

***The Golden Triangle: Inside Southeast Asia's Drug Trade.*
By Ko-Lin Chin. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009. Softcover:
280pp.**

Myanmar's drug trade has been eclipsed in recent years by the surge of opium cultivation in Afghanistan. Even though Myanmar is now a distant second in global heroin production and exports, it has during the same period become the largest producer of methamphetamines in Asia. Ko-lin Chin's new book provides the most complete, balanced and insightful study of the Southeast Asian drug trade in twenty years, investigating the dramatic market shift from opium to methamphetamines in the "Golden Triangle", that confluence of the Mekong River where Myanmar, Laos, Thailand and Yunnan province all meet.

Chin, a renowned criminologist from Rutgers University, has previously written about Chinese street gangs in America and transnational human smuggling networks. Fluent in both Chinese and Burmese, he is uniquely experienced to conduct fieldwork in places like the former headhunter communities of the Wa hills of Myanmar, often out of bounds to Western researchers. The author does admit the local authorities gave him permission to conduct his research, "but did not completely trust me nor were they always truthful when I interviewed them" (p. 6).

The book starts with an excellent literature review of the Golden Triangle drug trade before moving into a sociological, anthropological, economic and political analysis of drug production in northern Myanmar, its export, use and impact on China in particular, and on Thailand and Myanmar to a lesser extent. Most of the chapters are thematic, looking specifically at the opium trade, heroin production and trafficking, methamphetamines, drug abuse, counter-narcotics legal efforts and a final analytical chapter on the business and politics of drugs.

The main focus of the book is on the Wa Special Region 2 of the Northern Shan State in Myanmar, controlled by the ethnic United Wa State Army (UWSA), former Communist Party of Burma guerillas, and now Asia's largest "narco-trafficking army" according to the US government which estimates their strength at more than 20,000 soldiers. The book also examines the illegal narcotics trade in Special Region 1, controlled by ethnic Kokang Chinese and a veritable hotbed of the heroin trade, but it undertakes little investigation of other areas.

The book's central thesis is that the main players in the drug trade operate both as "business entrepreneurs and as state agents" (p. 2), that production of narcotics can be seen as a criminal enterprise financing local state building and sustaining tenuous security relationships with armed groups and governments along crucial borderlands.

Chin interviews UWSA cadres and civilians at every level, from the political leadership, military commanders, mid-level drug dealers — both those with "official permission" and those racketeering off the books — plus drug enforcement agents from four countries, right down to the wretched opium farmers and desperate drug users in Myanmar, Thailand and China: a total of 418 interviews across the full spectrum of actors in the drug trade. Chin must be commended for granting his subjects the space to relate their experiences and views. There are sizeable quotes from an array of people which are revealing and depressing, and Chin skillfully weaves his narrative and analysis around this fascinating testimony.

The book addresses the important issue of the culpability of UWSA leaders in the drug trade. Some Myanmar scholars contend that the Wa people are being unfairly accused by the US government over their involvement in the opium trade, and argue the main culprits and profiteers from the trade are Chinese crime syndicates. This controversy intensified after the UWSA's opium cultivation ban of 2005 sparked a great deal of criticism over the human toll of rapid eradication policies and inadequate alternative livelihood projects in the Wa area.

Chin's conclusion is not just that the Wa leaders are deeply involved in narcotics production and trafficking, as the "muscle and the Chinese (gangsters) as the brains" (p. 35), but that "nearly everyone in the Wa region is involved in the drug trade. For people trying to survive in an impoverished area the drug trade has proved to be the most viable way to make a living ... it is also true that they are being unfairly targeted by the world community" (pp. 223–24). Chin reviews these vexed debates, and other contending perspectives on the drug trade, with commendable balance in the final chapter.

The author succinctly states the reason why a political solution to the drug trade has been so elusive: "the difference between a state builder and a drug kingpin, between benevolence and greed, and between public funds and personal wealth became all the more difficult to delineate" (p. 234). As the author writes about notorious drug dealer Wei Xuegang, "Wei is undoubtedly a good example of a

state builder who generates large sums of money from the drug trade while simultaneously contributing enormously to the development of the Wa State ... probably performed out of necessity rather than being of pure benevolence" (p. 154).

The author's conclusion is that the Southeast Asian drug trade can only be resolved in two ways. First, by political reconciliation in Myanmar, which must gradually provide alternatives to civilians in drug production zones and address low level conflict and long unaddressed political agendas by ethnic armed groups involved in the drug trade. Second, by seeing the Golden Triangle in its geopolitical context, as greater cooperation between China and the United States can assist Myanmar in eradicating production of narcotics and reducing demand in consumer states.

As Myanmar heads towards multi-party elections in 2010, large militias such as the UWSA are slated to become much smaller "border security forces", and technically surrender not just their arms but also abandon their involvement in illicit enterprises. The steadily rising opium and amphetamine-type stimulants production in Wa areas, and territory controlled by other groups, bodes ill for any conclusion to Myanmar's decades long drug trade misery.

Ko-lin Chin has written a seminal study of one of Southeast Asia's most destructive conflicts and deadliest exports, and this book deserves to be read by Asian scholars across a broad spectrum of disciplines. The author demonstrates how to conduct fieldwork in dangerous locations, never lose sight of the human factor, and also how to construct a balanced book of great use in the broader academic and policy worlds.