Asian Criminology (2007) 2:85–109
DOI 10.1007/s11417-007-9038-8

Into the Thick of It: Methodological Issues in Studying the Drug Trade in the Golden Triangle

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Accepted: 12 October 2007 / Published online: 13 November 2007

Abstract This paper explores research methods used in a study about a sensitive topic in a sensitive area—the drug trade in the Golden Triangle. It covers issues such as entering and exiting the research site, obtaining approval from the people in power at the research site, recruiting and training research staff, developing and testing interview protocols, locating the subjects to be interviewed, and conducting the interviews. This article also discusses problems encountered in the process of conducting the study and the limitations of the research project. Finally, it relates what lessons have been learned that are of general interest to researchers studying similar topics under comparable conditions.

Keywords Golden triangle · The drug trade · Research methods · Entry · Research team · Research subjects

One of the world's major opium cultivation and heroin producing areas is the Golden Triangle, a mountainous region with an area of c. 388,500 square kilometres (150,000 square miles) located where the borders of Burma (or Myanmar), Laos, and Thailand meet (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2006). In the 1990s, it was estimated that Burma produced more than 50% of the world's raw opium and refined as much as 75% of the world's heroin (Southeast Asian Information Network 1998). During that time, Burma was also the largest source of heroin for the U.S. market, responsible for 80% of the heroin available in New York City (U.S. Senate 1992; Gelbard 1998). In the late 1990s, hundreds of millions of methamphetamine tablets were produced annually in northeastern Burma and smuggled into Thailand for the booming Thai market (Phongpaichit et al. 1998; Chouvy and Meissonnier 2004).

Support for this research was provided by Grant SES-0095929 from the National Science Foundation. The opinions are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the policies and views of the National Science Foundation.

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The major opium growing area in Burma is located in the biggest and most populated state, the Shan State, occupied by various ethnic armed groups (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2005). The Wa, one of the largest of these ethnic armed groups, is in control of an area referred to as the Wa State, or Myanmar Shan State No. 2 Special Region, that produced 60% of the opium in the Shan State in the late 1990s (Lintner 1998). According to the United Nations' 2005 Opium survey in Burma, "ninety four percent of total opium poppy cultivation in Myanmar took place in the Shan State and 40% of national cultivation (or 42% of Shan State cultivation) in the Wa Special Region" (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2005: p. 3).

Shan State provided a base for the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) before the party collapsed in 1989, when leaders of the Wa area and of Kokang (another armed group in the Shan State that is dominated by ethnic Chinese) announced their independence from the CPB. According to the Burmese government, the CPB, which had strong support from China and various non-Burman ethnic groups, was a major threat to its authority (Smith 1999). After the disintegration of the CPB, the Burmese government quickly arranged cease-fire agreements with various former CPB groups in the Shan State. The ethnic groups promised not to fight against the Burmese government and, in return, the Burmese authorities allowed these ethnic groups to keep their arms and to remain involved in the opium trade (Steinberg 2001). U.S. sources estimated that Burma's opium production rose from 1,250 metric tons in 1988 to 2,450 metric tons in 1989 and continued to increase thereafter, to 2,600 metric tons in 1997 (Lintner 1998). Opium production in Burma began to decline significantly after 1997 and, by 2003, it had reduced to 484 metric tons according to U.S. estimates and 810 metric tons according to the United Nations' opium survey (Jelsma 2005). A subsequent United Nations' opium survey indicated that opium production in Burma continued to decline, to 370 metric tons in 2004 and 312 metric tons in 2005 (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2005). Interventions by local authorities, the Burmese government, and the United Nations, years of unfavorable weather conditions, and the loss of U.S. and European markets, were all cited as reasons for the dramatic decline of opium production in Burma (Jelsma 2005). Even so, Burma is still ranked as the second largest producer of opium in the world, after Afghanistan (Labrousse 2005; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2006).

As opium and heroin production in the Golden Triangle began to take a downward turn in 1997, a year after the surrender of Khun Sa to the Burmese government, the explosive growth of the manufacturing of methamphetamine pills in the area in the late 1990s and early 2000s cast a dark shadow over the Golden Triangle and raised doubt in the West over whether the area would ever be able to transform itself into a drug-free zone. Methamphetamine pills produced in Burma began to saturate the Thai drug market in the late 1990s, and the use of the pills began to spread to students and young professionals from bus drivers and laborers (Chouvy and Meissonnier 2004). New towns were built along the Thai–Burma border, allegedly by drug money, to promote the drug trade. Tensions between the Burmese and Thai authorities situated along the border began to mount, and border clashes occurred when one side thought that the other side was intruding into its territory. The stability of the region was, without question, seriously undermined by the massive production of methamphetamine (Dupont 2001).

Burma: A Country in Turmoil

Burma is bordered on the north and northeast by China, on the east and southeast by Laos and Thailand, and on the west by Bangladesh and India. Its coastline runs along the

Andaman Sea to the south and the Bay of Bengal to the southwest. Its total area is6.77 million square kilometers (2.6 million square miles). The main ethnic groups are Burman, Kachin, Kayin (or Karen), Kayah, Chin, Mon, Rakhine and Shan (Ministry of Information 2002). Burman forms the largest ethnic group, constituting about 70% of the whole population. Almost 90% of the population is Buddhist (Min 2000). The capital of Burma was Rangoon (or Yangon) before the authorities moved the capital to Naypyidaw, an up-country site near the town of Pyinmana in Mandalay State, in November 2005.

Burma was colonized by the British in 1886, and it was briefly occupied by the Japanese during World War II (Thant 2001). After the war, the British administration was reestablished in Burma. In February 1947, Aung San, a charismatic Burman leader, concluded the Panglong Agreement with Shan, Kachin and Chin leaders which laid the foundation for the establishment of a union of equal states in Burma. Unfortunately, in July 1947, Aung San and several other prominent leaders were assassinated as they assembled for a meeting in Rangoon. After gaining independence from the British the following year, the country began to disintegrate as many ethnic groups became disillusioned with a central government that was dominated by the Burman (Callahan 2003).

Only three months after independence, the first battle between the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) and government forces broke out and fighting soon spread throughout central and upper Burma. In the meantime, many insurgencies sprang up around the country as various ethnic groups also began to fight the Rangoon government (Smith 1999). In 1949, soldiers from the armies of the defeated Kuomintang (KMT) entered Burma from China's Yunnan Province. The arrival of KMT armed groups proved to have a crucial, long-lasting effect on the region (Cowell 2005).

On 1 March 1962, Prime Minister U Nu was ousted after a coup masterminded by a group of army officers led by General Ne Win, a career soldier who played a key role in the anti-Japanese resistance movement during World War II, and later in the suppression of insurgent ethnic groups after independence (Thant 2006). After the coup, the Revolutionary Council was formed to implement many new policies to change Burma from a relatively liberal state into a uniquely Burmese socialist state. The Revolutionary Council formed the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) in 1962. Mixing European socialist policies with Chinese Communist strategies, the Revolutionary Council began to implement dramatic policies that would eventually drive out of Burma the Indians and the Chinese, the two ethnic groups that dominated the Burmese economy.

From the coup in 1962 to 1988, Burma was wracked by armed conflict between the Rangoon government and various militant ethnic groups. On several occasions, the rebel groups were poised to take over Rangoon. The Rangoon government also clashed frequently with students who participated in street protests against the government. In 1988, a brawl in a teashop in Rangoon turned into massive, antigovernment street demonstrations led by college students (Steinberg 2001). The Rangoon government reacted violently: many students were gunned down and thousands were arrested, and all universities, colleges and schools were closed. However, large-scale street demonstrations continued to spread to other cities and towns, and soon the entire country was shaken by daily demonstrations.

Ne Win resigned as BSPP chairman, and in September 1988, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) was formed to shore up the regime. On the other hand, the pro-democracy movement established the National League for Democracy (NLD) and Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of the late Aung San, was named as general secretary (Fink 2001). In March 1989, a mutiny broke out in the CPB in the Kokang area, and a month later, rebellious Wa troops captured its CPB's Bangkang headquarters, ending the 41-year-long Communist insurgency in Burma.

Under pressure from the international world community, the SLORC conducted a multiparty general election in 1990. The NLD won a landslide victory and captured about 60% of the vote, and 392 of the parliamentary seats, including all 59 seats in the Rangoon Division. The military-backed National Unity Party won only ten seats. However, not only did the SLORC refuse to turn over power to the NLD but it also begin to round up NLD leaders. The SLORC put Aung San Suu Kyi under house arrest in 1989. People in Burma were again deeply disappointed with their government and their hope for reform was completely crushed (Taylor 2001).

In November 1997, the SLORC renamed itself the State Peace and Development Council, presumably to project a softer image. However, things have remained the same in Myanmar since the military coup in 1962. Sixteen years after winning the general election, Aung San Suu Kyi, who was awarded the Noble Peace Prize in 1991, is still under house arrest and people in Myanmar are still living in fear and suffering silently under an extremely oppressive regime (Skidmore 2004, 2005). In September 2007, the monks in Burma launched a major protest against the military junta. Again, as in past protests, the demonstrators were violently quashed by riot police and soldiers: the Burmese authorities shot and killed a number of protestors in the streets, and beat or arrested hundreds of monks. The Burmese army (*tatmadaw*) is very much in control, and without many challenges internally from the various ethnic armed groups or externally from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) or from China, the *tatmadaw* is most likely to continue to cling to power and do poorly in terms of economic development or the protection of human rights (Selth 2001; Callahan 2003; Steinberg 2006; Thant 2006). An international study released in 2004 listed Burma as the fourth most corrupt country in the world (U Win Naing 2004).

Conducting Research in the Golden Triangle

Between 2001 and 2003, I conducted a study that explored the drug trade in Burma, specifically in the Wa area of northeastern Shan State, against the backdrop of the country's political and economic situation. Hundreds of face-to-face interviews with opium growers, drug users, drug dealers, Wa leaders, law enforcers, key informants, and villagers were conducted for this study.

The purpose of this article is to discuss some of the methods used in gathering field research about the drug trade in an extremely remote area controlled by an armed group considered by the U.S. government to be one of the largest drug trafficking organizations in the world. When conducting a study of this nature, a researcher must contend the difficult issue of entry and exit of the places to be studied, because he or she cannot go in and out of the research sites legally. The researcher must also deal with the question of how to establish a research team in an area where the majority of the population never attended school. Bringing in qualified people from the outside is not an option because of the difficulties in traveling to the area; in addition, people from the outside normally do not speak the Wa language. Finally, the researcher must overcome the problems of reaching opium farmers who live in remote villages, locating drug users who do not want to identify themselves as drug users, or finding rich and powerful drug merchants who are reluctant to admit that they are involved in the drug business. Thus, this paper will focus on three main issues: how to get into the site, how to organize a research team, and how to locate the subjects. Even though problems related to entry, staffing, and subjects have often been addressed in methodology textbooks and articles, most of these discussions revolved

around research conducted in ghetto areas of developed countries or were concerned with doing fieldwork within a particular criminal subculture or network located in an urban center. Gaining entry into the Golden Triangle and interviewing opium farmers and drug dealers there, however, posed a completely different set of methodological problems.

When I began to contemplate a study of the drug trade in Burma, I decided that I would use an integrated research method instead of relying on one particular approach. My plan was to use both traditional and extreme methods (Miller and Tewksbury 2001) to collect both quantitative and qualitative data from several groups of subjects, including opium growers, drug users, drug dealers, and leaders of armed groups. Extreme research methods, according to Miller and Tewksbury (2001: p. 1): "are those that involve either highly unusual or creative approaches to finding answers to difficult-to-answer questions. Researchers using extreme methods are thus usually thought of as individuals (or teams) that go about their work in ways that many other researchers would see as dangerous, innovative, and sometimes unethical." However, for safety reasons and because I do not speak the Wa language, I knew that I would not be able to conduct covert participant observation in the Golden Triangle with these groups of people. As described later in this paper, the "extreme" part of my approach was mainly about how I gained access to the research settings through clandestine means and not how I hid my identity to gain access to the subjects.

I will begin by discussing the process of getting in and out of the Wa Hills.

Getting In and Out of the Wa Area

Because I was born in Burma and my enduring research interest has always been on transnational crime, I had been thinking since the mid-1990s about conducting a study of the drug trade in the Golden Triangle. My ability to speak the Burmese language and my familiarity with Burmese culture gave me the confidence that I could carry out a study like this. Only later did I realize that cultural roots and language skills do not matter much in the Wa Hills; the area is very different from the rest of Burma, and in the hills people speak Chinese or Wa, not Burmese.

When I visited Taipei in 1999, a friend there who knew I was interested in the Golden Triangle told me that a former schoolmate of ours had married a man who claimed to be very close to leaders in the Wa area. Our former schoolmate's husband, Mr. Lee (not his real last name), was a Taiwan-born mainland Chinese who had traveled extensively in the Golden Triangle to explore business opportunities. In the process, he had become acquainted with leaders of various armed groups in the Shan State. In 1997, Mr. Lee established a nonprofit organization to help the Wa State investigate opium-substitution crops and legitimate business opportunities. I met my former schoolmate while I was in Taipei and she promised to help me get in touch with her husband. Not until I returned to the United States was I able to reach him by telephone. But he had good news; he said he would be happy to take me to the Wa area whenever I was ready to go.

First Entry: August 1998

In August 1998, I finally met Mr. Lee in Taipei. A few months earlier, Lee had already informed the Wa leaders of my intention to conduct a study in the Wa area and he had asked the leaders to send me a letter of invitation. When the letter arrived at my office at Rutgers,

I was thrilled. My plan was to talk to the Wa leaders to explore the feasibility and logistics of conducting a study in the area before applying for a research grant.

After meeting Mr. Lee in Taipei, I became more optimistic about doing the study because he seemed to be close to the Wa leaders and familiar with the Golden Triangle. He was also an easy-going and amusing companion. After a few days in Taipei, we flew to Bangkok and were met at the airport by a woman called Ms. Lin (not her real name), who was a Hui (Muslim) Chinese, born in northern Thailand and at that time living in Mae Sai. Divorced, with two children, she made money by trade: driving to Burma almost every day, mainly selling Thai products to Burmese buyers. She also operated a real estate business, selling new houses in Mae Sai to Burmese or Chinese buyers from Singapore and Hong Kong.

The three of us stayed in Bangkok for a few days, so that Ms. Lin could finish shopping for Bao Youxiang, the supreme leader of the Wa. Mr. Bao had just built a new house in Bangkang, and Ms. Lin was purchasing all kinds of home appliances, decorative items, and furniture for the man she called *dalaoban*, or big boss. After Ms. Lin completed her shopping, we flew to Chiang Rai, about an hour flight from Bangkok. Ms. Lin's sister came to meet us at the airport, and drove us to Mae Sai, which was about a 45-minute drive from Chiang Rai. Mr. Lee and I stayed in the Wan Kong (Palace) Hotel, which turned out to be surrounded by dozens of brothels with sex workers mostly from Burma or China. Mae Sai is a bustling border town located at the northern most part of Thailand, just across from the Burmese town of Tachilek. The two towns are separated by a tiny river that one can swim—in some parts, walk—across easily.

While I was in Mae Sai, Mr. Lee and Ms. Lin never told me when and how I would cross the border into Burma and I did not ask. All they said was, "Don't worry, we will find a way to take you over to Burma. You just have to be patient. When the time is right, we will make the move." After staying in Mae Sai for several days, one night Ms. Lin told us that we would be crossing the border the following day. Very early the next morning, she drove us to her father's house in Mae Sai where a pickup truck was parked in front. The rear of the pickup was stacked with all kinds of commodities on top of a mattress and a box spring. The mattress and the box spring seemed to be placed as a foundation for the items piled above. Ms. Lin pulled the rear door open, and I saw a stool placed underneath the box spring to form a sort of hollowed out space for the journey. Ms. Lin told Mr. Lee and me to climb into the rear of the truck. I was also told to leave my luggage, including my passport and money, with her.

I was taken aback. I knew that I could not cross the border with my U.S. passport, but I also had never thought of going into Burma hidden inside a pickup truck. While I was standing there not knowing what to do, Ms. Lin urged me to act quickly because the Thai customs officials she usually dealt with were expecting her to show up at the checkpoint. If those officials were not there, our truck could be searched. She also said it is important to separate me from my belongings, especially my travel documents and identification, so that if we were arrested, we would not have to tell the Burmese or Thai authorities that I was a U.S. citizen.

I hesitated for a few moments, then I climbed into the rear of the truck and hid under the box spring with Mr. Lee, and Ms. Lin closed the rear door. It was dark inside, but she had made sure that there were gaps along one side of the box spring and the rim of the truck for ventilation. Ms. Lin assured me that it would only take a few minutes to reach the Friendship Bridge that connects Mae Sai and Tachilek. She drove, and one of her housekeepers, a young woman from the Shan State, sat on the passenger side.

The truck was not searched at all by Thai customs. Ms. Lin had been driving back and forth across the bridge almost every day for several years and she knew the Thai officials

manning the checkpoint. However, we had to wait in line for our turn to enter Burma that seemed like an eternity. I began to ask myself whether this was worth it—putting myself in such a precarious situation for a research project that very likely was not feasible.

But, luckily, we easily passed through the checkpoint: we were in Burma. A few minutes later, the truck stopped and Ms. Lin opened the rear door and let us out. We were inside a huge compound occupied by the Hong Bang Company, a major Wa base in Tachilek. According to U.S. officials, the Hong Bang Company, though involved in a variety of legitimate businesses, is basically a front for Wa leaders to launder their drug money (U.S. District Court 2005). Inside the compound, I saw several relatively new BMWs and Mercedes-Benz and I wondered where the cars came from and where they were going. There were also quite a few young men, some of them in United Wa State Army (UWSA) uniforms, busily moving around the compound. Some were armed, with handguns or automatic rifles. Some carried stacks of cash. It was clear that "business," whatever it was, was exceptionally good at that time.

The three of us then met with the director of the Tachilek Office, the local term for the headquarters of the Hong Bang Company, and the UWSA, in Tachilek. The director had been expecting us and we talked for ten minutes. I could not help but notice a couple of M-16s behind his desk. Then he abruptly told us to go to another room because a high-ranking Burmese army officer had showed up unexpectedly. Twenty minutes later, the Burmese officer was gone and we were back in the director's office. Apparently, the officer wanted to give his daughter a top-of-the-line Sony video camera and asked the director to help him find one. The director told us the story in a mocking way.

Half an hour later, we were set to leave the compound for Bangkang, about 400 kilometers (250 miles) from Tachilek. Because I had been formally invited by the Wa government to visit their area, the leaders in Bangkang had made all the necessary arrangements for me, free of charge. First of all, they had obviously instructed Mr. Lee and Ms. Lin to bring me across the border into Myanmar. Second, they had asked the Tachilek Office to prepare a car, a driver, and two bodyguards to escort Mr. Lee and me to Bangkang. The car was a brand new Toyota 4×4 Runner, and the driver was a Muslim Chinese in his forties who was probably one of the most experienced drivers in the Wa Hills. A Wa officer and a soldier were dispatched to protect us, and I noticed that the office director handed the officer a large amount of money. I also noticed that two boxes of Johnny Walker whisky had been placed in our car trunk. I told Mr. Lee and the Wa officer that I did not drink, and they laughed and said the whisky was not for me. Only later did I realize the whisky and the money were there to please the Burmese officials manning the checkpoints along the route to Bangkang. The area between Tachilek and Hedao, a Wa town, was under the control of the Burmese.

Once we were outside of Tachilek, I was shocked to see the rough condition of the roads. It was towards the end of the monsoon season, and the roads were deep in mud after weeks of rain. The roads were also very narrow, and when a car or a truck in front of us got stuck in the mud—which happened often—the rest of us in line had to wait for hours for that vehicle to move. But the worst thing was that we were now in the mountains, and the roads edged along cliffs, overlooking valleys that were thousands of feet deep. There were no natural or artificial barriers to prevent a car from sliding off the road. The passenger seat in front was located on the cliff side, and when I looked out the car window, it seemed as though I was hanging in the sky. I prayed and prayed throughout the whole trip.

Because of rain and mud, our car moved very slowly most of the time. Often when the car was stuck, we all had to get out and give it a push. The road was so slippery that we had

a hard time staying upright. Pushing that car on that muddy road was like pushing an elephant.

Most of the areas between Tachelik and Hedao, a Wa town, are controlled by the Burmese government, and we had to go through several checkpoints operated by Burmese soldiers. However, because our car was equipped with an official Wa license plate and we were accompanied by a Wa army officer who was familiar with most of the officials on duty, Mr. Lee and I could stay in the car at the checkpoints. Our Wa officer and the soldier would get out, walk over to the Burmese officers and hand them a bottle or two of whisky and some cash. The Burmese would take a look at us from a distance, but never bothered to come over and ask us questions.

We arrived in to Kengtung, the capital of the Shan State, in the evening and decided to stay there overnight. Since the city was under the control of the Burmese authorities, we did not wander around. We went straight to a restaurant, ate, and then found a hotel and went to bed. The next morning, before we left the city, we also visited the Wa Office in Kengtung, to make sure everything was in order.

The road from Kengtung to Hedao was just as bad as the road from Tachilek to Kengtung. We also had to go through one of the largest checkpoints in the area—the checkpoint located in Miang Yang. Mr. Lee and I did go into the customs building because it was required, but we were not questioned by any Burmese authorities. The officials just had that curious look in their eyes; they knew we were foreigners.

We arrived in Hedao late in the evening. It rained all day and our car lurched along the muddy, cliffside roads before it once again got stuck in the mud. But we pushed on, and finally reached Hedao. We were all encouraged, because Hedao was a Wa town and the area from there to Bangkang was under the control of the Wa. Burmese officials could not enter without explicit approval from the Wa. From Tachilek to Hedao, I believe, we went through at least seven Burmese checkpoints, large and small.

We checked into a hotel in Hedao that was located near a casino; Lee and I walked around the casino after dinner, and the place seemed to be packed with gamblers from all walks of life. There were a few games there that I had never seen before.

We left for Bangkang the next morning and discovered that this road between Hedao and Bangkang was incredibly rough, much worse than the road from Tachilek to Hedao. We were now in the heart of the Wa Hills, where roads were in even poorer shape than roads in areas controlled by the Burmese. At one point, we had to wait for two hours while a pickup truck was dug out of the mud. Later, it took our SUV an hour to get up a steep, muddy road. It was another day of rain, but as the sky was growing dark, we were in a good mood because, after three long days, we knew we were nearing Bangkang. All of a sudden, we came upon a car that was parked right in the middle of the road and there was no way to get around it. The car was locked and its owner was nowhere to be found. Our driver, who knew the area well, said: “Don’t be nervous. I believe there must be a problem with the car and the driver is walking to the nearest village for help. He will be back soon.” We sat there in the open road in the pitch dark, and I had the feeling that we were all alone on the planet. We were hungry and there was an army of mosquitoes hovering around us. After waiting for more than four hours and thinking that we might have to spend the night in the middle of nowhere, all of a sudden, the owner of the car showed up. We asked him what was wrong with his car. He said: “Nothing.” It was just that he was hungry and had decided to stop his car right there and go look for food. Now that he had filled his stomach, he was ready to move on.

It was past midnight by the time our car rolled into Bangkang. After moving at a snail’s pace for about 400 kilometers (250 miles) in a mud-bowl for three days, our brand new

Toyota was pretty beat up by that time; the rear bumper and the two front lights had fallen off along the way and the car was making all kinds of noise. That night, Mr. Lee and I stayed in a hotel owned by Bao Youxiang—the Meixin Hotel, considered the best in town. At that time (August 1998), Bangkang was in the midst of a major construction boom. Aside from the Meixin Hotel, most of the buildings located on the two or three main roads in Bangkang were half-finished; the roads, unsurprisingly, were unpaved, muddy, and full of holes.

The next day, nine Wa leaders welcomed Mr. Lee and me by throwing a banquet at our hotel. Most of them were Wa or Chinese men in their fifties, all casually dressed. One thing that struck me was that some of them had a small pistol stuck in the front or back of their waistbands. It signified that they were high-ranking officials. At the dinner party, I explained to them in Chinese the purpose of my visit, the research aims of my study, and the research methods to be used. They were, naturally, curious to meet a professor from the United States and wondered why in the world I would go such trouble to do something that would not bring any "real benefit" (meaning money) to myself. Nonetheless, they asked me to write a brief proposal for them, so that they could have a meeting and discuss the merits of my research. I went back to my hotel and wrote a three-page proposal and gave it to them the next day.

The Wa leaders examined the proposal for three days, and then approved it. I have often been asked why would the Wa leaders be willing to allow a study of this nature, considering the fact that they are alleged to be heavily involved in the drug trade? There are several possible reasons:

1. Since the collapse of the CPB in 1989, the Wa have been eager to develop their own group identity and to obtain international recognition. The Wa leaders may see this study as an opportunity for them to express their views within the international community and to enhance further international contacts;
2. The Wa leaders are aware that in order to solve the opium problem in their area, they need international assistance. An objective study conducted by a U.S. scholar may help Western governments better understand their predicament and, as a result, be more willing to help;
3. The Wa leaders may not view themselves as "drug lords," "drug barons," or "criminals" because they see themselves simply as leaders of an impoverished area who only marginally benefit from the opium trade. As long as they do not personally export the heroin to the West, they believe that they are not responsible for the heroin problem in the West;
4. Because I was born in Burma and speak Burmese fluently, the Wa leaders might see me not as a hostile "outsider" but as a sympathetic "insider".

Even though I was able to leave the Wa area with a letter of approval from the Wa leaders, I was, I must admit, unsure about conducting the study (granted that I receive research funds) because I simply could not imagine myself taking a trip from Mae Sai to Bangkang a second time. I did bring up this issue at the meetings with the Wa leaders and they told me that, with the help of Mr. Lee, they would find another, more comfortable route to bring me into their territory. I had the sense that this more "comfortable route" meant via China.

After the Wa leaders learned of our problems navigating our way from Hedao to Bangkang in the Toyota 4×4 Runner, they decided that we should take a pickup (also a Toyota) from Bangkang to Hedao and then take the 4×4 Runner from Hedao to Tachilek. Someone would drive the Runner to Hedao empty. With the pickup, we were able to plow through the muddy roads a lot better than with the SUV, though we did have a time-

consuming flat tire on the way back. We spent one night in Mang Yiang instead of Hedao and then spent another night in Kengtung before we headed for Tachilek.

We spent the night in Tachilek and got ready for Mr. Lin to pick us up. Ms. Lin came alone in her Honda Accord and this time she told me to climb into her car's trunk and said that she had already removed the two speakers located behind the rear seats for ventilation. After what I had gone through over the past two weeks crossing the border and traveling in the Wa area, I had no qualms about riding in the trunk and I just climbed right in. Ms. Lin drove the car across the border and back to Mae Sai. Mr. Lee arrived in the hotel in Mae Sai in the afternoon and I asked him how he came back. He said: "Well, Ms. Lin came back to Tachilek with a group of visitors from Mae Sai after she dropped you off. She also had an extra travel document with her and that was for me. She just drove all of us from Tachilek to Mae Sai in a minivan."

Second Entry: February 2001

After I returned to the United States, it took me another two years to finally submit a proposal to the National Science Foundation (NSF) for funding. January 2001, the NSF notified me that they would fund my project.

After I told Mr. Lee of the grant, he informed the Wa leaders that I would be in the Wa area sometime in February 2001 to begin the study. This time, Mr. Lee asked me to fly to Kunming, the capital of China's Yunnan Province, and he said he would pick me up at the airport. After staying in Kunming for two days, we hired a taxi to take us to Simao. Because parts of the sections between Kunming and Simao were under repair, it took ten hours to drive to Simao. Originally, we planned to fly, but we changed the plan after learning the airport in Simao was closed for reconstruction. Flying will only take 45 minutes.

We checked into a hotel in Simao, a 10-million-yuan (about US$1.2 million) investment of several Wa leaders. There were not many guests in the hotel, and Mr. Lee told me the Wa leaders were losing money from this investment, but they would rather invest their money outside Burma because they distrusted the Burmese government.

The next day, Mr. Lee and I went to a photo shop to take black-and-white pictures because we needed them when we later applied for travel documents. In the afternoon, Mr. Wang (not his real name) and his friend showed up to take us to the Wa area. Mr. Wang, like Mr. Lee, was a Sichuanese. He was in his early thirties, was born in Lancang, where his wife and daughter currently live, and for past two years he had been spending most of his time doing business in the Wa area with his father-in-law. Because of his good relationship with Chinese authorities in the area, Mr. Wang was asked by the Wa leaders to transport Mr. Lee and me across the border.

Lancang is about 175 kilometers west of Simao and it took us about three hours by car; it was past midnight when we arrived. Mr. Lee and I checked into a hotel and Mr. Wang and his friend went home. The next day, we went to the police department in Lancang to obtain travel documents for us to cross the border. Later I made this field note:

> We went to the police department of Langcang to get an exit permit for foreigners. Mr. Lee and Mr. Wang walked up to the second floor of the police building with my photo and a document issued to Taiwanese passport holders by the Chinese government. A clerk asked Mr. Lee and Mr. Wang where the other applicant was and Mr. Lee said that he was not feeling well and was waiting outside in the car. The clerk said that was fine. It only took

about ten minutes to get our permits. Both of us used fake names and dates of birth. We both were supposed to be businessmen from Burma on our way back home.

It took about an hour to drive to Menglian and another hour to Menga. On that occasion I wrote the following field note:

> When we arrived in the Menga checkpoint, it was about four in the afternoon. An armed police officer (*wujin*) walked over to our car and asked who we were and where we were going. Mr. Lee said we were employees of a large Wa company and we were on our way back to Burma after conducting business in China. The officer has no idea what Mr. Lee was saying because Lee was speaking Yunnanese and the officer did not understand Yunnanese. Only later when Mr. Lee repeated his words in Mandarin did the officer understand. He asked us how long we had been in China and Mr. Lee said one month. The officer looked inside the car but did not search our luggage. The whole process took only about ten minutes and we were allowed to go. After crossing a short, narrow bridge, we were in Bangkang.

According to Takano (2002: p. xiv), a Japanese writer who visited the Wa area in 1995, that was exactly how he entered the Wa, crossing the Menga checkpoint with a travel permit that indicated that he was a "Burmese with completed business on the Chinese side returning to Burma." It seemed to me that if a person looked Chinese, like Takano did, or like a member of a hill tribe, he or she could cross the border relatively easily.

We checked into the Meixin Hotel. The street in front of the hotel was paved and all the buildings located on that street, considered to be the main street of Bangkang, were by then completed. There were a number of restaurants, massage parlors, and medical clinics, plus the Kang Xiang Jewelry Store, a supermarket, and a bowling facility. Just around the corner, there was a new casino teeming with hundreds of gamblers. Despite the paved roads and new buildings, Bangkang seemed to be somewhat quieter than when I was there two-and-a-half years ago. There were fewer people on the streets, and many stores appeared to have recently closed.

When I left Bangkang three months later, Mr. Wang drove me to China through the Menga checkpoint without any problems, and I do not think he had to obtain any kind of travel documents for me. We went to Lancang first, spent a night there, and continued by car to Jinghong, the capital of the Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture which is located near the Mengla area or the No. 4 Special Region. After a couple of days in Jinghong, I flew to Kunming alone and Mr. Wang went back to Bangkang. All the interview questionnaires, including all the documents I collected in the Wa area, which amounted to thousands of pages, were scanned and installed in my computer notebook.

Organizing the Research Team

Three weeks after my arrival in Bangkang in mid-February 2001, I had recruited five females and one male to be my interviewers. All of them were ethnic Wa in their late teens or early twenties who had been born in the Wa area and spoke both Wa and Mandarin fluently. All of them had received the equivalent of only junior high school education because there was no senior high school in the Wa area; it was almost impossible to find a Wa speaker with a high school or a college degree living in Bangkang. To hire these young people who were working for the Wa government at the time of my recruitment, I had to have the approval of their work units, not an easy task by any means because their

employers were reluctant to "loan" them to me for a few months without receiving any benefit in return. However, after an order from Wa headquarters, the work units eventually complied.

Even so, I was not very happy with the prospect of having a group of interviewers who were so young and with such limited education. When I visited the Wa area the first time in 1998, I met the principal of Zhenxing Middle School, the highest level of education available in Bangkang, and he offered to let teachers from his school conduct interviews for me if I returned to carry out the study. But after giving it some thought, I realized there would be a number of problems to be resolved—especially the problem of how the Chinese-speaking teachers will communicate with the Wa-speaking opium farmers—so I turned down the offer.

Before I hired the young Wa, I also considered the idea of hiring Wa officials to conduct interviews for me. A Wa leader had suggested that he could order a number of party officials from various villages to come to Bangkang to receive training from me and then return to their villages to conduct the interviews. I was hesitant to follow his advice, however, because I wondered how many opium farmers would be willing to tell local authorities the truth about their opium harvest, since those same local authorities collect an opium tax from farmers based on officially-projected opium harvest.

To ease my concerns about the young interviewers-to-be, I decided to do two things: one, to train the interviewers and, two, to test whether they could do the job. A project manager and a research assistant (both of them were hired locally) helped me with the training. The project manager had received a master's degree from a university in China and had been working in Bangkang for a couple of years as a computer store manager. The research assistant was also originally from China, and had been doing business in the Wa State for four years. I spent two weeks training the interviewers and I spoke to them in Chinese. In the first week, I taught them issues related to sociology, criminology, drug use, drug business, theory, and research methods. In the second week, I focused on how to conduct a face-to-face interview with a standardized questionnaire, how to build rapport with the subject, how to fill out the questionnaire, and the confidentiality and ethics of research. After that, I asked my interviewers to conduct mock interviews with one another.

Before conducting the actual interviews, I also made sure my young interviewers were capable of thoroughly explaining to their subjects the purposes and sponsorship of the research, that their questions were phrased in an appropriately anonymous and non-threatening manner, and that they clearly understood the procedures for confidentiality.

Finding the Research Subjects

I stayed in Bangkang throughout the first phase of data collection (between February and May of 2001). Although Bangkang was a small town, it had electricity and other items needed for research purposes (such as telephones, fax machines, copy machines, etc.). During my stay in Bangkang, I spent a substantial amount of time traveling to the remote hills to interview subjects. The highest leader of the Wa government, Bao Youxiang, wrote a letter of introduction for me to present to local authorities outside Bangkang.

During the second phase of data collection (December 2001 and January 2002), I traveled to the border area of Myanmar and Thailand to interview key informants who were either drug dealers, family members of arrested drug dealers, or people who were familiar with the drug trade. I also visited Rangoon and Bangkok to interview law enforcement authorities there.

The third phase of data collection involved an ethnographic study conducted in Kunma, a town located in Mengmao County of Northern Wa. Three Wa women lived and worked in Kunma for more than three months between August and December of 2002 conducting fieldwork. Kunma was the area where Bao Youxiang migrated to from China about 40 years ago, and where he has spent most of his time.

The fourth phase of data collection was conducted in July and August 2003. I visited Taipei to interview drug enforcement authorities there, spent two weeks in Yunnan Province to interview local police officers, and also traveled to Kokang to interview key informants there. I also visited the Wa area for the third time in April 2005. While there, I interviewed a number of Wa leaders about the upcoming opium ban and the February 2005 indictment of eight Wa leaders by a U.S. federal court in New York.

In order to examine the political economy of the drug trade within the social context of the Wa, this study collected data from seven groups of subjects located in Myanmar, Thailand, and China. The collection of data from each group is described in details as follows.

Opium Farmers

One of the main purposes of this study is to examine, from the opium farmers' point of view, their pattern or routine of opium cultivation as well as the process of opium buying and selling. Through in-depth, face-to-face interviews with opium farmers in their homes, this study attempted to collect firsthand, reliable information on all aspects of opium growing, opium selling, and the problems and prospects of the Wa government's plan to prohibit opium cultivation by the year 2005. No such survey had ever been conducted in the Wa State, except that journalists and freelance writers from the West (Cox 1996; Marshall 2002), Japan (Takano 2002), Taiwan (Yang 1987), and China (Xian2000; Rentang 2000; Shilung and Shuya 2003; Yunfeng 2004; Ling 2004; Shu 2005) had all recently visited the area for brief periods of time and had written books about their adventures. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime conducted the first opium poppy survey in the Shan State of Myanmar in 2002, one year after I conducted my survey there (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2002).

In the following pages, I will explain step-by-step how the survey was carried out.

Developing and Testing the Questionnaire

I developed the questionnaire for opium growers and I went through each and every question with my interviewers and asked for their suggestions. Because of their familiarity with the growing, buying, and selling of opium, my interviewers, though still very young, were able to give me many good suggestions. The following domains of information were gathered from opium growers through interviews using both open-ended and closed-ended questions:

- *Background characteristics*: Sex, age, marital status, number of children, place of birth, tribe or ethnicity, village, education, and occupation (if any).
- *History of opium cultivation*: Length of involvement in opium cultivation, parents'/ grandparents' involvement in opium growing, and changes in the patterns of opium growing.
- *Reasons for opium growing*: Main reason(s), the role of historical and cultural factors, the incentives needed to stop the subject from growing opium, and whether involvement in opium cultivation is voluntary or involuntary.

- *Social processes of opium cultivation*: How much land and how many people are involved, who they are and how often a year they sow, harvest, process, and market opium.
- *Selling*: How the product is sold, in what form, who the buyers are, the subjects' perception of the buyers, where the product is sold, how payment is made, and problems associated with opium transactions.
- *Use*: The extent of opium use, family history of opium use, amount of product for self-use (if any).
- *Income and work*: Income from opium, income from other crops, income from other sources, and working patterns.
- *Lifestyle*: Routine activities, leisure activities, and standard of living.
- *Perception of involvement in opium cultivation*: How the subjects see it, how their families see it, the social definition of opium cultivation, use, buying, and selling.

A few days after the questionnaire was drafted, we all went to a nearby village to test the questionnaire and also to find out whether my interviewers were ready to conduct the interviews. We conducted six interviews with opium growers in the village. My interviewers also asked the subjects their opinions of the questionnaire. I made a few changes to the protocol after the pilot study. I was also pleased with the skill of my interviewers.

Sampling and Interviewing

After the questionnaire was finalized, we used the one and only copying store in Bangkang to make 300 copies of the questionnaire. The questionnaire was 14 pages long with 61 closed- and open-ended questions. I also rented a sport utility vehicle from a Wa leader so that the research team would able to travel to the poppy fields without having to seek assistance from the Wa government. With the approval and help of the Wa government, every member of the research team was issued a photo ID to be worn around the neck whenever he or she went out to conduct interviews. No one in the Wa area walked around wearing a photo ID, and no doubt these IDs were instrumental in bestowing upon my interviewers an aura of officialdom in a place where government officials were feared and respected.

Since developing a random sampling based on the population of Wa opium growers was not feasible, I decided to develop a quasi-quota sample. I thought that it was important to include both male and female, both Wa and non-Wa subjects (mainly Chinese and Lahu), villages both north and south of Bangkang, and villages near and far away from major towns in the Wa area. The research team met and discussed how we were going to find and interview 300 opium growers in Northern Wa. After a few meetings, the following decisions were made:

- We would take three field trips to conduct the interviews. The first trip would involve the route from Bangkang to Nandeng in the north, and we would interview opium growers living in the villages along the way. We decided to focus on the following major areas: Nankangwu, Tenge, Yingpan, Aicheng, Shaopa, Longtan, Kunma, Xindifang, and Nandeng. The second trip would involve the route from Bangkang to the west, and we would focus only on opium farmers in Wengao because there were not many towns in the western part of Bangkang. The third route would involve the route from Bangkang to Hedao in the south, and we would interview subjects in Mengping, Mengbo, and Hedao.

- We would pay our subjects cash (50 yuan, about US$6) instead of dry food, cooking wine, or spice. During my first few weeks in the Wa, I learned that opium farmers in remote villages preferred cooking items over cash because eating was always their number one concern and there were no places in the villages to buy these items even if a person had cash. However, after we brought these bulky and heavy items with us when we went to a nearby village to test our questionnaire, we decided that it was simply not feasible for us to do so because (1) there was simply not enough space in our SUV to store these items, and (2) my female interviewers were not enthusiastic about carrying these relatively heavy items while walking up and down the steep mud roads in the hills.

The three field trips we took were indescribably laborious and challenging. To begin with, our midsize SUV was crammed with eight adults, their personal belongings, and food. There were no clean places to stay on the trips. After we conducted interviews in the remote villages, we usually drove to a nearby town where there were either hotels or guest houses. Even when we lodged at a hotel or a guest house in a small town, it was quite a challenge, since these hotels did not have private bathrooms in their rooms. Also, we were often very hungry, because there were no restaurants in the hills. We brought boxes of instant noodles with us, but finding boiling water was always a major problem, and even when we did find a place to eat in a small town, the sanitation was far from ideal. Some of the villages we visited had no roads and consequently we had to park our car near the roadside and walk an hour or so to reach our subjects. Finally, traveling in a car for two weeks on the winding, muddy roads of northern Wa was risky and sometimes dangerous. Car accidents occurred all the time along those poorly constructed and unregulated roads, and there was ever-present dirt, mud, and disease. All of us got sick on these field trips. After three arduous trips, we had completed 300 interviews with opium farmers in Northern Wa.

Drug Users

In order to understand the causes, patterns, and impact of drug use, we then collected firsthand information from drug users in the Wa Hills. We decided that we would include in our sample opium, heroin, and methamphetamine users because they were the three primary groups of drug abusers in the Wa area.

We prepared a standardized questionnaire for drug users. Similar to the development of the questionnaire for opium growers, I drafted the questionnaire first and then discussed each and every question with members of my research team at a group meeting. I then revised the questionnaire based on their feedback and suggestions.

Interviews with 52 drug users concentrated on the routine, history, and impact of drug use. Drug users were asked: (1) their history of drug use, (2) history of drug use in their families, (3) the social process of drug use, (4) how drug use affects them and their families, (5) how they support their habit, and (6) society's reaction to their drug use.

As it turned out, the majority of our subjects were either young methamphetamine smokers or older opium smokers who were mostly either Wa or Chinese. Only two heroin users were included in the sample—there were not many heroin users in the Wa area. We used the snowball sampling method in the recruitment of drug users. We did not encounter many problems in recruiting opium smokers because opium smoking in the Wa Hills is legal for older people, but not tolerated in the young, presumably to minimize the impact of

opium use on the Wa society. Many opium smokers we interviewed were relatives, neighbors, or friends of my interviewers. Recruiting methamphetamine users was somewhat challenging because it was illegal to use methamphetamine tablets in the Wa area. Luckily, all my interviewers were young and outgoing and had many friends in Bangkang. The majority of the methamphetamine smokers we interviewed were, like the opium users, my interviewers' friends, neighbors, or relatives. Most interviews were conducted either in the hotel rooms where the research team was staying or the subjects' homes without the presence of a third party. Like the opium farmers, we paid drug users 50 yuan each for their participation in the study.

Drug Producers/Traders

The opium trade in the Wa area is legal and it is a common activity. On market days (every five days), farmers from villages go to nearby towns to sell their raw opium in the open.

To collect information on the social organization of the drug trade in the Wa State, the research team interviewed 35 subjects who were involved in the drug business. These subjects could be categorized into low-level opium buyers or collectors, mid-level opium traders, high-level opium traders/ heroin producers, methamphetamine dealers, and methamphetamine producers. These subjects were not paid, but we gave them a gift (i.e., a basket of fruit) to show our appreciation for their participation.

The interviews with drug traders were conducted after we finished interviewing drug users. By that time, after more than ten weeks, most people in the Wa Hills, especially in Bangkang, had become aware of the research team and the research project. I drafted the questionnaire for drug dealers and went through all the questions with my research team; I listened to my interviewers' suggestions and revised the questionnaire based on their comments. Then I trained my interviewers once again before sending them out into the field. In the training sessions, I focused mainly on safety issues, making sure interviewers knew how to protect themselves in the field. My instructions were relatively simple:

- First recruit those whom you know well and then move on to those with whom you are less familiar.
- If they are reluctant to participate, do not push them.
- No deception should be used under any circumstances in recruiting a subject. Tell a potential subject exactly who you are and what you are trying to do.
- Try to interview as many low-level opium dealers as possible because opium buying and selling of raw opium is legal in the Wa area and low-level dealers often operate openly in the marketplaces. They are less likely to refuse to participate and less likely to pose a threat to interviewers.
- Do not ask or record any information that might inadvertently expose the identity of a subject.

At the very beginning, my research team had a difficult time recruiting drug dealers to be interviewed. They approached opium traders they had known for many years and yet these opium traders were reluctant to be interviewed, probably because they were aware of the opium ban to go into effect in about four years. Recruiting methamphetamine producers or dealers was even more difficult because it was a crime to produce or deal methamphetamine in the Wa area. We spent about three weeks recruiting the 35 subjects for the drug dealer sample. Eventually, most of the drug dealers we interviewed were neighbors or relatives of my interviewers. Even so, my interviewers were repeatedly reminded by the subjects,

especially those in the methamphetamine business, that if for some reason the information they provided to us ever leaked out, they were "dead meat."

We interviewed almost the same number of male and female drug producers/dealers. The majority of them were Wa people who were married and in their late thirties; almost 80% of them did not have a regular job. Moreover, our subjects were mostly opium traders (71%). We included in our sample only nine methamphetamine producers or dealers and one heroin producer.

Wa Leaders

According to Robert Gelbard (1998: p. 188), a former assistant secretary of the U.S. State Department: "The United Wa State Army has continued its business without interruption and is now the leading trafficking organization in Burma". For this reason, I interviewed 21 Wa leaders to explore the role of the Wa army in the drug trade.

Many of these interviews took place in Bangkang; most of the Wa leaders were either ethnic Wa or Chinese, and almost all of them spoke fluent Chinese, so 19 interviews were conducted in Chinese, and only two were in Burmese. I conducted the interviews informally, guided by a set of open-ended questions. These subjects were not paid for their participation in the study. The main purpose of the interviews was to collect information on: (1) the history of the Wa people and the development of the current Wa government; (2) the structure, function, political ideology, and social policy of the Wa government; (3) the role of the Wa leaders in overseeing opium cultivation and heroin production in their territory; (4) their reaction to the accusation that they are drug lords; (5) their expectations in terms of the international community's role in dealing with the opium problem in their area; and (6) their plans for the economic and political future of the area.

Arranging interviews with Wa leaders was not as smooth as I thought it would be. Not many Wa leaders were enthusiastic about being interviewed, and it was not clear who in the Wa government could help me set up interviews. Besides, most Wa leaders (or their family members) were involved in the drug trade, and it was not difficult to understand that these leaders were not going to be very candid in their discussions about the drug trade in their territory.

Key Informants

In December 2001, I traveled to the Thai–Burma border area and visited several villages and towns that were major transit points for drugs out of Myanmar. I visited Tachilek, Mae Sai, Chiang Rai, Huai Krai, Fang, and Chiang Mai. With the help of Ms. Lin, the woman who helped me to get into Burma, I was able to locate and informally interview 12 former drug dealers and family members of imprisoned drug dealers. The interviews with these key informants focused on drug trafficking in the Thai–Burma border area, the individual and group characteristics of those who were involved in the drug business, the connection between official corruption and the drug trade, and the roles of ethnic Chinese, remnants of the KMT, and various hill peoples in the drug business.

No deception was used while interviewing subjects in the border area. Subjects were told in advance the identity of the researcher and the purpose and nature of the interview. Even though subjects were paid a small amount of money, their participation in this study was mainly due to Mr. Lin's presence and her assurance that their identities would never be

exposed. The fact that most subjects were close friends or relatives of Ms. Lin was also a key factor in their willingness to be candid with me about their involvement in the drug trade.

Law Enforcement Authorities

Opium cultivation and heroin production in the Wa Hills and other areas of Burma have had serious ramifications for the international community; the impact has been felt by the countries that share a common border with Burma, the transit countries the drugs go through, and the countries with a strong demand for heroin or for methamphetamine tablets. I interviewed 20 law enforcement authorities to find out how they were coping with the drug trade and the obstacles they encounter in dealing with it.

Interviews with law enforcement authorities were conducted in four Asian cities: Rangoon (Burma), Bangkok (Thailand), Taipei (Taiwan), and Kunming (China). In Rangoon, I interviewed a mid-level officer with military intelligence, a police colonel with the Central Committee for Drug Abuse Control, Ministry of Home affairs, a U.S. drug enforcement official, and the director and deputy director of Progress of Border Areas and National Race Development. While in Rangoon, I also had the chance to interview a drug user and two former drug lords, including Luo Xinghan, the person who was instrumental in the cease-fire agreement between Rangoon and Kokang.

In Bangkok, I interviewed Chartchai Suthiklom, the Deputy-Secretary General of the Office of the Narcotics Control Board, and his colleagues, and Yuthabool Dissamarn, the Deputy-Secretary General of Anti-Money Laundering Office, and his colleagues. When I visited Taiwan, I interviewed three police officers with the Criminal Investigation Bureau (CIB) of the National Police Administration and four drug enforcers with the Drug Enforcement Center, Investigation Bureau, Ministry of Justice. In China's Yunnan Province, I interviewed two drug experts from the academic community, three law enforcement officers, and a prison warden.

Wa Villagers

Ethnographic fieldwork was conducted in a Wa village to collect in-depth and rich ethnographic data about how ordinary people in the Wa area lived and worked. Because I was unable to take a leave of absence from my school during the semesters, and because summer is not a good time to do fieldwork in the Wa Hills due to heavy rain and muddy roads, I decided to hire two former interviewers and a newly recruited worker to conduct the fieldwork for me.

Before the fieldwork was conducted, I flew to Jinghong, a Chinese city near the Sino–Myanmar border area, to meet and train the three fieldworkers. I spent four days explaining to them the purpose of the fieldwork, how to conduct fieldwork, how to write field notes and maintain a field dairy, what to do and what to focus on in the field, etc. We also talked about where to conduct fieldwork. After lengthy discussions, we selected a village in Kunma mainly because (1) one of the fieldworkers had a large number of relatives living in the village and she was relatively familiar with the area, and (2) the village was located in a district where the chairman of the Wa State, Bao Youxiang, lived. We thought that with the approval and support of the chairman, our ethnographic work in the area would be much easier to carry out.

The three workers arrived in Kunma Town on 19 August 2002 and stayed in a guest house there until 13 December 2002, and during this four-month period spent most of their time in a nearby village and interacted with as many people as possible. They went to work in the poppy fields with the villagers, participated in a variety of social and cultural activities, and informally talked to people in their homes, in the marketplaces, and poppy fields. Aside from such topics as opium growing and selling, my fieldworkers asked villagers about what it was like to grow up in the Wa Hills, how they met their spouses, how they managed their daily lives, their health and illnesses, their joys and pains, and their economic and living conditions. The fieldworkers interacted with hundreds of people in this four-month period and recorded lengthy conversations with 60 people in the village. Conducting ethnographic work in the Wa area was hard work, as indicated by the following notes made by a researcher after she had accompanied a farmer in an opium field:

> Today, I went to a poppy field of the village leader to help him plow the ground. I arrived at his house in the morning around nine, had breakfast and we left around nine-thirty. When the village head told me we would be going to the poppy field that was closest to his home, I thought it would not be far, but we walked and walked for an hour and a half to get there. He and his family members walked so fast that I could barely keep up with them. After we got to the field, we rested for ten minutes and then we started to plow the field. Around two o'clock the village head asked me to prepare a pot of Wa porridge for lunch. Eating lunch in the poppy fields is a Wa custom. They don't want to work with their stomach empty, afraid that it might make them too weak to work. That's why every family will carry some rice and a pot with them when they go to work in the poppy fields. When the porridge was ready, I asked them to come over to eat. The village head took one look at my porridge and he grinned, because I did not know how to cook porridge at all. The porridge was too watery; it was like soup rather than porridge because I had put in too much water. But the village head said it was not a big deal, he and his family somehow managed to eat all the porridge. After lunch, we took a break for ten minutes and then continued to plow the earth. We worked until six before we went home. It was even harder to walk back to the village; on our way back we were walking uphill this time, and it took about two hours to get home. It was all hard work, working in the field or walking back and forth between the village and the poppy field.

Because the ethnographic data was collected in an unobtrusive way and not restricted by a questionnaire or an interview guide, I find the data to be extremely interesting, rich, and reliable, and it gave me a very good look at everyday life in a remote Wa village. Things that these people were highly unlikely to discuss with strangers or the authorities were frankly revealed to my interviewers. Very often, people in Kunma approached the fieldworkers and volunteered to participate in the study.

In sum, a total of 500 interviews were conducted for this study; subjects included 300 opium growers, 52 drug users, 35 drug producers/dealers, 21 Wa leaders and officials, 20 law enforcement authorities in Asia, 12 key informants (former drug dealers, and family members of imprisoned drug traffickers), and 60 villagers.

Problems Encountered in Conducting this Research

I felt very fortunate to be able to collect so much valuable data in the Wa State within such a short period of time. I was also extremely relieved that no one on the research team was

seriously sick or harmed during the data-collection period, considering how easy it was to get ill or hurt while traveling in the Wa Hills. Even so, I encountered problems while conducting this research and I was often frustrated and irritated when things I took for granted in the United States were not available in the Wa State.

In an area where few people had regular incomes, most everyone was looking for an opportunity to make money. As a result, it was not easy for anybody, not to mention an outsider like me, to get things done without paying for them. But even after paying, there was no guarantee that the looked-for service would be provided and there was no court to settle any dispute. I did not receive paid-for service a few times but, luckily, those financial losses were relatively minor. I was also fortunate to have had a group of dedicated workers who never made any unreasonable demands throughout the data-collection period.

I did not sleep well on our field trips even though I was usually extremely tired by the time we arrived at our hotel or guest house. These were often ramshackle places, and I was easily awakened by all kinds of noises that are common in the countryside—the clucking of the hens, the ringing of the cows' bells and worst of all, the screaming of the pigs who were about to be slaughtered. Often, I found myself getting up four or five o'clock in the morning and pacing in my room while it was still dark outside.

Car accidents were very common in the Wa hills. Once when we were on a narrow road and about to enter a town, our car was hit by a car on its way out. We learned later that the driver of the car was the son of the town's mayor. We were on the cliff side of the narrow road, and I took a deep breath after I realized that our car could have veered off the road and down into the deep valley. I was grateful that no one was hurt, but then I began to worry that it might cost me a fortune to fix the car in such a remote area where parts are scarce and extremely expensive. Luckily, the repair bill was not as devastating as I had feared it would be.

Many of the "roads" we drove on had been cheaply built in the late 1990s by contractors and workers from China; since the Wa authorities usually did not maintain the roads, many of them were in ruins after a couple of years. While traveling by car through the lushly green and remote Wa Hills could be exciting and quite beautiful, it could also be highly unpleasant and extremely risky.

Finally, most interviews were conducted under rather difficult or awkward conditions. My field notes recorded one occasion as follows:

> After we arrived in a town one morning, we decided to visit the mayor without advanced notice. We walked to the mayor's house and saw about 20 opium bricks (called *joi* in the Wa hills that weights about 1.6 kilograms) lying there in the front yard. The mayor's wife and four or five workers were mixing raw opium with poppy leaves and shaping the mixture into brick-size packages. Two male workers were in military uniform. Some one told me later that the mayor was a top opium dealer. The workers weren't surprised or alarmed by our arrival; they just went on with their activities as we watched them. A few minutes later, the mayor walked out of his house; it was about ten-thirty and apparently he had been sleeping. We handed him the letter from Bao Youxiang endorsing our research. He then immediately telephoned his Chinese secretary to come over to his house to work as the interpreter because, the mayor, a Wa, was not fluent in Chinese. All of us sat down at the courtyard, and while we sat there and talked about the opium trade, the mayor's wife and her workers were busy mixing and packaging the raw opium. The air was filled with the rotting smell of opium.

In the final analysis, the support of the Wa leaders was critical to the successful completion of this research project. During my stay in the Wa area, the Wa leaders kept

their promise to me and never interfered in my activities in any way. Moreover, they gave me complete freedom in the recruitment of research assistants and interviewers, the selection of research subjects and sites, and the development of interview questionnaires. All my requests for assistance were responded to promptly and helpfully by the Wa leaders. Their level of cooperation far exceeded my expectations.

I did not encounter much difficulty securing approval from our school's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Prior to this study, I had conducted interviews with victims of gang extortion, as well as interviews with gang members, illegal immigrants, and human smugglers, and had done so under circumstances where it was virtually impossible to ask these subjects to sign anything using their real names. In this study, as in past studies, the IRB was kind enough to allow me to use an informed consent statement instead of an informed consent slip that would have to be signed by the interviewee. This meant that the interviewers were only required to read the informed consent statement to their subjects. Subjects would not be asked to sign any forms. How I was to arrive in the Wa area was not mentioned in my application, nor was it asked by members of the IRB.

Limitations of the Study

Conducting a study of this magnitude on a sensitive topic in a difficult terrain like the Wa Hills was a major challenge. Even though we conducted 500 formal and informal interviews with people from diverse backgrounds and locations, findings from this study should be considered exploratory and should be interpreted with caution because of the inherent limitations in the use of personal contacts as well as in the snowball sampling technique we used. For example, we interviewed a small number of opium farmers in a village in Nangdeng Special District across the border from China. We knew that this particular village, occupied by mostly Chinese, was not representative of the entire district because the region was occupied by many other ethnic groups, each with its own pattern of opium cultivation. Opium yields could differ dramatically from village to village.

The second limitation of this study was that the research team did not visit Southern Wa or interview anyone from the area. Because Southern Wa was not known to be a major opium producing area, we did not think it had much bearing on our research into opium cultivation in the Wa State. However, our research on the production and use of methamphetamine was also confined to the Northern Wa, and Southern Wa was reported in the Thai media to be a center of methamphetamine production and trafficking. During the course of this study, a few skirmishes broke out in the Thai–Burma border areas, with the Burmese and the Wa on one side and the Thai and the SSA (Shan State Army) on the other side, and, as a result, the border was closed a few times. The Shan, also known as Dai, are considered part of Burma, even though they share the same language and cultural heritage with the Thai and they have always been closer to the Thai than to the Burmese or the Wa. Under the circumstances, it was almost impossible for me to obtain approval from the Wa leaders to travel to Southern Wa.

The third limitation of this study was the lack of rapport and trust between the researcher and his subjects, especially the Wa leaders and the drug traders. Even though the Wa leaders had allowed me virtually total freedom to conduct this study in their territory, I would be lying if I said that I thought they completely trusted me or that they were always truthful when I interviewed them. I think that most Wa leaders were skeptical of who I was and what I was doing there. It was only natural for them not to reveal too much about the drug trade in their area. Drug dealers and traffickers are, by definition, suspicious people, and

they are not going to trust a person like me. However, the fact that my interviewers were, in most cases, the relatives or friends of the drug dealers and traffickers we interviewed gave me the confidence that the data was relatively reliable and valid. Wa leaders also became more cooperative after they noticed that I worked hard every day; my busy schedule and lack of involvement in the many activities available (drinking, drugs, gambling) convinced the Wa leaders that I was serious about my research project. As suggested by Berk and Adams (2001), working hard and working during weekends could be one of the best ways for a researcher to establish rapport with deviant groups. People who trusted me the most were my research assistants and interviewers, even though they, too, at first wondered what my real motives were. It was only after they learned to conduct the interviews, actively participated in the arduous process of conducting the interviews in the remote Wa Hills, then cleaned, coded, and entered the data, did they come to believe that I was a legitimate researcher.

While I was collecting data in the Wa area, I thought about conducting complete participant observation, just to reduce the impact of the limitations mentioned above and to give me a better understanding of the phenomenon I was studying. Some researchers have actively participated in the very activities they were studying (Humphreys 1975; Ronai and Ellis 1989; Hopper and Moore 1990; Jankowski 1991), even though these activities were abnormal or illegal. There were many occasions when I could have used drugs, and I knew that if I did it would bring me closer to my subjects. However, I was alarmed by the fact that Takano (2002), the Japanese writer, had become addicted to opium after living in the Wa area for just a few months, and I was well aware that many drug traders in the Wa area were addicted to the very drug they were selling. As a result, I was unwilling to try any of the drugs that were easily accessible in the Wa area.

I did, however, seriously explore the possibility of becoming an opium trader myself so that I could get involved in what is known as covert participant observation (Miller 2001)- "research in which the researcher hides his or her presence or purpose for interacting with group" (Hagan 1993: p. 234). I had been in the Wa Hills for several weeks, and after interviewing a number of low-level opium traders and learning that they sold the opium they collected from the markets to mid-level traders, I was eager to find out how low-level and mid-level traders interacted and conducted business. I then met with the Wa leaders and told them that I wanted to get involved in buying and selling opium in order to better understand the trade. Because it was completely legal for anyone, regardless of age, to buy and sell opium in the Wa area, the Wa leaders told me I should go ahead and do it. I was thinking that I would invest about US$2,000 as start up money and would just buy and sell of a small amount of opium. My plan was to hire someone to buy opium from farmers in the markets, then arrange to pack the opium into *joi* (or viss), and sell the bricks to mid-level traders in Bangkang. With the help of one of my interviewers, who had once been a small-time opium trader, we approached two women who were longtime low-level opium traders to see whether they would work for me. This time I did not tell the women who I was or what my real motive was.

The two women were excited after hearing that I was interested in the opium business, but they said I had to come up with 300,000 yuan (about US$36,000) as start up money because they would prefer to buy and sell around 100 *joi* per deal; the market price for a *joi* of opium at that time was 3,000 yuan. At the very least, I would have had to invest 150,000 yuan (about US$18,000) so that they could handle about 50 *joi* per transaction. The two also suggested that it would be significantly more profitable if we, after buying 100 *joi* of opium, found someone to convert the opium into heroin for us. Because the start up money they were talking was out of my reach and they were not interested in buying and selling a few *joi* for me, I quickly gave up the idea of becoming an opium trader.

Conclusion

According to Reuter (1994: p. 91), there are only a handful of original, empirical works on organized crime. His findings, published 12 years ago, remain pertinent:

> ... this phenomenon [organized crime] has not attracted much scholarly attention. It would be difficult to identify as many as half a dozen books that report major research findings, or even that many significant articles. This probably reflects the extreme difficulty of obtaining accesses to relevant official records, which inevitably involves more sensitive private information than is needed for most criminological research. Field research also faces substantially more serious obstacles than it does for other forms of criminal activity.

Studying the drug trade in the Golden Triangle is in many ways similar to studying organized crime and, as a result, not many researchers have ever attempted to collect primary data there, or in other drug-producing areas in the world such as Afghanistan and Colombia. The assorted problems of getting in and out of the research sites, obtaining consent from leaders of the armed groups, establishing a research team in the field, traveling to remote villages where the subjects live, and conducting the interviews with hill peoples or drug lords, can all be very challenging. In the process, a researcher must be able to adapt to situations where he or she can make observations and collect information without resorting to deception. In this paper, I have tried to give some idea how this can be accomplished. My experience in the Golden Triangle suggests that conducting a study of a sensitive topic in a remote area is not impossible if a researcher is equipped with a generous research grant, possesses the necessary language skills, is willing to spend time in the field and endure the inevitable hardships, and is not easily frustrated by the many problems that can occur in an underdeveloped area occupied by an unfamiliar population. One of the things I learned from conducting this project is that when a researcher is working in an area like the Golden Triangle, he or she should not take anything for granted, but must utilize whatever resources are available to achieve the research goals.

In my opinion, the methodology I used was neither "extreme" (Miller and Tewksbury (2001) nor "ethnography on the edge" (Ferrell and Hamm 1998). To be extreme, one needs to become involved in covert participant observation, and I did not. Moreover, I would not suggest that anyone use covert participant observation anywhere in the Golden Triangle. It is too risky. The only thing extreme about my method was that I twice secretly crossed the border into Myanmar from a neighboring country. My approach was not "ethnography on the edge" because the major components of my research were not even ethnography; they were rather conventional research methods of interviewing a large number of different groups of subjects with different standardized questionnaires. I would like to call my approach "improvised methodology," mainly because I had to improvise tactics and adjust plans constantly in order to overcome the many hurdles along the way. Being Chinese also proved to be helpful because most people I met in the Wa area spoke Chinese and thought highly of the Chinese.

I take comfort in the fact that I did not deceive my subjects when I recruited and interviewed them. More importantly, I did not put others unknowingly or unnecessarily at risk. I am not sure whether I was justified in entering and leaving Burma secretly, so that I could conduct my study without being monitored by the Burmese authorities. I leave it to my readers to make this judgment. When I began to contemplate a study of the drug trade in Burma, I did not give serious thought to asking the Burmese authorities for help in gaining access to research subjects and settings. There were many reasons for this. First of

all, I did not think the Burmese government would allow a Burma-born American professor to conduct such a study in their country, especially in the troublesome border areas. Then, even if Burmese officials supported such a study, they would, in all probability, not let me do it on my terms; they would perhaps have someone from the government accompany me and monitor my work. Knowing the mutual distrust that exists between people in the Wa or the Kokang and the national authorities, having a government official with me while conducting research would not be a plus.

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