



**As the principal source of the world's heroin glut, Burma's General Khun Sa makes an easy target in the war on drugs. But is he a master criminal or a freedom fighter? The truth about Khun Sa, and the Golden Triangle drug trade, rests in the history of a Shan royal family now exiled in Canada**



*by Patricia Elliott*

# A Life in the Drug Trade

**O**n an early spring evening members of a joint RCMP and Vancouver Police Department street crew gather in a downtown noodle shop. These are the cowboys of the war on drugs, white boys who recount their exploits with a combination of unsubtle racism and macho pride. Last night a fourteen-year-old grade-nine student from a local high school delivered one ounce of pure heroin to an undercover agent. Two adults were arrested in connection with the bust: the morning newspapers reported that police had cracked a heroin ring operated by an Asian gang called the Big Circle Boys. The minor involved was a Malaysian émigré, a "gook" to the

street crew. The epithet is as jarring as the fiery dollops of chili sauce that the officers, chopsticks in hand, deftly stir into their noodles.

In the past three years a river of cheap, high-quality Southeast Asian heroin has spilled into North American streets. It's known as China White, the Cadillac of heroin – and it constitutes a strange and deadly comeback for the drug. China White originates in the Golden Triangle – the region where the borders of Thailand, Laos, and Burma meet (although today the Triangle is essentially a province of Burma). The stuff that comes through Vancouver is on its way to the 200,000 or so addicts of New York City. From source to destination, though, China White cre-

ates a chain of addiction: in 1993, there were 30,000 to 35,000 heroin users in Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver. There were also deaths: in B.C., the Vancouver regional coroner, Larry Campbell, estimated the 1992 total at between 160 and 170, up from 124 in 1991. With a \$10- to \$13-billion-a-year drug-trafficking industry, Canada has become a major transshipment country.

The general reaction from law-enforcement agencies to the renaissance of heroin has been to initiate a new push in the war on drugs. Everyone is looking for a source, a bad guy to take out. In the office of the RCMP's Vancouver heroin unit, where photos of dealers are tacked to the wall with syringes, Constable Henry ►

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Chan vicariously follows the drug trail through a network of operatives and contacts. He's different from the street crew, not at all cocky, perhaps because he grew up in Hong Kong, where, he says, police weren't automatically the good guys. The Big Circle gang of the morning headlines, says Chan, is not really a gang at all. It's a loose association of people from the same home town, Guangzhou, who often do business together. When Chan talks about drugs, he talks about long histories and vast global networks and complicated politics. Beyond Canada's shores the network broadens into an unstructured web of favours and IOUs. How can you finger a ringleader?

This hasn't prevented Canadian and U.S. officials from trying. The person who has replaced Manuel Noriega on the most-wanted list is General Khun Sa, who operates a drug army in the hills of Bur-

ma. bours call her "Chao, the old Chinese lady"—not realizing that *chao* (pronounced "chow") is in fact a royal honorific among the Shan people of the Burmese hills. Her full name is Chaonang Hearn Hkam, the Mahadevi (or Chief Consort) of a ruling family of the Shan State's Yawngwe principality. The Mahadevi is out of politics now, she says, living quietly near her eldest son, Tiger (who has always kept thousands of miles between himself and Burma, preferring to dream of the restoration of democracy in his homeland). Another son, Tzang, now lives in Coquitlam, British Columbia; he was the political officer for the Mahadevi's own rebel army, her right-hand man through fourteen years of insurgency. To begin to understand the rise of General Khun Sa, you need only to travel to Edmonton and interview the Mahadevi: her family history mirrors the descent of legitimate political struggle into drug smuggling and the international drug war.

through the ranks of the British army, including a young Shan called Shwe Thaike. Although he was only a minor nephew of the ruling prince of Shan State's Yawngwe principality, in 1927 Shwe Thaike succeeded his uncle on the throne. He became a *chaofa*, a celestial ruler; the title was a throwback to the days of warrior kings but, in modern terms, the principalities were akin to local administrative districts, with the ruling princes acting as administrators.

In 1937, the Yawngwe Chaofa married Hearn Hkam, the youngest daughter of a prominent Shan nationalist from a neighbouring principality. Although she was the third in what eventually became a five-wife family, her husband installed her as his Mahadevi. Six times the Mahadevi entered a birthing hut in the palace gardens. Her first-born was Hsö Khan-pha, or "tiger." Next was Tzang, the "elephant," followed by a daughter, Ying Sita, sons Myee and Harn, and a

## While forging her rebel army, the Mahadevi tried to avoid the drug trade and hang on to her old-world values. But opium became first the means and then the aim of the war

ma. The U.S. Attorney General's office says Khun Sa is the major source for the global heroin trade, and in March, 1990, the Americans indicted him *in absentia* for trafficking.

Four months later, when I interviewed the general in his headquarters in the Burmese hills, he argued, "I'm not a devil. I don't have horns and hooves." What he has is an army that includes many of the rebel groups set up in opposition to the Burmese General Ne Win, whose coup in 1962 toppled a fledgling democracy. In the interests of his trade, which provides cash to feed his army, Khun Sa has maintained floating alliances with political enemies as well as friends. The Burmese government, the Thai border patrol, and the CIA have all found it in their interest to let him do his thing while at the same time decrying what he does. Khun Sa's is the typical balancing act that drug empires are built on. To demonize him will not, as Khun Sa himself points out, put a stop to the opium and heroin trade, and it would certainly obscure the path by which his tiny corner of the earth became the centre for ninety per cent of the Golden Triangle trade.

Oddly enough, many of the steps along that path rest in the memory of a woman who now lives in a high-rise senior citizen's apartment in Edmonton. Her neigh-

**A**lthough her speech has been slowed by a stroke, Chao Hearn Hkam's voice still carries an unusual degree of poise as she speaks of her years of power and exile. Her homeland lies deep in a horseshoe of forested hills encircling the Irrawaddy River delta region that is Burma proper. For more than 2,000 years this geographical fortress has acted as haven to Asia's dispossessed peoples and defeated armies. Shan State itself became home to more than twenty different ethnic groups.

Few invaders or explorers dared or cared to enter Burma's forbidding territories, protected by warrior kings and intractable jungle. But the world's imperial powers could not fail to see that Burma was a potential back door to China, and China—always China—drew them on. By the mid-eighteenth century French, Dutch, Portuguese, and British trading posts were established on the Bay of Bengal coast, which eventually led to gunboat diplomacy and, in 1853, the British annexation of the delta region called Lower Burma.

But between the delta and the Chinese empire stood the hill country and its fiercely independent ethnic groups. The British wooed the hill people with treaties that promised independence. They educated and promoted ethnic leaders

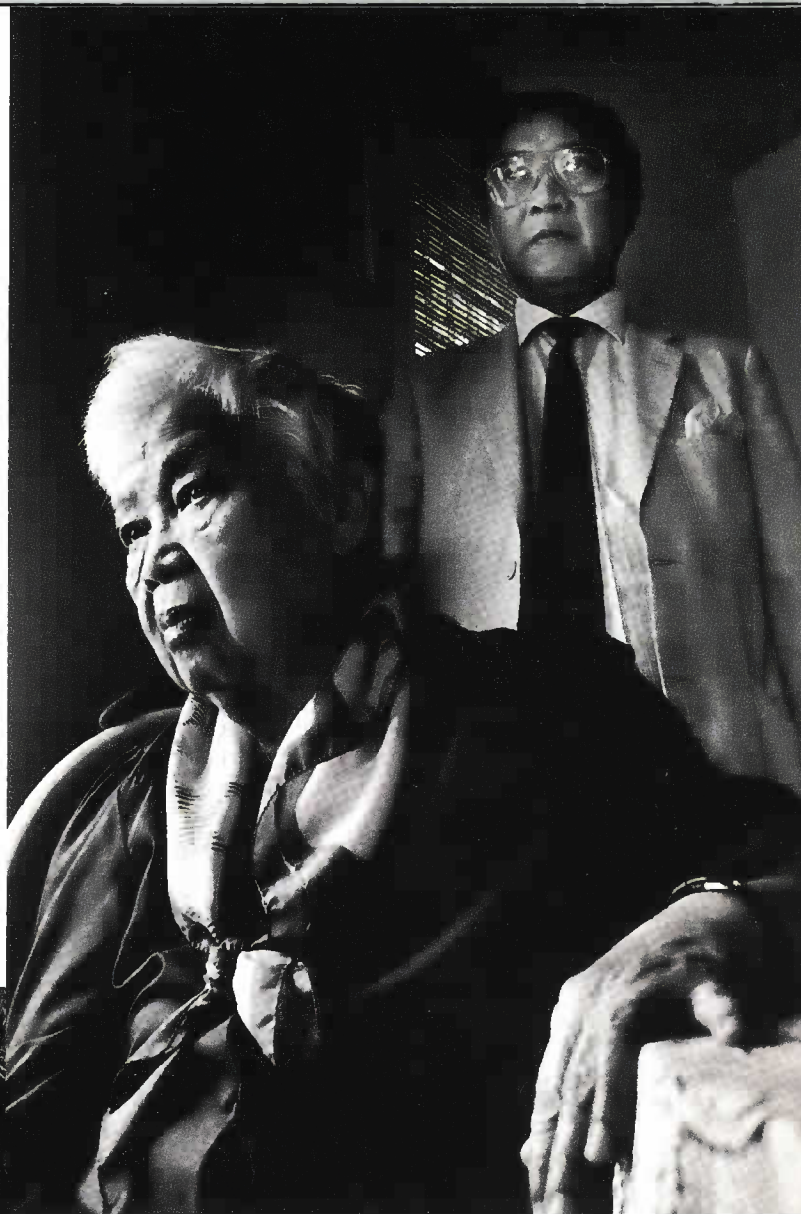
daughter, Leun. Little Myee, the "bear," became a family favourite. The Mahadevi remembers days of peace and plenty. Her husband proved himself to be an able administrator, and the hill people enjoyed a bounty of gold, silver, timber, gems, jade, tea, and opium. "If we had one murder a year, that's rare and rare," the Mahadevi recalls.

Then came the Second World War: the British were replaced by yet another imperial power seeking control of the doorway to China. Like the British, the Japanese promised autonomy for the hill states. But their soldiers were cruel and disrespectful. In these hard times the Mahadevi proved to be a tough leader in her own right. As the war was ending and the Japanese were being pushed out of Burma, the village headmen came to the palace seeking permission to do something about looting by Japanese soldiers. Her husband answered that, if the soldiers acted like robbers, they were robbers—what would you do if a robber came to your house? Asked if this was an order to kill, he said no, he was just stating "what is." The Mahadevi listened in the next room, getting increasingly impatient: "They kept asking for permission to kill the Japanese. I got so fed up I put my head in the door and said,



"Yes, kill them. Nobody ordered you to do it. I said it."

The Shan eventually offered their support to the British and once more gained the treasured promise of independence. But when war ended the British withdrew from the region forever, taking their promises with them. In 1947, Chao Shwe Thaike, an optimist, helped lead the Shan into a proposed Union of Burma, persuading fellow minority leaders to sign a treaty that would allow them to join the union with an open-ended recognition of the right to secede. The treaty was negotiated with Burma's dynamic new leaders, headed by Aung San, who was beloved as the country's father of independence. But Aung San and his most experienced followers were assassinated that year on orders of a political rival, leaving the emerging nation in the hands of U Nu, a minister in Aung San's government. U Nu saw Burma as a nation for the Burmese, not the hill peoples. Nonetheless, Chao Shwe Thaike's campaign — some say his co-option — to lead Shan State into the Union was rewarded. In 1948 Burma became a nation, with U



**The Mahadevi's son Tzang (left) was her right-hand man through fourteen years of insurgency. Now she lives quietly near her oldest son, Tiger (above, right), in an Edmonton high-rise. Her neighbours know her as "the old Chinese lady," not as a Shan queen**

Nu as prime minister and Shwe Thaike as president, a largely ceremonial position. The family moved from their hill palace to a large home in the delta city of Rangoon, the seat of government.

Chao Shwe Thaike completed his presidential term, then served as parliamentary speaker. Constrained by his duties for the Union, he encouraged the Mahadevi to champion Shan goals as an elected MP and restricted his own nationalistic efforts to translating Buddhist texts into Shan.

Amazingly, the fledgling democracy survived against all odds for twenty-four years, though U Nu was a rebel and a dreamer, not up to the complex task of governing. During a particularly bad patch he invited the army commander to take control. General Ne Win did, and then, a few months later, relinquished his power. But this small fray in the democratic fabric led to the unravelling of U Nu's government. ►



**The March, 1962, coup shattered Burmese democracy and the Mahadevi's family. Her husband (below) died in prison. Her son Myee (far right in the portrait) was killed by soldiers. In the circle of her children Tiger stands at her right and Tzang at her left**



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The story now passes to Chao Tzang Yawnghwe, the Mahadevi's second son. In his suburban home in Coquitlam, Tzang studies a photograph of his father. Theirs was a complex relationship. "In a princely household you treat your father the same way everyone treats a ruling prince. You have to stand up when he comes in, be very formal, ask permission to speak," Tzang explains. In his memoirs, published in 1987 in Singapore, Tzang recalls standing on the road with his schoolmates, waving a tiny flag while his father drove by. It was only when Tzang became a university student that son and father began to speak to one another "on a more human level."

In 1962 Tzang was a twenty-three-year-old teaching assistant at Rangoon University, just beginning to find his way through the tangled politics of a campus, and country, fervent with ethnic nationalism. Once he had even travelled into the jungle to join an insurgent army of Shan rebels, but his father sent a monk to persuade Tzang that the best way to transform Burma was to get a good education and to participate in the political process. Tzang returned to university. Years later, looking out his picture window at the spring rain, Tzang begins to speak with the crystal-sharp memory of a survivor.

In the pre-dawn darkness of March 2, soldiers of the Burma Army furtively cut a hole through a hedge surrounding the family home. Tzang, exhausted from a late night of marking exams, slept through the early commotion, but his seventeen-

year-old brother, Myee, heard a noise. Armed with a lance, he went out on the porch to investigate.

Tzang awoke to a barrage of gunfire. He is convinced the soldiers meant to wipe out the entire family, not knowing that the Mahadevi was in England with her eldest son, Tiger. In the end it was his father's Buddhist faith that saved all but one of them. Earlier in the day a print shop had delivered Shan-language editions of the Buddhist scripture, the *Tri-pitaka*, which were in a stack ten feet high and two feet wide in the hall. The family crawled behind the scriptures and waited for the gunfire to cease. After the barrage, soldiers led the celestial ruler of Yawnghwe away to prison.

The immediate casualty of the night was Myee, the favourite son. Tzang found the body of his younger brother lying on the ground by the porch. At first he could see only a small bullet wound in his ankle, and he wondered how this could kill him, why there was so much blood. Then he found the execution-style bullet hole at the back of Myee's head.

With the Mahadevi and her eldest son away and the Chaofa in jail, the powerful Shan family was now rudderless. Tzang himself chose the next course of action, of which he still speaks with some pride: "The first thing I did was lodge a charge of murder against the Burmese military at the police station. I think I'm the only person to lodge a charge of murder on Ne Win." (Certainly, there were many in Rangoon with cause for complaint – in

his single-minded grab for power, Ne Win rounded up all who had achieved prominence in the new Burma, from ruling princes to members of the business class.) Then he held a funeral service for his brother, returned to university, and awaited news of his father. Almost nine months later, on November 21, he learned that the Chaofa was dead, reportedly of heart failure.

The Mahadevi arrived from Great Britain in time for a cremation worthy of a ruling prince at the family seat in Yawnghwe. Tiger stayed behind in England to act as an anchor should the family need to escape Burma. Following the cremation of his father, Tzang began to find the advice delivered by the monk a little hollow. Who knew what the celestial ruler, always a teacher of moderation and due process, would have counselled now? Tzang finished his duties for the academic year and then again slipped into the jungle.

As Tzang ventured into the hills, General Ne Win began a frightening transformation, described evocatively by the Burmese historian Maung Htin Aung: "He had been a man of the world, gay, friendly, and fond of company, but overnight, to set an example to his officers and the people, he became an austere recluse, whose only form of recreation was to play a round of golf by himself on a lonely course." Ne Win eventually released ►



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most of his political prisoners, including U Nu, but the sons of independence now lived in fear. Mirroring his own personal withdrawal, Ne Win sealed off the country from the world and embarked on a reign of terror. He called it the Burmese Way to Socialism.

The encircling hills became Ne Win's walls, which he was content to let fall into political anarchy. At the height of the Cold War, the jungle was well on its way to becoming a nether world of drug running and international intrigue. The biggest players in the region were the remnants of China's nationalist army, the Guomindang (abbreviated to KMT from the old spelling, Kuomintang), who had sought refuge in the hill country after China's 1949 Communist revolution. Within the year the CIA was busy organizing the KMT for a planned military adventure against China.

In 1950 the KMT leadership managed to gather 4,000 of its fleeing stragglers at a base camp. Also recruited were 300 locals under the leadership of Olive Yang, a member of the ruling house of Kokang principality. Yang was a clever, pistol-packing woman whose word was law in Kokang, rugged country where opium was the only viable crop. With Yang backing the KMT, international support was stepped up. Mysterious airplanes dropped arms and listening equipment from the skies, and mysterious men in the guise of Western missionaries wandered the hills making connections and promoting alliances.

The small poppy farms in KMT territory had served the market for medicinals. With help from its international backers, the army soon discovered that the bright flowers could be transformed into money for guns. Although the KMT's invasion of China never materialized, it did conquer much of the black market. Opium production in the hill country expanded by almost 1,000 per cent, from less than forty tonnes a year after the Second World War to an estimated 300 to 400 tonnes in the year of Ne Win's coup. As well, the KMT introduced heroin refineries to the region.

On the other side of the secret war was the Communist Party of Burma, a formidable force armed by the new revolutionary government in China. Caught in between were hundreds of tiny rebel groups. Tzang eventually found his way to the base camp of the Shan State Independence Army—a group of university students camping in a collection of

plastic-sheeting lean-tos in the jungle. Tzang's homeland had become a hostile territory bristling with arms, where the only free market was the drug trade. How could Shan nationalists chart a course to survival?

It was the Mahadevi who came to the rescue. In 1963, fearing arrest, she fled Rangoon for Thailand with the children who were still at home, Ying Sita, Harn, and Leun. The exiled queen settled in the ancient walled city of Chiang Mai in northern Thailand. There she found ragtag groups of Shan students, each waving its own flag: "They had arms — they bought a few — but they didn't know what

to do. So we started organizing them." The Mahadevi managed to forge an alliance of groups, including the "army" Tzang belonged to, into a single force. She suggested the name — Shan State Army — and became chairperson of the central command. The SSA's goal was independence for the frontier state and its minorities.

In the battles and intrigues to follow, the Mahadevi always tried to hold on to her old-world values. People would ask why she was organizing only students, and she would reply: "These students are educated and they have good parents. I know their families." As opium became the currency and later the goal of war, ►

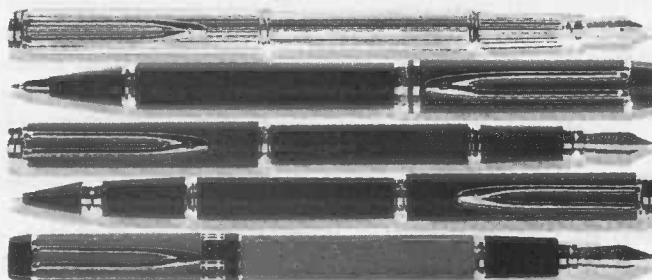
*The McCooeys*



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ALTHOUGH THE MCCOOEY BROTHERS AND THEIR SISTER  
HAVE ALWAYS BEEN REMINDED OF THEIR STRIKING SIMILARITIES,  
IT IS THEIR DIFFERENCES THEY HAVE ALWAYS INSISTED ON.

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## Drug Trade

hanging on to these values became increasingly difficult. Other leaders bought into the trade, and they pressured the Mahadevi to do the same. The first to come calling was Olive Yang's older brother, Jimmy, a former Burma MP and Rangoon playboy. (Jimmy had taken his sister Olive's place as Kokang leader because he disapproved of her lesbian liaison with a local actress.) Jimmy Yang said to the Mahadevi: "Ma'am, I hate to see you living in this poverty. So put forty thousand with me and trade in opium. At least you will gain another forty thousand every year."

"Jimmy, my horoscope said I can do anything, but no opium. If I do this I will lose," the Mahadevi argued. But finally, she said she might put in \$20,000 if she could have some time to think. Before she gave a final answer, Jimmy was betrayed by one of his commanders, Lo Hsin Han.

Enter Khun Sa, future heroin kingpin, a half-Chinese, half-Shan who also came looking for a donation from the Mahadevi. Like Jimmy Yang, Khun Sa commanded a local home guard. But he seemed to honour no alliances; sheer audacity had made him a rising star in the opium trade. Again the Mahadevi refused to play. It was a risk, and to this day she wonders how she got away with it.

ists would send in troops and there would be battles. Other times they would turn a blind eye to the taxation.

The forces of the Burmese government, ironically, did not present a problem; the requirements of the opium trade included a political balancing act that provided some measure of protection to the SSA. In the hill country Ne Win's government was represented by the local militias, the most powerful of which was Khun Sa's Loimaw home guard. Khun Sa enjoyed the protection of the Burma Army and reportedly shared his profits through kickbacks and "taxes." Although Khun Sa's official duty was to clear out insurgency, it was that very insurgency that fuelled the flow of money and arms into the Triangle. The two armies – one official and one insurgent – quickly developed an understanding: they would leave each other alone.

Tzang downplays the importance of opium revenues to his mother's army, but they were a factor. Alfred McCoy, one of the world's few Golden Triangle historians, records SSA shipments of 160 kilograms of raw opium in 1964, which grew to a peak of 1,600 kilograms in 1967. Revenues from these and other sources helped buy arms and uniforms from Thailand. Tzang remembers that about once every two years, when the army had col-

Lo Hsin Han for control of the drug routes," Tzang admits. Whatever the circumstances, the money and arms Khun Sa's army brought were a godsend.

By the early 1970s the Americans, while still providing support for the KMT, had reason to be embarrassed by all the intrigue and drug running in the Triangle. American soldiers were coming home from Vietnam addicted to drugs, and some of them told tales of being ordered to fly opium shipments out of the region. So the U.S. labelled Lo Hsin Han the Opium King of the Golden Triangle and pushed for an arrest. Under international pressure the Burmese withdrew support from the home guards, of which Lo was now *de facto* leader. The isolated Lo, now dubbed a drug trafficker, was ready to make a deal. In 1973 he came to the SSA with the currency of an alliance: five tons of morphine worth \$1-billion (U.S.). The SSA decided to use his dubious international reputation as a playing card.

What Lo, Tzang, and others from the SSA's political wing came up with was a deal unlike any other: they would jointly approach the U.S. Narcotics Bureau with an offer to end the opium trade in exchange for the political freedom of Shan State. The written text of the agreement stated in part: "The SSA and its allies will ensure that all opium controlled by their

## In the 1990s, when the war on drugs finally won out over the war on Communism, Khun Sa's status changed from respected cold warrior to despised drug trafficker

There was, of course, more to her refusal than simply heeding her horoscope. The Mahadevi had gained an agreement with the Thai army to operate with a free hand as long as her army, the SSA, stayed out of the cross-border trade. She let her soldiers in the jungle know that whatever they did with *their* opium was fine, as long as they didn't bring it over the border into Thailand.

**A**s his mother's chief political officer, Tzang was confronted with manoeuvring the SSA through a minefield of corruption and deal-making. Like other insurgent armies the SSA carved out a territory, west of the river Salween, and began levying a tax on trade and agriculture, including opium fields. Occasionally it would tax the opium merchants travelling through its territory, most of whom were connected with the Chinese nationalists. Sometimes the Chinese national-

lected enough "stuff" to trade, a convoy of 300 to 400 men would set out for the Thai border, where the international anti-Communist intelligence community was eager to lend a hand. "We would camp out on the Thai border and the intelligence people would contact us and with their tacit, unofficial approval we would be allowed to travel to Chiang Mai or Bangkok, wherever we wished to go."

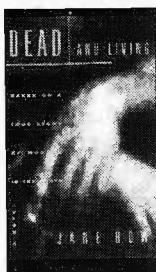
In 1969 there were rumours that the Burma Army was about to pull its support from Khun Sa in favour of Lo Hsin Han. Khun Sa immediately contacted the SSA with an offer to join forces. The SSA accepted, but for Khun Sa the deal came too late – the Burmese military managed to nab him and send him off to jail in Mandalay. His troops escaped, though, changed their name to the Shan United Army (SUA), and joined the nationalist cause. "Basically what his army was doing was making an alliance with us to fight

armies is burnt under international supervision.... Once the Shan State has a democratically elected government, those countries which will gain from an end of the opium trade will be expected to provide financial help for an economic and agricultural campaign to assist the people of Shan State to replace opium with other crops."

SSA envoys travelled to Bangkok for a meeting with U.S. representatives while Lo waited at an SSA base camp in Thailand. Yet, even as the Americans were studying the deal, Lo was enticed aboard a Thai military helicopter and arrested. His arrest was trumpeted in the Western press as a spectacular bust that would end the opium trade.

**A**s the politics of opium entangled the Shan nationalist movement, one member of the Mahadevi's family was still free and clear. Tiger, the eldest son, had never returned to (Continued on page 72)►

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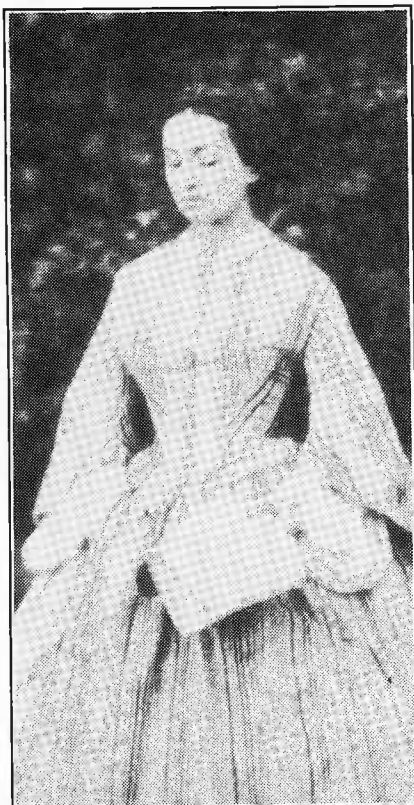


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## Drug Trade

(Continued from page 24) Burma. In 1964 he completed a degree in geology and political institutions at the University of Keele in Britain. With no hope of returning safely to his homeland after the coup, he took a job on the Ivory Coast with De Beers. When De Beers closed its mines there two years later he was given the choice of going to Australia or Canada. In 1966 Tiger found himself in Flin Flon.

Far removed from the turmoil of modern Burma, he stuck to his father's political philosophy of doing things "the legal way." From Canada, Tiger was also able to keep a clear focus on the person who had broken down political order in Burma and Shan State — General Ne Win, still the iron-handed ruler. In 1974 Tiger's sister, Ying Sita, who had settled in New York and got a job with *Time* magazine, gathered eyewitness accounts of rape and murder committed by the Burma Army. But when she tried to publish the atrocities neither *Time* nor the media at large were interested. Tiger tried to alert *The Globe and Mail* and other newspapers in Canada, but also failed: "It was like shouting in the wilderness as far as the Western press was concerned." In 1975 he moved to Edmonton and busied himself doing geological consulting work. More than a decade would pass before he spoke out again.

In the meantime, Tzang was losing his political movement to the lure of guns and power. Tzang's military commanders argued in favour of an alliance with the Communist Party of Burma (CPB), which was provided with steady shipments of coveted arms by the Chinese government. When the daring plan to buy independence with the opium crop failed, Tzang could no longer stop the drift towards the Communists. His mother had cut her ties in 1970; it took until 1977 for the faction that wanted to cut a deal with the CPB to oust Tzang.

The upstart Khun Sa, however, had more lives than a cat, and luck undimmed by his years in jail. In 1978 he made his way to Thailand to reclaim his troops. One of the people he approached for support was Tzang, now living in Thailand, twice an exile. Tzang met with Khun Sa at his base camp in Thailand; this was the first and last time the two men met face to face. "He urged me to join him, to be his president. And that has been his message to me ever since," says Tzang. For Tzang and his mother, though, the war was over. Tzang took a job as a loans of-

ficer at a Thai bank, and eventually followed his mother to Canada.

In the end an anti-Communist faction of the SSA found itself in the camp of Khun Sa, and learned the art of survival from a master. When the Mahadevi returned to Thailand for a visit in 1985 she found her rag-tag army transformed into a force that had "quite a lot of money." She never returned to the opium wars.

**S**o it was that an ageing Shan queen and her son Tiger settled into lives of relative obscurity in Canada, determined to watch events unfold as spectators only. But then something happened to stir Tiger, at least, from his silence. In 1988, years of frustration boiled over in the Burmese delta. Thousands of students, workers, and monks took to the streets to protest against Ne Win's military regime.

Here at last was a movement that to Tiger made sense and provided hope — a pure and simple cry for democracy. As the army gunned down students in the Rangoon streets that September, he began contacting politicians and journalists. He started on familiar territory, the mining industry. Petro-Canada was heavily involved in Burma's oilfields. Tiger launched a protest. This time newspapers printed a few articles and he was able to found a human-rights group called Burma Watch International.

In Rangoon, General Ne Win recognized that his government had lost its ability to inspire fear and obedience. In a surprise move he stepped down, eventually filling the void with his own creation — the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). In another surprise move SLORC called general elections for May 27, 1990. Exiled sons and daughters of Burma began to return, including the longtime expatriate Aung San Suu Kyi, daughter of Burma's assassinated father of independence. Her arrival on the scene must have been inspiring for Tiger. But what happened to her was proof that expatriate dreams don't fare well when faced with brute force. Suu Kyi was arrested and, although her National League for Democracy swept the election, SLORC unleashed a renewed reign of terror against the Burmese people. At the Thai border, bodies floated down the Salween River. Burma was a killing field.

Once again students fled to the jungle where the old cycle of anarchy and political violence resumed. The result was an unexpected boom for the opium trade. "They [the Burmese] have been knocking our heads for so long that it's time we take a rest and enjoy the Burmese ▶

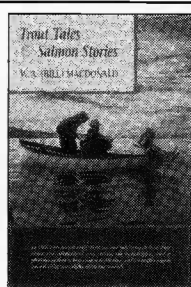
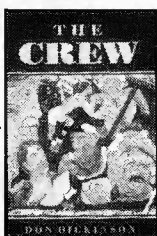
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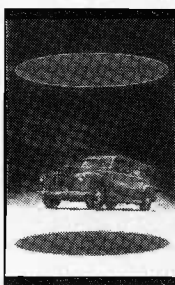
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## Drug Trade

knocking against each other," observed Khun Sa.

The story now belonged to the general. On a surreal moonlit night in July, 1990, the last drops of a monsoon rain whispered in the Shan forest. A natural amphitheatre nestled in the slopes of a mountain valley, at its base a large stage, fully wired for sound and light. As the night deepened, the throb of live rock'n'roll washed the hill side, and the lights of Khun Sa's town blazed fearlessly.

At a food stall, his soldiers lined up to spend their pay on steaming bowls of spicy Chinese-style noodles. When a small white truck rumbled by, there was a sudden hush. Respect or fear? It was the boss's truck, and the boss himself might be sitting behind the tinted glass.

In 1982 Khun Sa had escaped a Thai airforce attack on his base camp there. Seen fleeing into the jungle on a white horse, he soon resurfaced on his old stomping grounds: Shan State, Burma. Near the village of Ho Mong he succeeded in uniting the various nationalist factions—including the Shan State Army—under a single banner.

Khun Sa's name, which in Shan means Prince Prosperity, no doubt held some promise for "his" people, who had suffered more than three decades of anarchy and oppression. Poverty, disease, and violence ruled the hill country, evident in the eyes of people who hurried down muddy jungle tracks, fearful of press-ganging armies, robbers, and land mines. What did such people think when the trail suddenly opened up onto a broad road with a well-guarded checkpoint? There in the middle of the jungle were neat rows of houses, shops full of imported goods, a video parlour, a school, a hospital, a marketplace—all maintained and administered by the army of General Khun Sa. In a neglected corner of the world, here was a Prince of Thieves.

At first light on the first full day of my stay, regiments of boy-soldiers, some looking no more than ten years old, marched to the parade grounds. "Some rumours say I have been recruiting small boys. It's not true. It's their parents who send them to me to take care of them," Khun Sa said. For a brief time the boys are fed, clothed, paid, housed, and educated. Then at sixteen they march into the jungle to fight Khun Sa's latest enemy, and quite often to die. Khun Sa claimed to have raised an army of 18,000 regular troops, 8,000 local militia, and a reserve force of 5,000.

Together they fought for and gained control of a territory that included oceans of poppies and fourteen heroin labs. The general made no secret of the fact that this was the source of sixty per cent of his army's income. "We are like beggars sleeping on golden beds," Khun Sa likes to say in his speeches to recruits. For now, the golden bed was opium.

The general promised to develop other resources once Shan autonomy was won. His 1989 price for a seven-year opium-eradication scheme was calculated at \$210-million (U.S.) in United Nations assistance, \$265-million in foreign investment, and \$89.5-million in private aid. "When I have recovered my country the twenty-six races of Shan State will rejoice. But if I can free the people of the world from the menace of opium, then I will do good for the world. I would like to do that," Khun Sa said.

So far his offer had no takers, and reining in the general was a complex matter. The Rangoon government was in no hurry to make enemies of Khun Sa's formidable forces. Between 1985 and 1988 heroin production almost tripled, despite U.S. material assistance for spraying defoliants and monitoring crops. Following the initial crackdown on the democracy movement in 1988, the U.S. withdrew its assistance. Production increased another thirty per cent. In 1990 Burma's opium yield was 2,000 to 2,250 tonnes, up from 750 to 800 tonnes in 1986. It was this sudden bulge in crop yields that would, over time, find its way to the streets of Vancouver: by the spring of 1993 prices were down fifty per cent, and purity was up from between three and five per cent to as much as thirty-five per cent, resulting in the unprecedented increase in overdoses that captured national headlines.

To further complicate matters, Khun Sa's was the strongest anti-Communist army left in the region. As a result the CIA and the DEA were often at odds over the matter of Shan politics and drug running. Only in recent years had the war on drugs gained the upper hand over the war on Communism. Around the world the status of men such as Manuel Noriega and Khun Sa changed from cold warriors to drug traffickers.

Sitting on his veranda surrounded by his bodyguards and assistants, Khun Sa reflected on the circumstances that had defined him as the undisputed ruler of the Golden Triangle. "In the name of anti-narcotics they have used hired armies to attack us. They have used planes to spray our houses and fields. Because of what they've been doing the livelihood ►



## Drug Trade

of the people has been destroyed... They say I'm the king of heroin, the king of opium. But I haven't seen any DEA official, any Thai or Burmese official, come and say, let's join hands together to stop opium. No Red Cross people, no UN people. There's no help with crop substitution, schools, hospitals." He paused to light a cigarette. The far-off sound of children reciting lessons floated in the air. "I haven't seen anyone telling the people that opium is not good."

Seated next to Khun Sa was an earnest, bespectacled man, Colonel Khern Sai, whose job was trying to improve his boss's international profile. Press stories tended to feature hair-raising tales: Khun Sa buries people to their necks in sand; Khun Sa sends letter bombs to his enemies; Khun Sa threatens to hold hostage any Western journalists entering his territory. Khern Sai carefully clipped the stories and pasted them into scrapbooks. There was something extremely poignant about this act. The last hopes of the Shan independence movement were pinned on a warlord with a ruthless reputation who claimed to have the power to buy freedom with opium.

So each year the mule caravans leave Shan State for Thailand to deliver opium and refined heroin, returning with guns and IOUs from various business interests. In the streets of Vancouver, undercover officers see the results of a heroin glut, but the faraway, shrouded politics of Southeast Asia are beyond them.

In a back alley near a trendy Kitsilano restaurant a Vancouver police officer waits for a deal to go down and grumbles, "We've lost the war on drugs." Still, by the end of the shift, he and his co-workers make a deal, nab a courier, break down a door, and arrest two twenty-four-year-old pipefitters. The street officers are well aware that this is no solution. The best answer they can come up with for the likes of Khun Sa is a "rip and grab" — take the drugs and blow him away.

This is exactly the strategy the DEA settled on in its 1990 indictment. In June, 1992, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled it legal to kidnap suspected drug runners in other countries. In response Khun Sa's army announced that its leader had been overthrown in an internal coup. Then the press assured the public that the "coup" was merely a public-relations ploy.

It seems unlikely, however, that the capture of Khun Sa would end the opium trade. A political solution is the only solu-

tion from Tiger's point of view. In Edmonton he pores over a map of Southeast Asia, identifying the unmarked borders of Shan nationhood. He dreams of someday returning to a country he barely remembers, and he doesn't think Khun Sa will present a problem. "I think the opium trade will disappear if we get peace in the country."

Tzang agrees that a political settlement is necessary, but unlike his older brother he believes it will be a very long and difficult road to the eradication of opium. In 1985, when Tzang moved to Canada, he settled in Vancouver, not Edmonton. A considerable distance remains between the two brothers. "I don't know what he thinks," says Tiger of Tzang. "He hedges." Tiger is leery of Tzang's continued contacts with a border-based government-in-exile, and prefers to steer clear of the internecine and violent politics of the region.

"He's living in a dream world," says Tzang of Tiger. Tzang views Khun Sa with a certain amount of sympathy. The man is not really a drug lord but a politically simple general who is trapped by circumstances: "The only way he can spend his money is to arm his troops and raise a bigger army.... He can't take the money and go on a holiday or do any-

thing. He's there in the jungle, outlawed by the whole world." Tzang sees Khun Sa's opium-eradication scheme as a lost cause. If it ever came to pass, the general would soon be dead or in an American jail like Noriega: "He can't challenge the whole network of opium. He'll become dispensable."

Tzang entered the Golden Triangle as an idealist and emerged years later as a survivor. "Most people in political turmoil are not the lord and master of their own destiny. They become what they are by virtue of changes in their political conditions, which will constrain them from doing certain things — and which will pressure them into doing certain things." He was speaking about Khun Sa, but he could have been speaking about himself or any one of the 8-million people of Shan State who have lived and struggled at the source of the heroin trade.

Perhaps Khun Sa should have listened to the Mahadevi, when he offered to cut her in to the trade those many years ago. "I told him, it won't work, Khun Sa," the exiled queen says. She recognized that opium money bought only suffering. She has since received two letters from Khun Sa asking her to rejoin the movement. "Not on your life," is her reply. **SN**

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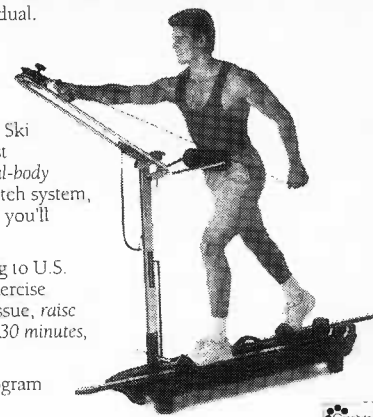
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