

An Attempt to Switch Crops in Laos

U.S. 'School' for Opium

By David K. Shieler
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Koi Nya, Laos

THE TINY green leaves of the opium poppy are just beginning to poke through the rich earth of the steep hillside field tilled by Wa Cha Song.

He strides barefoot up the slope until he is standing in the middle of the cultivated swath of land that he has slashed with hand tools out of the wild mountain country of northern Laos.

He does not talk about heroin addicts in New York; he talks about the rain, the soil, last year's untimely frost.

Wa Cha Song is a Meo tribesman who has grown opium all his life and has smoked it since he was 17 years old. But through all those years of drawing the sticky black sap from the poppy and hardening it into one-pound cakes for sale to the buyers who wander through the mountains, he knew little about its ultimate destination.

In fact, he knew nothing about big-city heroin addicts until a few months ago, when he attended a training course set up in the mountains by the United States government.

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THE COURSE attempts to induce opium growers to switch to other crops. But it has proved a slow, frustrating and rather unsuccessful effort, for no other crop has been found that can bring these farmers the \$45 to \$50 a pound that they get for opium.

"I'm aware now that I am doing a lot of things to a lot of people," Wa Cha Song said slowly. "I am very willing to quit growing, but there is no crop that can bring as much cash."

American officials estimate that 60 to 70 tons of opium are produced annually in the region of Laos controlled by the rightist faction of the coalition government. They say they have no idea how much is grown in the more extensive areas under pro-Communist Pathet Lao control.

Sixty to seventy tons represent about ten per cent of the opium produced in the so-called



Wa Cha Song stands in his recently planted poppy field on the slopes of the mountain country in northern Laos

"Golden Triangle" of Laos, Burma, and Thailand, with the Burmese crop the largest by far. Officials here say they cannot tell how much from Laos ends up as heroin in American cities, but the United States has been prodding and aiding Laos to suppress the drug traffic.

In 1971, the government acted to prohibit opium from growing. It exempted only tribesmen older than 40 who obtained permits to grow it for their own use. The hill

tribes have long used opium medicinally for everything from fevers to snake bites.

After the law was passed, several Meo asked an official in Xieng Nguen village for government help in developing alternate crops. That was the genesis of the training center, situated in Xieng Nguen and funded by the United States Agency for International Development. A second center, which concentrates on agricultural research, is located at Ban

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Houei Sai near the Burmese border.

To recruit for the voluntary six-week course, Gary Bayer, a United States official in charge of the center, sends employees who are tribesmen into the mountains by plane, helicopter, or on foot. Often, Bayer explains, the volunteers have to be flown from their remote villages at great expense.

"They're usually not likely to walk three days to come into something they know nothing about," he said.

In a year and a half, the center has trained 235 of the estimated 15,000 tribesmen in this limited section of Laos, Bayer said. There is little evidence, however, that the trainees stopped growing opium after having taken the course.

"The average Meo opium grower in a good opium growing zone is better off than the average Lao who grows paddy rice," Bayer observed. "It's very difficult to find anything that's going to get him to switch from growing opium."

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COMPOUNDING THE problem is the fact that opium poppies grow in the dry season from October to March, usually in fields from which corn or upland rice has just been harvested. The American program has experimented with crops of soybeans, mushrooms and mung beans, which are used for livestock feed, but they are not working at high elevations.

"I had been hearing that the government would stop us from growing," said Ya Pao Song, a young Meo in explaining his decision to take the training course. He has planted some fruit trees as security against the day the government really does crack down.

But he has also planted poppies again this year. If the crop is good he expects to get up to 50 pounds, worth \$2500.

"I am now aware of the evils being done," he said. "I feel guilty growing it, but now it is the only means of livelihood, the only means of income, so it becomes a necessity."