
Burma, the Heroin Trade, and Canada

Dr. Chao-Tzang Yawnghwe

Shan academic and member of the Burma Vancouver Roundtable

Introduction: The Problem of Narcotics and the Opium-Heroin Trade

The problem of heroin outflow from Burma is a serious global problem in one respect, but it is also, at the bottom, a global agro-business based on the opium crop, in which are involved a host of entrepreneurs, financiers, wholesalers, retailers, producers, and finally, consumers around the world.[1] The opium-based, multi-billion agro-business is however radically different from others of the kind since opium and its processed (or value-added) product, heroin, is illegal. Therefore, besides the host of actors involved in the commercial-business side of this multibillion dollars, agro-business, there are also involved host of other actors. These include, on the one hand, criminal elements—gangsters and narcotics syndicates—that regulate, in a manner of speaking, the illegal, trans-border, transnational opium-heroin trade [2], seeing to it that agreements are observed, debts paid, goods delivered as promised, and so on.

On the other hand, or in tandem, actors in this opium-heroin agro-business and trade include those who have taken on the task of suppressing what is termed narcotics trafficking. They are: international organizations such as the United Nations, in particular its agencies responsible for drug suppression and eradication (and crop replacement), the Interpol, national governments (or states), national police forces, national narcotics suppression bodies with extra-national interests and jurisdiction. Also involved in various ways in the opium-heroin problem (or alternatively, business) are politicians (national leaders or otherwise), community leaders (mayors, local politicians, town council members, etc.), and organizations that deal with the “collateral damages” of heroin on societies and its members. Both the business of “fighting” the opium-heroin problem and dealing with its negative effects on communities,

have become multibillion dollars, transnational ventures, based primarily on revenues of national states, i.e., in the final analysis, tax raised by governments, i.e., paid up by members of society.

The Opium-Heroin Trade: A Short History

The history of the opium-heroin problem-cum-business is a very long one. It has its root in the 19th century, and began as a British attempt—very successful—to open up the self-sufficient, even self-contained, Chinese “economy”. Because China did not need or want goods offered by British and other traders from the West, opium was exported from India to China, and sold for silver coins which, in turn, was used to buy tea and silk, and sold in India, Britain, the United States, etc. Part of the proceeds was then reinvested by, in particular, the British East India Company in the opium industry in India.[3] It can even be said that opium was instrumental in commercializing the Chinese economy and bringing it into the world economy.

The opium-heroin business was given a big second boost in the cold-war years (roughly, from the mid 1940s to the late 1980s). This time, the motive was not commerce or economics. It was purely political. It began in Burma, a country that neighbors China, Laos, and Thailand—countries that were variously involved in the “hot” (and “warm”) aspect of the global cold war between Communism and the “Free World”, led by the United States. As Alfred McCoy, among a few perceptive observers, notes throughout the cold war, the CIA used gangsters and warlords, many of them drug dealers, to fight communism. These included Marseilles Corsicans, Lao generals, Thai police, Nationalist Chinese irregulars, Burmese military-socialists, Afghan rebels, Pakistani intelligence, Haitian colonels, Mexican police, Guatemalan military, and so on. During the forty years of the cold war, government intelligence services—including American—forged