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The Southeast Asian Connection

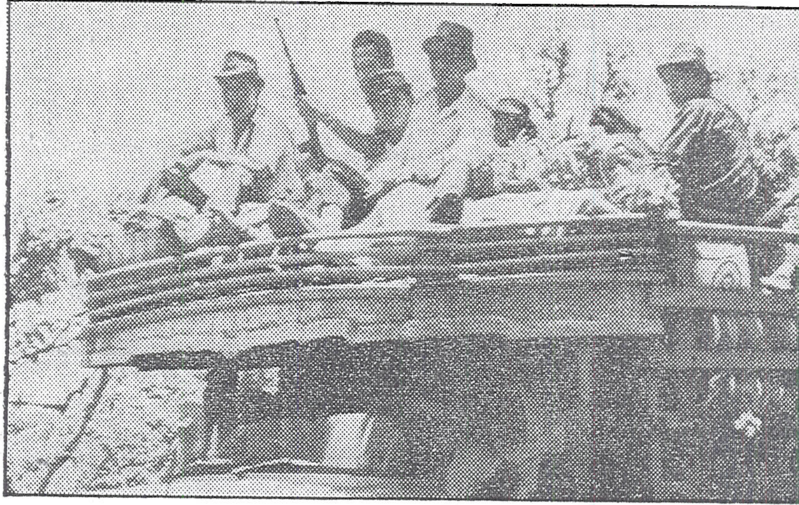
By HANS J. SPIELMANN

BANGKOK, Thailand—The world's attention in recent months has been turned toward the Mideast—Turkey, principally—as the source of illicit supplies of heroin. But the fact is that the fabled "Fertile Triangle" of Southeast Asia — Thailand, Burmma and Laos—continues to produce two-thirds of the world's known supply of opium, from which heroin is derived.

The figures alone are eye-catching: in 1970 Thailand's hill tribes contributed 185 metric tons of raw opium to the world's supply, Burma 1,000 tons, Laos 100.

It is true that most of the opium, or about 800 tons, is consumed by Southeast Asians from Rangoon to Hong Kong. Nonetheless, about 400 tons continue to leave the area, bound for addicts around the world. The buyers, not all Americans by any means, range from soldiers in Vietnam to junkies along New York's Eighth Avenue.

So vast are these supplies (U.S. addicts, for example, consume annually the heroin derived from "only" 120 metric tons of opium), so limitless the profits, that governments, armies and revolutionary fronts have played parts in the production and trade through the years. They continue to do so, and even the United States Central Intelligence Agency has had its days in the poppy fields.



Opium traders in northern Thailand head for contact.

"They have been growing poppies for 150 years."

The Vietnam war and the complex and confusing movement of "foreigners" back and forth through Southeast Asia has created a boom in the illicit production of raw opium. Today, in Thailand alone, it is estimated that half of the 350,000 hill people in the elevated areas of the north participate in growing poppies.

Thirty per cent of these workers are addicts themselves, but they turn a tiny profit by the standards of the million-or-billion-dollar deals we are accustomed to associating with narcotics. The average worker earns about $100 a year and has, incidentally, no real knowledge of what he is doing. That is to say, the hill people do not even know that they are producing an illicit product for a world market; they have been growing the poppies and using the opium in lieu of pain-killing medicines for about 150 years.

The production of opium only became illegal in Thailand in 1958, as did trafficking and smoking, and the hill people really could not understand that they were outlaws. Not to worry, as things developed: production went on unabated.

As it is now, there is a sort of Common Market in opium operative in Southeast Asia. National boundaries are crossed by an assortment of rogues who, while moving tons of the stuff, "lose" only 2 or 3 per cent as bribes and tributes and so forth.

The operation begins with the fields in the high country (over 3,000 feet above sea level for the high-quality poppy) of Thailand, Laos and Burma.

The hill people themselves have neither the courage, contacts nor funds to enter into the distribution, so they await the sharp lowlanders. These townsmen come around at harvest time, looking down their noses at the hill people whom they consider to be inferior, and buy the opium at very low prices.

The best buy is in Burma, where a kilo of raw opium sells for $15; in Laos it's $30, and in Thailand $40.

Opium is gathered in the villages and then in ever-larger towns by smugglers, who may be described in the first dealings as petty, but who become rather more than that as the opium changes hands and the supplies pile up. Then highly disciplined paramilitary types take over, with toughness and sure-handedness.

Among these is an outfit known as the Shan of Northern Burma—relatives of the Thais—whose dream, at least back in Burma, was the establishment of an autonomous Shan State. But its fighting wing, the Shan Liberation Army, has generally abandoned politics as it observed the fertile fields of Shan asylum in northern Thailand.

Units of the front transport the opium grown in Burma (and this is the mother lode—700 metric tons for export) to bases in Thailand. Of course, as units cross the Burmese-Thai border, back and forth, back and forth, the talk is all politics and the dream of statehood, but it's camouflage for the real action, which is the opium.

The Shan has somewhat complex, but strict, working arrangements with the notorious Kuomintang (whose parent organization is Nationalist Chinese) troops of the Fertile Triangle. Sometimes the Shan and the Kuomintang trade arms and ammunition, and medicines—often purchased from U. S. stocks in Laos—for opium.

The Kuomintang troops also keep up political appearances, when the real idea is opium. They say that they carry out pro-U.S. espionage in Burma, and even claim forays into China for "anti-Communist" activities. But these units are no longer used and supplied by the United States or Taiwan, as they once were, although they maintain radio contact with each other.

The Kuomintang is said now to have 10,000 men under arms, chiefly in Thailand, but in Burma and Laos as well.

Frequently, Kuomintang caravans of between 300 and 500 men, plus horses and mules carrying contraband for trade, can be seen working toward the north of Thailand and Laos toward Burma. They are supplied along the way with food by villagers eager to

please such impressive forces, and eager to make extra money or to acquire some unusual luxuries.

Once they make their contacts—either with Shan troops or with smugglers—the Kuomintang caravan can pack up as much as fifteen tons of opium for the return trip southward. It is sai dthat these troops and their "allied contractors" transport between 450 and 500 tons of raw opium southward each year. Their profit mark-up is 200 per cent.

One arrangement that the Kuomintang and the Shan have is that each Kuomintang convoy that goes into certain poppy-growing territory actually controlled by Shan troops must pay tribute. This amounts to about $1.50 a kilo, and entitles the caravan to a transit letter and Shan escorts backs to territory controlled by the Kuomintang. (In other areas Shan convoys must pay tribute to Kuomintang soldiers—the reverse situation.)

As noted, there are a great many addicts in Southeast Asia, and the Kuomintang troops sell off a good deal of the opium back in Thailand. They get four to six times what they paid. But most of it is headed for export—for quick dashes across more borders, to airports and train stations, to seaports, to Bangkok, Singapore, Hong Kong, Vientiane and Saigon. And on and on.

In the last five years, the Kuomintang, discovering among other things that some of the opium it was transporting was bringing in 2,500 times more profit to the ultimate dealer than to its troops, began processing the opium itself. Kuomintang thereby increased its own profits, never inconsiderable, at least threefold.

In Thailand at least, the Government once had a monopoly on opium. That is no longer true. Poppy-growing, trading and using are illegal. But Thai officials have a mixed set of attitudes toward the hill people and the production of opium today, the sum of which is that it goes on unchecked.

The growers are mostly ethnic minorities whose loyalty to Bangkok is tenuous.

So if the Government leaves the growers alone, the growers will not complain about the lowland majorites whom they dislike; they will instead accept the political status quo and the life in the poppy fields, to which they are accustomed. They will not fuss over prices at harvest time.

But the growers do accumulate some surplus cash, as Bangkok knows too well, and with it they tend to amass arms. The growers make it plain that if there is any attempt to suppress or hinder opium production they will become guerrillas.

That is what happened in Laos: the Meo rebellion began not as a planned "Communist revolt," but out of bitterness and misunderstanding that arose when Laotian officials tried to step into the opium trade.

Under pressure from the United States and other outsiders, the governments do of course pretend to be attempting to eliminate the trade. But because of internal difficulties with roaming armies and guerrillas, and with corruption of their own officials,

"Green Berets were ordered to buy supplies."

they have largely kept hands off. Until last year, no serious attempt of any kind was made by any of the three governments we have talked about here to curb the traffic, to stop it where it must be stopped—in the hills. At least $85 million is at stake, and no single government has seemed willing to do other than to participate.

The governments in question knew in any case that United States objections were in the main window-dressing. The truth was that the U.S. spreading involvement in the war meant that its chief concern was stability in Southeast Asia. And if this meant the continued production of opium in the sensitive areas—say in the fertile fields where Laos, Burma and Thailand come together—that was all right with the U. S.

United States Special Forces, or Green Berets, and the C.I.A. were at one time up to here in the traffic—for, to be sure, political reasons. Green Berets were ordered to buy certain supplies of opium in order to make and maintain stanch allies among the growers cum guerrillas.

Large-scale traffickers such as the Kuomintang were supported in some cases, only tolerated in others, so long as they displayed anti-Communist attitudes and rendered intelligence services. They were even given the use of C.I.A. planes. Even when the Kuomintang hit upon the scheme of processing its own opium to increase profits, U. S. officials did nothing, although the C.I.A. could not have failed to notice refineries in the area of the "fertile triangle," refineries which turned out 96 per cent pure heroin.

Last year, as mentioned, because of the pressures from President Nixon to crack down on heroin wherever in the world it would be possible, some action was taken in Southeast Asia. The C.I.A. and other agencies bought off certain dealers (including a general who was paid to retire), who had been their friends and who were deeply involved in opium. A few raids were conducted in Thailand.

A deal was made in which certain *refineries* in Laos were closed.

But the point is that the installations moved to Burma and there, together with an adjacent area of Thailand, the highest concentration of refineries in the world is now situated. Marseilles cannot compare.

Thus the richest traffic and cultivation of opium in the world goes on. Not in the Mideast, formerly the biggest supplier, whose annual output has dropped to 120 tons and will decrease further. But in the Far East, and more specifically in Southeast Asia's Fertile Triangle, where U.S. encouragement, war and muddying of borders by rampaging troops make the business easy.

It could be stopped and should be, but only the most determined cooperation among nations would do the job, cooperation at economic, political, military and social levels. Such cooperation seems unlikely.

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