

***Narcotopia: In Search of the Asian Drug Cartel That Outwitted the CIA.* By Patrick Winn. London, UK: Icon Books, 2024. Hardcover: 365pp.**

During the five decades since Alfred McCoy published his groundbreaking work on the involvement of America's Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in Southeast Asia's drug industry (*The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia*, 1972), several publications and reports have examined the fluctuating dynamics of the region's narcotics trade, which is chiefly located in Burma/Myanmar. While most have focused on Shan State, which has long held the distinction of being the world's largest opium-producing area, relatively little attention has been paid to the Wa State, an autonomous zone in Myanmar's northern Shan State that claims the title of the world's second largest opium-producing region.

Patrick Winn's *Narcotopia* rectifies this oversight with an in-depth examination of the Wa State's role in the global narcotics trade. According to Winn, he wanted to "present a narrative that is more expansive and truthful, less monochromatic" than some other texts (p. ix) as well as to explore how the Wa State became a "Narcotopia", a region where drugs are a defining factor of commerce, politics and daily life. As a *narcoperiodista*—a journalist specializing in the drug trade—Winn depicts the Wa State's evolution from a "narco-tribe" to "narco-state" (pp. 1–3), characterized by a labyrinthine network of drug operations managed by a diverse cast of characters, including Wa, Wa-Chinese, Shan-Chinese, Chinese and Americans.

The central character is the United Wa State Army (UWSA), the military wing of the United Wa State Party, which rules the de facto independent state. As a dominant drug cartel *and* a revolutionary force, it holds a significant position in the international narcotics trade, making it a persistent challenge for Myanmar's central government and for China and the United States. Winn meticulously traces the history of the Wa State's rise to prominence in heroin production in the 1960s. Opium came before de-facto statehood (p. 18), and Winn emphasizes how the Wa people, known for their fierce independence streak and warrior culture, capitalized on opportunities created by the CIA, whose anti-communist campaign during the Cold War inadvertently bolstered the Wa State's drug production capabilities. Resilience and adaptation allowed the Wa

to transform their territory into one of the world's preeminent narco-states, a transformation that heightened both their power and vulnerability.

Another character *Narcotopia* introduces us to is Saw Lu, a pivotal asset for America's Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and CIA and a visionary Wa leader who, in the 1970s, tried to lead his people into a new era free from "the bondage of opium" (pp. 317–21). Committed to developing his homeland, Saw Lu reached out to the United States for support in improving the region's infrastructure, yet his mission, beautifully reconstructed in the book, shows the challenges of leadership in such a complex environment. At the centre is his struggle against his archrival, Wei Xuegang, a China-born kingpin and a UWSA commander who wanted to grow the narcotics trade. Their contest for influence reveals the lingering tensions over the role of narcotics in the Wa State, a region that appears unable to shake the dominion of "guns, drugs, and espionage" (p. 39).

Winn's storytelling excels by juxtaposing the bleak realities faced by the Wa people with their rich cultural heritage. They are "warrior-farmers" (p. 36) who balance ancestral traditions with the harsh necessities of survival in a conflict-ridden region. The book also examines the impact of the Cold War and the subsequent "War on Drugs" on the Wa, highlighting how their struggle has been manipulated by external powers, particularly the DEA and CIA, which oscillated between viewing the Wa as potential allies in the broader war for regional influence and as obstacles in their pursuit of drug kingpins. This duality, depicted through Winn's sharp, often humorous observations, enriches our understanding of the contradictions of the narcotics trade and the "War on Drugs".

Despite its strengths, *Narcotopia* has certain limitations, although this depends on the reader's wants. From a criminological perspective, its narrow focus on the Wa syndicates and the UWSA may be seen as a shortcoming. The focus on one organization overlooks other significant players and the larger trends within Southeast Asia's drug trade. While Winn presents the UWSA as the dominant player in the region's drug industry, his evidence does not fully substantiate this claim. Moreover, a more academic reader may find the narrative captivating but lacking in analytical rigour. Indeed, its journalistic approach, though engaging, means that socio-political and economic factors are not studied as deeply as some might like. Additionally, Winn's reliance on interviews with key figures, including former Wa

commanders and DEA informants, raises concerns about potential bias. These firsthand accounts provide valuable insights, but relying on information derived from figures within the drug trade and law enforcement may not always provide the most comprehensive or impartial perspectives.

Nevertheless, for readers seeking an informative and entertaining account of Myanmar's drug trade, *Narcotopia* is a first-rate account. Importantly, it reveals the human condition of the characters involved in the trade—their ambitions and betrayals and their desire for freedom. It is, frankly, an outstanding piece of investigative journalism that reveals a hidden world of complexity and contradiction, of conflict, survival, exploitation and intrigue.

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