in the showroom, besides educating visitors and having them experience how real hand-made products are produced. We observed that every day, when group visitors arrive, Somchai and Pimporn take turns leading them to explore certain sites, starting from the museum and the student exhibition room and moving to the factory, then to the showroom, where the song “Doi Silver” is played to encourage visitors to “promote” this specific craft heritage by purchasing Doi Silver commodities. On such occasions, they usually dress up formally either in their full traditional costumes or in an adapted modern style, showcasing their Iu Mien ethnic background. This section details how the entrepreneurs usually conduct their touring activities.

At the museum, visitors are introduced to Doi Silver with an emphasis on four key features. This starts with a narration that Doi



FIGURE 4 | Pimporn Rungrachatawanich shows photos of her family's meeting with and gifting silver craft products to royal family members on various occasions in Nan Province. Photograph by Prasit Leepreecha.

Silver is an Iu Mien ethnic-based enterprise built by our interlocutors' father, Chan Tong Rungrachatawanit. A large portrait of Chan Tong Rungrachatawanit, with a phrase reflecting his skillful craftsmanship, "steady hand, patterns ingrained in the mind," is placed at the entrance in the middle of the museum room. Pimporn added that he was a "master artisan of Nan" who served Queen Sirikit's craft project in 1978. As visitors explore further, hundreds of forging tools supposedly used by Chan Tong are also displayed, confirming him as an expert and passing this heritage on to the present generation and beyond. Visitors are also informed that the Iu Mien people have been culturally inseparable from silver since time immemorial, before shifting emphasis to the fact that without the patronage of the Thai monarchy, Doi Silver could not have been able to preserve this craft field, especially emphasizing the collaboration with the Royal Gold Jubilee College under Princess Sirindhorn's patronage in launching the dual vocational educational program that has enabled Doi Silver to "preserve, promote, and innovate" heritage—its slogan in this craft field (Figure 4).

In addition to the role of the monarchy, increasing demand from the international market allows Doi Silver to keep this cultural heritage alive. Different samples of modern, fashionable crafted commodities exported to three jewelry brands abroad are showcased in contrast to a full set of Iu Mien traditional silverwares. Pimporn said some of the products were crafted using traditional Iu Mien techniques. Without consumption and demand, this craft heritage would disappear. At the exit door, a guestbook is available for visitors to write down their thoughts and comments. Most state their appreciation and thank Doi Silver for preserving this craft heritage for Thai people. According to the

guestbooks, three main groups visit Doi Silver: government officials from both local and national levels, elite and middle-class tourists, and university and school students.

Moving on to the factory, there is a small corner dedicated to showcasing craft pieces designed by former students of the vocational program. Inside the factory, one would not know that it is also a classroom for the students if not guided by the business owners. Calendars indicating working days and holidays are placed on each individual desk. Everyone is busy with their own work, while the entrepreneurs introduce their students to visitors and provide details about their creative and innovative craft projects. They often introduce people in the factory according to two categories: Those wearing blue T-shirts are the teachers, gray are senior students, and those in purple T-shirts—a color representing Princess Sirindhorn, founder of the Golden Jubilee Royal Goldsmith College—are students, despite the fact that they are all craft laborers subject to the factory's regulations. Besides responding to the labor shortage as mentioned earlier, the opening up of the factory in this context is also a marketing strategy to create symbolic value to their entrepreneurship as an act of "preserving heritage for the nation"—the symbolic value that also allows us to see how the ethnic entrepreneurs, as subjugated subjects in Thai society, attempt to redefine their ethnic identity and ethnic relation through this cultural craft economic field.

From the factory, visitors usually head to the showroom, where an array of silver crafts are on display and a team of young saleswomen is ready to assist. Some of the showcased products are meant to highlight the company's high level of cultural capital

and economic power. For instance, the collection includes silver craft warriors, a Suphannahong barge associated with the Thai monarchy, a dragon barge, a Buddha statue on a movable throne, and a large water bowl associated with ancient Lanna culture. These objects are uniquely described as “one of a kind” or “objects of pure art,” distinguishing Doi Silver products from products available in the mass market. “Products of pure art are difficult to sell, but they say many things,” said a part-time lecturer at Doi Silver (P. Bangbon, pers. comm., December 14, 2022). Apart from these exceptional pieces, products are similar to those found in other shops in Nan. The only distinguishing feature of these products is the “DS” logo on each item. These products are similar because they are sometimes made by the same craft producers and suppliers. Craft workers do not only work in the factory; they often take orders from other enterprises and work on their projects on nights and weekends (On, a craft producer, pers. comm., November 17, 2022). This explains why the market is competitive, and each enterprise needs to have its own marketing strategy to attract customers.

In addition to showcasing the exceptional products mentioned earlier, another element that builds visitors sentiment in the showroom is the soft background of the song “Doi Silver,” a Thai song composed by songwriter and singer Su Boonliang and cosung by Lanna Khamming. This song gives a biography of Doi Silver:

- Born amidst silver, yet lives among mountains.
- Life is simple beneath the vast blue sky.
- Silver crafts brighten, shining eyes,
- well preserved from generation to generation.
- Once one visits Nan Nagara, the creative city,
- must not miss to witness this very fine craft,
- a gift from Doi Silver.
- Take it to your heart, take it far.
- Rich with time, each curve is skillfully carved,
- Hands hit and hold, leaving intricate patterns.
- Commemorated in Nan Nagara.
- More than ornaments, silver is life.
- Silversmiths craft with care,
- For wearers to feel the love.⁶

More than a piece of art, the function of this song in this business context is not only to persuade visitors to buy their commodities as souvenirs of Nan but also to commemorate the position of Doi Silver as a craft manufacturer in Nan Province, run by people

who are *khon doi* (mountain people) who have been stigmatized as aliens or non-Thais for decades, if not centuries. This song aligns with Doi Silver's emphasis on their role of preserving national craft heritage, despite being placed in the margins of the nation. This song was the result of Pimporn's personal contact with Su Boonliang several times in meetings with Nan provincial officials discussing collaboration in constructing Nan Province as a new tourist destination in Thailand's north. She joined the meetings because, during the 2010s, she was president of the Nan Silver Cluster, while Su Boonliang was recruited by Nan provincial authorities to promote Nan through his creative songwriting and melodious voice. Indeed, he described Nan as simple and slow, with its own rhythm, in his song “Nan na si” (น่านนะสิ)—a song that pulled waves of domestic tourists to Nan Province. The song “Doi Silver” was therefore composed and sung recently with similar objectives.

This is the art of marketing, where business transactions are subtly intertwined with the assertion of ethnic identity as part of the preservation of craft heritage and its greater significance to life and society. In the showroom, visitors are no longer perceived merely as visitors, or merely as potential customers; rather, anyone who purchases a product is seen as part of Doi Silver's mission to preserve the cultural heritage of silver for the nation. Photos of purchasers with their purchases are often posted on Facebook, with captions such as “Thank you for being a part of preserving heritage for the nation.”

One result of the delicate performance of the art of business, where commercial interests are both directly and indirectly mentioned, has been the steady stream of social media coming to broadcast this message without any investment from entrepreneurs (see BLACK DOT 2024b; Thai Public Broadcasting System 2020). Furthermore, the entrepreneurs' two ongoing projects—the museum and the educational program—lead others to perceive them as loyal citizens who are paying back the country that saved them from the Cold War conflict in their former mountainous home (P. Bangpon, pers. comm., December 14, 2022).

Compared to a decade ago, Doi Silver has significantly changed from implementing these cultural and educational practices. Doi Silver has reshaped itself from being seen as driven solely by business interests into a company whose business interests are not prominently showcased but are embedded in the symbolic value of “preserving heritage for the nation.” This article sees this as the outcome of the art of “doing marketing as not doing,” where the silver entrepreneurs have implemented various cultural practices to impart symbolic value to their business in the craft field as an act of “preserving heritage for the nation.” As a result, the entrepreneurs' business interests are hidden from view, in Bourdieu's (Bourdieu and Nice 1980) sense of symbolic economy. Furthermore, through the subtle art of marketing, they have developed relationships with myriad groups beyond their own ethnic community, all with shared interest in Doi Silver.

This shared interest ties them together in a network, each relying on others for their own interests, a symbiotic relationship among all stakeholders in the silver craft industry. This is comparable to the Thai proverb “Water depends on the boat; the tiger depends

on the forest.” Without marginalized, skillful laborers like the H’tin, Hmong, Lue, and Khon Muang, the relationship with the monarchy built since the 1970s–80s, and craft consumers who purchase silver crafts for self-expression, Doi Silver would not be the successful leading agent in Nan’s silver craft industry. Conversely, without Doi Silver, these marginalized students and craft producers would be searching for other jobs or forced into low-wage labor. Similarly, without recipients of royal patronage like Doi Silver, narratives of the monarchy’s beneficence would not be reproduced to push the ideology and message of royalism that benefits the monarchy and its network. Most importantly, the art of silver craft, representing accumulated wisdom, history, culture, and human civilization, would have been confined to a limited circle of practitioners and possibly disappeared with the passing of its elders, especially ancient Nan silver craftsmanship, a part of the national heritage that is at risk of loss. It is through the efforts of all these relevant actors that this craft heritage remains alive.

The relationships of the actors in the silver network with each other have been firmly established and maintained over time. Today, we can see their collaborations on different occasions, for instance, in the wedding of a daughter of a former Nan Provincial Industrial Office head with a son of the owners of Doi Silver, where Saralee Kittiyakorn—a niece of Queen Sirikit—along with other provincial representatives was present, held at Doi Silver. It can also be seen in the World Iu Mien Cultural Festival and Conference, held twice in Nan Province from 2022 to 2023 and once in Phayao Province in 2024. This festival and conference were held under the leadership of Somchai, who was the former president of the Iu Mien Thai Foundation, and his wife, who was formerly president of the Nan silver cluster. Throughout these 3 years, the festival and conference were financially and socially supported by various state agencies, notably the Privy Council, acting on behalf of the monarchy and firmly continuing to attend the festival as chair of the opening ceremony. Even from the Thai government’s project presenting Nan as a creative city of crafts and folk art to the UNESCO Creative City Network, Doi Silver takes a prominent role as one of the leading actors in researching and reviving Nan’s silver craft heritage. All these efforts further widen entrepreneurs’ circles of relationships as well as their economic opportunities. Such results stemming from the marketing strategies employed by entrepreneurs can promote lasting social integration. However, at this moment, our focus is on how these entrepreneurs have used their marketing strategies as a form of ethnopoltics. In future research, we plan to explore this area further.

Doi Silver today is totally different from Doi Silver prior to the 2010s. However, from the perspective of the entrepreneurs, all these changes were unintended consequences. As Pimporn (pers. comm., March 25, 2022) expressed, “Doi Silver has reached its current stage not because we foresaw something [interests] and then practiced, but because we practiced first and then saw something out of the blue.” This statement suggests that ethnic entrepreneurs’ approach to business is often shaped by contingencies. Most importantly, the effort or success of these individual ethnic members is never a private issue as for mainstream entrepreneurs. We have seen these two ethnic entrepreneurs of Doi Silver struggling over resources and from a position

of inferiority to reposition themselves through specific marketing practices. Doi Silver has repositioned itself as a firm of the “other” that nonetheless has contributed its cultural capital to mainstream Thai society and the nation and not as a problem maker threatening national security, as the Iu Mien have been seen in the past.

5 | Conclusion and Discussion

Being formerly categorized as one of the 10 hill tribes, the Iu Mien in northern Thailand had also been perceived as the “other within” (Winichakul 2000) who were uncivilized when compared to the lowland Thai mainstream. In addition, they had been stereotyped as trouble to national security and marginalized in Thai society. However, in the contexts of economic development in the highlands and the tourism boom in Nan Province over the past few decades, we have found that the Iu Mien in the Paklang community have made use of their silver-smith skills and wisdom to achieve both economic benefit and public recognition. Not only do they produce and sell silverwares in the Paklang community but many Iu Mien entrepreneurs have also established their silver craft businesses in urban markets in Nan Town and Pua District. Among those ethnic enterprises, Doi Silver has become a popular destination among domestic tourists to visit and purchase souvenirs. It is our finding that besides engaging in direct business transactions, the two founder-entrepreneurs of Doi Silver have employed a specific marketing approach referred to as the “art of marketing.” This article has discussed how this marketing approach has so far been conducted and what it has aimed to achieve. We have already pointed out that the marketing art of Doi Silver is conducted through cultural activities. These activities have included offering silver crafts to members of the monarchy since the 1980s, launching a dual vocational education program in 2014, and establishing a museum in 2020. Additionally, these two entrepreneurs also guide visitors on tours around the factory and showcase specific products as pure art, tied to supporting Thailand’s national pillars, particularly the monarchy and Buddhism. The key point is that all these activities contribute to creating symbolic value for their commodities and business, framing their continued manufacturing of craft commodities as an effort to preserve heritage for the nation—the symbolic value being marketed by Doi Silver. We have also further shown how meaningful this symbolic value has been for the entrepreneurs of Doi Silver, based on two aspects.

First, we see the entrepreneurs’ mobilization of this symbolic value as the art of marketing for economic interest. They have designed spaces for visitors and customers to walk through and learn the long history and unique culture of the Iu Mien ethnic group pertaining to silver craft making before entering the silver craft shop. Each tour and study group, including special guests, is led by the owners, starting from the museum section, moving to the production section, and ending at the shopping zone. Visitors learn how silver crafts have been developed and how they are essential not only to the Iu Mien but also to the nation, which attracts customers to buy Doi Silver’s commodities at the end, not because of their use-value and economic value but because of their symbolic value. Critically, this creation of symbolic

value is argued by Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Nice 1980) to be an essential element of the modern capitalist economy where economic interest is operated in its advanced form via culture, because through culture, interest is often made “disinterested” or hidden from view. For Doi Silver, it is our contention that the owners have foreseen their business interest gained through this cultural dimension. As a result, visitors walk into Doi Silver not only to buy silver crafts but also to absorb the history and production lines. Certainly, such beforehand information could help customers to decide to buy silver crafts.

Second, moving beyond the Marxist explanation and other studies (Appadurai 1986; Ayuttacorn and Ferguson 2018; Baudrillard 2016) that view such cultural activities merely as an advanced form of wealth accumulation in modern capitalist economy, we demonstrate that the Doi Silver marketing model has extended its interests beyond business interests. In other words, we propose that its assertion of symbolic value over Doi Silver’s commodities and business as an act of “preserving heritage for the nation” is the art of ethnopolitics, where entrepreneurs have publicly launched various specific cultural initiatives to position themselves as subalterns who have nonetheless secured the silver craft heritage, either their own or others’, for the nation—not as problem makers or threats to national security, as they were once viewed by the state during the Cold War era. In this regard, the entrepreneurs are doing “ethnopolitics” to gain public recognition via this high cultural and economic capital field, in similar vein to the collective ethnopolitics of the Iu Mien, which takes other forms (see Hayami 2006; Jonsson 2008; Walker 2001).

We further observe that this model of marketing symbolic value is not commonly seen among ethnic entrepreneurs, even among the Iu Mien silver craft entrepreneurs in Nan Province. Therefore, even though several ethnic groups in Thailand and beyond have exhibited a strong entrepreneurial spirit (Geng 2023; Ratanapruck 2008; Takaeng 2017; Trupp 2015), they neglect the opportunity to enhance their products’ value by engaging in unique cultural elements, and most importantly, they do not assert their ethnic identity and sense of belonging in Thailand. In contrast, the Iu Mien silver craft entrepreneurs of Doi Silver exemplify how cultural expression can be integrated into commerce. Thus, Doi Silver represents a significant case study in the context of evolving marketing trends within contemporary ethnic entrepreneurship. For future research, there is a need to investigate the perceptions of both supporters and customers, as well as their influence on decision-making regarding the support and purchase of silver crafts from Doi Silver.

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Endnotes

¹ This wording is translated from a phrase often said by entrepreneurs in Thai: “การสืบสานภูมิปัญญาเพื่อแผ่นดิน.” We translated the term แผ่นดิน (*phean din*) as “nation” because it has been used in contemporary Thai discourse to signify a sense of nationhood rather than merely a geographical entity. For instance, the phrase referring to the king of Thailand as the “father of the land” (พ่อของแผ่นดิน) is an example of this shift. Another example is the term the “good person of the land” (คนดีของแผ่นดิน), which generally refers to citizens of the nation.

² Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital refers not to the cultural attributes of a social group but rather to educational degrees, credentials, knowledge, and skills.

³ Sterling silver is commonly used in making high-quality silver products. Usually, it consists of 92.5% silver and 7.5% alloy, the global standard of sterling silver.

⁴ Engaging with members of the Thai monarchy via the silver craft field is also an interesting area where members of both parties are responsible for the construction of “products of loyalty.” However, this article investigates mainly the creation of symbolic value related to the Iu Mien entrepreneurs’ claim of their entrepreneurship as an effort to preserve this specific craft heritage for the nation.

⁵ This was in the same year as the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis. I did not hear well-established silver craft firms in Nan mention how their businesses were affected by this economic crisis. However, many former “small small entrepreneurs” said they decided to give up in this craft industry to engage in other economic activities because the price of silver sterling was higher than the prices of the finished silver craft products.

⁶ Authors’ translation. The original Thai lyrics can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X7DBnpGc2tU>.

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