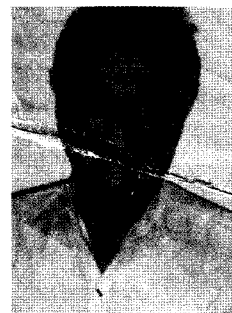


MERCHANTS OF MADNESS:

THE METHAMPHETAMINE EXPLOSION IN THE GOLDEN TRIANGLE



By
Reinhard Hohler

Two writers based in northern Thailand, Lintner, Bertil and Michael Black, trace the development of the drug trade in the famed Golden Triangle and the socio-political factors surrounding it.

This carefully compiled book focuses on the "criminal" activities in the Golden Triangle, an area that is a well-publicised tourist area in northern Thailand.

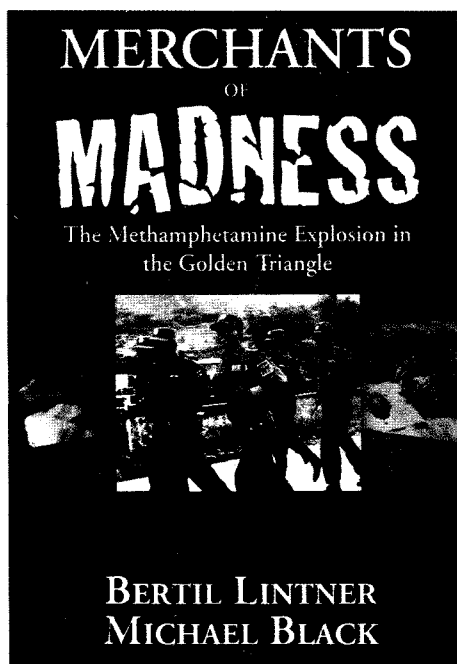
Geographically, the Golden Triangle is about 9 kilometers from the ancient town of Chiang Saen in Chiang Rai Province along a road paralleling the Mekong River. The area is also called Sop Ruak, where the Mekong meets the Ruak River and where the borders of Laos, Myanmar and Thailand come together. The Golden Triangle actually comprises a much wider area to become a "golden quadrangle" if the border areas of China's Yunnan Province are included.

Criminal activities in this area include the drug trade and the illegal production of opium, heroin and methamphetamine, a synthetic drug that is locally known as "yaba" or madness drug, which is now popular in Thailand and neighboring countries. "Yaba" is becoming a threat to Thai society by creating a dangerous new wave of drug addiction.

The lucrative drug trade in the Golden Triangle is the result of several decades of political upheaval in Myanmar, formerly called Burma. Bertil Lintner, a Swedish journalist based in Chiang Mai in northern Thailand, covered Burma from 1982 to 2004 for the now defunct Hong Kong weekly magazine, Far Eastern Economic Review. Together with co-author, Michael Black, who wrote for Jane's Intelligence Review and has lived in the area since 2002, Lintner explains who's who in the Golden Triangle and how the drug trade has become a multibillion dollar enterprise.

The authors mention that it is based on extensive research, including a collection of firsthand accounts from law enforcement and intelligence officials, as well as sources close to the drug traffickers themselves. They also reference the first pioneering study, done by American Alfred W. McCoy in his book, "The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia" published in 1972.

The book describes the shift from the production of heroin to methamphetamine tablets starting in the 1990s. Methamphet-



amine was first called "yama" or horse drug. Since 1996, yama has been called yaba as it was realized that the drug could drive people mad. The drug was sold in the slums of Bangkok and in the back-alleys of Chiang Mai. I still remember when samlor-drivers in Chiang Mai offered tablets for 120 baht (US\$3.65) each.

A record number of 95.9 million tablets were seized in 2002 and even teachers and their students were found selling yaba in all Thai provinces. In 2003, Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra launched his controversial war on drugs. Ironically, Thailand has successfully eradicated opium production, but has underestimated the methamphetamine explosion in the neighboring Shan State of Myanmar.

The book describes the mutiny of April 16-17, 1989, when the insurgent Communist Party of Burma (CPB) based in Panghsang imploded. Panghsang is a small town in the Wa Hills of Myanmar's Shan State near the Chinese border, where hill tribe people abound. After the heavily armed CPB collapsed, it subsequently split up into four ethnic rebel armies, whose commanders were involved in the drug trade.

Myanmar's military government, which has been fighting Mon, Karen, Karenni, and Pa-O ethnic groups since 1962 at the Thai border, had just crushed the popu-

lar uprising of 1988 and feared a possible alliance between the pro-democracy activists and the new rebel armies. "Alliances of convenience" were forged between the military government and the new rebel armies in the Wa Hills with active help by Lo Hsing-han (Kokang Chinese) and Khun Sa (Sino-Shan), who were established drug barons of the Golden Triangle. Most of these alliances still exist and the modern cities of Panghsang and Mong La in Eastern Shan State clearly indicate the huge profits from the drug trade.

The ambitious United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes activity in the Wa area is mentioned and accused by the authors of doing little to stem the flow of drugs from Shan State. There is the official view that some secretive Chinese syndicates from Hong Kong or Taiwan control the trade, but a recent study called "The Chinese Connection: Cross-Border Drug Trafficking between Myanmar and China" by Ko-lin Chin and Sheldon X. Zhang does not support this view. More likely, it is the United Wa State Army that all illegal activities come from, even after the ban on poppy cultivation in the Wa Hills was imposed in 2005.

The business of the drug trade is highlighted by the authors and the practice of investing drug money in casinos is described. One recent example is the Boten Golden City Complex at the Chinese-Laotian international border checkpoint in Luang Namtha province of northern Laos. Chinese authorities clamped down on the casinos of Lin Mingxian, leader of the National Democratic Alliance Army from Mong La, in early 2005. Tourists can still visit Mong La but will be disappointed to find many of the old casinos closed.

The book looks at the future following the Saffron Revolution at Yangon in September 2007 and the devastation of cyclone Nargis in the Irrawaddy Delta in May 2008 and the move of the Myanmar military government from Yangon to its new capital of Nay Pyi Taw.

The book is a must-read for understanding the ongoing ethnic and political conflicts in Myanmar and for reviewing the attempted solutions that have been shown to be counterproductive in the region.

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