

places that escape historical and other literature that scholars tend to rely on.

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||| Ko-lin Chin. *The Golden Triangle Inside Southeast Asia's Drug Trade*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009, xi + 280p. |||

Of all the larger ethnic groups in Burma, until very recently, the least well known has been the Wa, living in the northeast of Shan State where the border with China was only officially delineated in the 1960s. The Wa (a Mon-Khmer group speaking dozens of dialects in various small groups, some of whom do not often call themselves Wa), have long been considered the wildest people of the country. They are former headhunters who now command a large private army and reside in a region where opium poppy was openly grown until 2005. Since 1989, when the government and Wa leaders reached a ceasefire agreement, the area has been known as Special Region 2 for which non-Burmese (and Chinese without border passes) were severely restricted from visiting.

Ironically, however, these people have become the subject of several recent research reports, a considerable amount of which came from field work that is impossible in much of the rest of the country. Following an agreement between the United Nations International Drug Control Programme and the Myanmar Government in 1998, UNDCP (later UNODC)¹⁾ began working with opium growers in the Wa Region. For the next ten years, its work included agricultural development, infrastructure, health improvement, and related activities. The Project conducted surveys to collect the required information and thus provided unprecedented data on a remote area of the country. In addition, during the approximately ten years the project operated, a

few Western journalists were allowed in to observe the work and report on local conditions. One of these, Tom Kramer, wrote authoritatively detailed accounts on the region, the first to be widely published since Bertil Lintner traveled there covertly from 1985–87.

Amid this unprecedented opening of the area, a Burmese-born Chinese, Ko-lin Chin, Professor of Criminal Justice at Rutgers University, took it upon himself to make use of local contacts to study the Wa Region and the drug trade. Taking advantage of his ability to enter the Wa Region as a citizen of Burma but also, through his Chinese contacts, directly from China, he conducted research there starting in 2001. On his own, he trained young Wa surveyors to collect data on drug use, poppy cultivation, marketing, addiction and related issues. He followed up with new visits to the Wa Region in 2002, 2004, and 2006 and also interviewed law enforcement officials in Burma during this time. Probably no one else has collected data in such an organized way over so long a time on a restricted border region in the country.

Not long after carrying out the bulk of his research, a pivotal moment in Wa history occurred in 2005 when the Wa imposed a ban on opium poppy cultivation that it has since then, been enforced effectively. I was present in the Wa Region both prior to the ban and afterwards, for most of 2006 and 2007 as the manager of the UNODC Wa Project and in places where I had seen huge fields in 2003, I saw none after 2005. I was not the only one—no one on the staff of over 100 project workers ever mentioned seeing any poppy. This was confirmed by an independent UNODC survey mission as well as American and Chinese surveys, both field-level and by remote sensing. Wa leaders say they were 99 percent effective and that they had imprisoned and fined a small number of offenders. In early 2006 a DEA official told me, in what has proven to be an understatement, “at the very least, it [poppy cultivation] is way down.” Ko-lin Chin confirms the

1) United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.

ban's effectiveness when he quotes a resident of the Wa Region who had worked with him on the project as saying "The opium ban was a success" (p. 241). While there are Wa growing poppy outside the Wa Special Region, all the authorities agree that very little is cultivated within it. Nowhere else has the elimination of poppy cultivation been done so quickly and peacefully.

Ko-lin Chin describes the Wa Region as the center of the production and trade of heroin and methamphetamines for much more than a decade. By skillfully quoting drug users in the Wa Region as well as in China and Thailand, Ko-lin Chin makes clear the problems faced by users of heroin and methamphetamines, the use of which has continued despite the ban. Making good use of his unprecedented access as a researcher to Wa leaders and farmers alike, he provides an overview of the "Golden Triangle."²⁾ Taking the Wa as the center of drug production in Southeast Asia, he discusses the region's drug trade from the inside out in what is a major accomplishment.

Ko-lin Chin agrees with Thant Myint-U, who in his *River of Lost Footsteps* (2006), called for increased international engagement while saying that the effort to use sanctions to effect regime change had proven unsuccessful. With so little money invested legitimately in Burma,³⁾ persons earning money from drug production and marketing have assumed a dominant position. If outside investment does not materialize, Ko-lin Chin worries that the opium ban

might unravel causing many negative side effects.

Ko-lin Chin's work could have been a greater accomplishment if he had provided more information on the effects of the ban. Although he mentions that the ban caused many problems for the farmers since it eliminated their major source of cash, the book would have been more comprehensive had he mentioned how the farmers tried to compensate by clearing more land for swidden rice production and collected more forest products for sale to China. In so doing, the book fails to mention that these actions together, importantly, with massive commercial logging sanctioned by certain Wa leaders, severely damaged the region's natural environment.

A clue to this skewed coverage comes on page 1 in the book's second sentence, when he writes, "Within Burma, most of the opium is grown in the Wa area..." This inexplicable lapse interferes with the otherwise major contribution to understanding the Wa, Sino-Burmese relations, and the politics of drugs and crime in this remote border region. Similarly, Ko-lin Chin could have made better use of information gathered by the UNODC Wa Project as well as by investigating how it was addressing these same issues.

This compromises his excellent fieldwork and pioneering approach. Since he does not have data from in-depth investigations after 2005, his assessment of the impact of the ban lacks the authority found in his pre-2005 accounts. While some of the relevant issues have been dealt with by Tom Kramer (who took the picture on the cover of Ko-lin Chin's book) in *The United Wa Party: Narco-Army or Ethnic Nationalist Party?* (2007) and *Neither War nor Peace: The Future of the Cease-Fire Agreements in Burma* (2009), Kramer was only able to visit the region for a relatively brief period of time after 2005 and lacked the Chinese language ability to speak directly to the people and their leaders.

One of the issues that could have been better

2) The Golden Triangle is not an indigenous term, but came to be applied to the area accidentally after by U.S. Assistant Secretary of State, Marshall Green on 12 July 1971, referred to the area of Burma, Laos, and Thailand as "a golden triangle" where poppy was not grown, in an apparent effort to be cordial to China prior to the announcement shortly thereafter that President Nixon was going to visit that country.

3) And development work such as the UNODC Wa Project which closed prematurely due to a lack of funding.

addressed was the economic impact of drug use. Ko-lin Chin stresses the negative impact drug use has on individuals. However, he seems unaware of UNODC surveys in Laos and Burma that show that poppy growers earn less cash than non-growers in similar situations. While this was true for Burma as a whole, it was not quite so for the Wa where factors, such as poor soil, years of fighting, high disease rates, a lack of markets, and predatory Wa leaders, have undermined social stability and agricultural productivity. Nevertheless, the high level of addiction among the growers sapped their energy to obtain high agricultural yields. Besides the investment Ko-lin Chin says is necessary at the macro-level, work (such as the UNODC Wa Project carried out and is now being followed up by agencies such as the World Food Programme and the German INGO, Deutsche Welthungerhilfe) is essential at the local level to rehabilitate drug users so they will have the wherewithal to make a sustainable living.

Another overlooked issue is the rapid and recent growth of rubber cultivation. Since 2001, when Ko-lin Chin collected most of his data and rubber was hardly grown in the Wa Region, tens of thousands of hectares have been cleared for growing rubber. Wa leaders, who identified rubber cultivation as a viable alternative to poppy cultivation, can often make more money from

rubber sales to China than they formerly had earned from marketing opium.

However, there are negative consequences to growing rubber. These have led to the appropriation by opportunistic Wa leaders of land formerly used in shifting cultivation (thus helping subvert the agricultural cycle). This has led to monocropping rubber which reduces biodiversity, eliminating the availability of forest produce. Since farmers can no longer subsist on their remaining land they become hired hands on rubber plantations, thus being transformed from independent landholders to coolie laborers.

These oversights notwithstanding, Ko-lin Chin's book is an excellent introduction to the issues in this remote border area that are quite removed from many forces at play elsewhere in Burma. While much remains to be learned about the Wa and their culture, Ko-lin Chin has provided a solid introduction to knowing the Wa Region, the drug trade along the border, individual users there, and some of the personalities marketing drugs. In this way he illustrates the complexity of the situation in Burma. Yet, given the recent growth of tensions on the border, maybe Ko-lin Chin will be writing more on the region.

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