
The Hell of Good Intentions:

*Some Preliminary Thoughts on Opium in the
Political Ecology of the Trade in Girls and Women*

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The Hell of Good Intentions: Some Preliminary Thoughts on Opium in the Political Ecology of the Trade in Girls and Women¹

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"Silver (money) grows in the 'virgin room'."
-- Brothel owner

"If I can sell her virginity twice, I double my investment."
-- Brothel Owner

"Sometimes, I have to teach them with the stick."
-- Woman owner of 'sex coffee shop'

"We think: if she's young, she's clean --- no AIDS."
-- Customer in massage parlor

"U.S. anti-drug assistance to the Burmese government has failed ..."
-- Robert S. Gelbard, U.S. Ass't. Secretary of State
for International Narcotics and Law-Enforcement Affairs

*"The road to hell is paved with good intentions... and it's
the best paved road in Bangkok."*
-- Anon.

This paper is a preliminary attempt to share some thoughts on two topics, which have compelled attention -- public or private -- in most human societies: Sex and drugs. Or more precisely, the relationship *between* sex and drugs; not as conjectured (or remembered) by the worried parents of teenage daughters, but as commodities in international trade. In the specific case of mainland S.E. Asia and China, what is the relationship through time of opiate production to the production of sexual services?

The mythic narrative of narcotics and sexual degradation (and like many mythic narratives, it embodies elements of 'reality') can be read in newspapers, quoted from NGO reports, or seen on TV: "Miba, innocent and simple hill tribe girl from the 'colorful' Akha tribe is rescued from a brothel (often by the BBC, CH-4, ABC, or "60 Minutes" film crew.) She has been sold by her father, who is an unrepentant heroin addict. Desperate for money to feed his vile habit, but not, the implication goes, desperate enough to work for it; he supposedly sees his daughters as a crop to be harvested when they are ripe." There frequently follows a learned interview that calls for the reform of patriarchal societies and explains that "Asian Cultures" (all of them!) have always devalued daughters, which was why Miba was sold in the first place. The piece generally closes with hope for a new life for Miba, thanks to the sewing skills that she has been taught -- preferably, for a Western TV audience, by nuns, missionaries, or fresh-faced NGOs. Lest we become complacent, however, a sober male or compassionate female voice reminds us -- over shots of happy girl children -- of "...all the other Mibas...." awaiting the sweaty embraces of panting paedophiles from Peterborough or their American equivalents.

Of course, it is easy to mock the voyeuristic and sentimentalized conventions of television (or their print counterparts), and stories similar to Miba's can certainly be documented. Moreover, the problem of minority girls and women in the Thai "sex industry" is an extensive one: today, there are estimated to be up to 30,000 from Burma alone, growing by some 10,000 per year.² Yet the explanations given for this seem inadequate in the face of one fact: twenty years ago there were virtually no minority girls or women in the Thai "sex industry." The current research project is aimed at answering a deceptively simple question: What changed?

To this end, we are examining the relationship of changes in the patterns of opiate production, trade and use to the process of the commodification of girls and women. The aim is to investigate the implications for regional development of a traffick in persons which contravenes numerous provisions of international humanitarian law, and threatens the physical and cultural survival of populations stretching from Southern China across the Shan States of Burma through Northern Thailand to Laos. The focus will be on the primarily upland minority peoples -- Akha, Lahu, Lisu, Yao, Hmong, Shan, etc. -- most at risk from this trade.

Introduction:

The past decade has witnessed an exponential increase in the traffick in girls and women from Burma and Yunnan into Thailand for the sex industry. Moreover, with the opening of borders and improved transportation routes, Laos stands poised to become a supplier and transshipper of girls to Thailand. Boys are not -- as yet -- a major factor in *this* trade. Both Burman and Han Chinese women and girls flow into this traffick, stocking the brothels of Ranong³ or massage parlors and brothels of the North.⁴ Tragic as are, these individual cases, the greatest collective impact is on the upland minority groups of the Thai-Burma-China periphery, who are disproportionately represented in the trade, and whose cultural and physical survival are most directly threatened. Networks of recruiters reach into remote mountain villages to buy, abduct, or lure young women and girls into the pipeline that feeds the lowest levels of the Thai sex industry. Poverty, warfare, forced labor, and repression also bring whole families across the Burma border, and make entry into the sex industry a rational (if dangerous) choice for young women eager to contribute to the well-being of their households.

The Sex Industry:

The term "industry" is carefully chosen. Sex -- gay as well straight -- is big business in Thailand. Prof. Pasuk Phongpaichit, an economist from Chulalongkorn University who specializes in research on corruption and money laundering, estimates that the income from prostitution and trafficking in women abroad alone exceeds the income from drugs and illicit arms trafficking combined. Tourism has boomed in Thailand over the last three decades. According to figures supplied by the Tourism Authority of Thailand, in 1960, 81,340 persons visited the Kingdom, staying an average of three days. In 1996, 7,192,145 persons arrived as tourists, staying an average of 8.23 days. . It is estimated that of the 7 million enter Thailand on tourist visas, between 1.8 and 2.2 million are tourists..⁵ Tourism revenues grew from \$10 million in 1960 to nearly \$8.7 billion in 1996. It is the largest source of foreign exchange, earning nearly eight times the value of Thailand's rice exports in 1996.

The majority of tourists visiting the country are "single" (though not necessarily unmarried) males. In fact, as of 1996, 62% of tourists were male. Easily available, relatively inexpensive commercial sex has long been one of the appeals of Thailand as a

tourist destination, and Thailand has certainly reaped rich economic rewards because of it. Yet various Thai governments, concerned about the image (if not the reality) of the country, have sought to conform appearances to Western rectitude, while still catering to Western desires. From 1960, when Marshal Sarit first 'outlawed' prostitution to "clean up" Thailand's image, through 1987 ("Visit Thailand Year") to 1997 ("Amazing Thailand Year"), this tension has reasserted itself each time a new strategy has been put forward to market the country.⁶

However, despite the partially successful attempts to market Thailand as a "cultural" and "family" tourist destination, and despite the expected chilling effect of AIDS, "sex tours" continue to come from the U.S., Germany, Britain, Scandinavia, and Japan. An ad for a package tour from England promises air ticket, hotel, meals, transfers, and "a selection of beautiful and exotic ladies" all included in one low price -- easy terms available. Many of these tours have brochures, which feature obviously pre-pubescent girls, and guidebooks are available which advise on how to avoid extra-territorial laws. Yet, most of the sex service industry caters to local men and intra-Asian travelers. These establishments are quite different from the bars of Patpong and Soi Cowboy, so well known to tourists and TV cameras that Senior Citizens are now shown them through the windows of air-conditioned buses on their tours of Bangkok.

The precise number of commercial sex workers in Thailand is an issue hotly debated by researchers, government officials, NGOs, politicians and pressure groups with force and not a little ideological fervor. An article in the *Nation* newspaper titled "Prostitution: Looking Beyond the Numbers" (July 11, 1993), noted an 'official' estimate of about 500,000 'registered' prostitutes.. On the one hand, this could seem quite low, however, since the Police Department gave a figure of slightly over 400,000 as long ago as 1964 -- before the expansion of the industry to meet the "R&R" needs of the Vietnam War or the massive upsurge in tourism in the late seventies and eighties. Given that most women and children in brothels are not registered, Thai non-governmental organizations currently estimate that the correct number is closer to 2 million.

However, were this number correct, it would mean that 24% of the female population of Thailand between the ages of 10 and 39 were engaged in commercial sex work. Even allowing for greater than observed influxes from other countries, this appears unlikely on its face.

At the other end of the spectrum, the Ministry of Public Health each year conducts a census of all sex service establishments in Thailand. This is done every January to obtain comparable data from year to year. This year (1997), for the first time, they differentiated between self-identified sex workers (65,983) and total workers potentially available for sex (105,454). They believe the latter figure to be the more accurate. They are also aware that although they try to sample for 'street walkers', etc., there is an undercount. However, it is not clear how this could possibly reach the levels of near two million.⁷ A number of researchers have settled (for not altogether clear reasons) on figures between 200,000 and 250,000.

These commercial sex workers (CSWs) work in a wide spectrum of establishments, which vary greatly in terms of remuneration, working conditions, coercion and autonomy. The Ministry of Public Health of Thailand has classified 24 different types of sex service establishments: including brothels, hotels or motels, tea houses, nightclubs, beer bars, dancing bars, a-go-go bar, discotheques, restaurants, coffee shops, cafes, cocktail lounges, pubs, massage parlors, traditional massage service, beauty salon, barber shop, escort service, call girls and "other".⁸ They range from upper tier bars in which women

can choose their customers, decide the services which they will offer, and retain their earnings from those services to brothels where young girls are literally chained to beds and forced to service up to thirty men a day.

Distinctions are made among CSWs between direct sex workers (DSWs) who work in brothels (*song*) or other establishments that *only* provide sex services, and indirect sex workers (ISWs) who work in bars or massage parlors, etc. and have greater selectivity with regard to sexual activity. Research to date has shown -- not surprisingly -- that DSWs are more likely to become HIV infected, to suffer from other STDs, and have lower earnings. Minority girls and women, whether from the hills of Thailand or Burma or China, almost all end up as DSWs -- stocking the lowest rungs of the sex trade. While some may move up, most do not.

It is currently estimated that between 20 and 30 thousand of these are girls and women from Burma (Myanmar), increasing by 10 thousand each year. These figures do not distinguish between Burmans and minority peoples, nor do they include women and girls who come from Yunnan, passing through Burma on their way to Thailand. Furthermore, despite a net increase each year in the aggregate number of these women engaged in sex work, some women drop out of sex work in Thailand, either returning to their home villages, or finding alternative employment. In addition, these figures do not take into account seasonal fluctuations in sex work, during which women will enter (or re-enter) sex work for a limited period of time. One indicator of this was pointed out by a Thai health worker in Mae Sai, a town on the northern Thai border with Burma, which is a major entrance point for sex workers and migrant agricultural laborers: Brothels in Mae Sai use, on average, a total of 6,000 condoms per month; in February, they use 10,000. It is likely, therefore, that total figures at any one time under-represent the number of girls and women effected by the trade.

While it is obvious that any such statistics are imprecise at best, it is clear that the participation of women and girls from Burma in the sex industry in Thailand has burgeoned rapidly over the last decade. Most recently, it has been estimated that 25%-35% of those entering the sex industry in northern Thailand are from northern Burma.⁹ In fact, an unpublished study reported that 97% of the workers in brothels in the town of Mae Sai on the Thai-Burma border were minority women from Burma or the Thai hills.

It is also clear that while these minorities still represent a relatively small percentage of total sex workers in Thailand, they are particularly vulnerable to exploitation and maltreatment. This special vulnerability has implications not only for the girls and women themselves, but also for the very existence of the communities from which they come.

In particular, the physical and cultural survival of upland minority groups on both sides of the Thai-Burma border, extending up into China, are threatened as never before. By 1990, there already were significant HIV infection rates among both the Dai and Jingpo in Yunnan.¹⁰ More recently, tests on minority women in Simao (Yunnan) have confirmed the presence of HIV-1 subtype E.¹¹ This HIV subtype is characteristic of Thailand¹², and can be taken as an indication of trans-border migration. The documented spread of HIV/AIDS back from concentrations in Thailand to relatively isolated upland communities in Burma and China can result in a wholesale destruction of these peoples not seen in this century. Moreover, as large infection pools are established in China (in particular) and Burma, increased migration will fuel the epidemic in Thailand and contribute to infection rates in the Lao PDR as well.

It seems clear that with the opening of major transportation routes, the expansion of trekking tourism and development projects, and the planned displacement and resettlement

of highland populations, Laos will play an increasingly important role as a source of supply of minority girls for the Thai sex industry. At present, there are relatively few highland girls and women from Laos engaged in sex work either in Laos or in Thailand. However, many of the preconditions exist for the rapid expansion of the sex industry in Laos¹³, as well as an increased flow of women into Thailand. In fact, Thai businessmen have already set up brothels along the Mekong (on the Lao side), and are ferrying customers across from Thailand. The women are paid in Lao currency (*kip*), but the customers pay in Thai baht, increasing the profit for the owners. The women in these brothels are, for the most part, lowland Lao. However, in areas of northern Laos where Chinese construction workers are building roads and Koreans have a dam project, highland girls and young women are starting to come down to the roads to offer themselves to the workers.

Laos is a very poor country (UNICEF places it among to lowest group in Asia for infant mortality and life expectancy), and the upland regions are under increasing economic and social pressure. Large areas, particularly in the Northwest, are extremely dangerous to farm because of UXOs (Unexploded Ordnance) left over from the war. Unexploded cluster bomb sub-munitions have made Laos to UXOs what Cambodia is to landmines.

In addition, there is increasing pressure on the Lao PDR Government from the international community to curtail the opium production -- which has been central to the economic survival of many of the hill peoples for the last century¹⁴. Moreover, despite a documented record of the failure of lowland resettlement programs in Laos¹⁵ (among other countries), the Lao PDR is planning to relocate a large percentage of its highland population. Precisely how large a percentage is as yet unclear, but what is clear -- and unsettling -- is that the plan has the avid support of the Asian Development Bank. The director of ADB's Programmes Department, Noritaka Morita, was quoted in *The Nation* newspaper in Bangkok: "We may need to reduce the population of people in mountainous areas and bring them to *normal life* [emphasis added]. They will have to settle in one place ... but don't call it resettlement. It is just migration."¹⁶

Past experience has shown that resettlement of highland people into the lowlands is accompanied by increased mortality, decreased nutritional status, breakdowns of social controls on domestic violence and theft, increasing problems with drug and alcohol abuse, transition from opium to heroin use, and dependence on low wage occasional labor. While clearly it is possible in theory to construct programs that will prevent or mitigate these negative outcomes; in practice, successes have been rare.¹⁷

There are also subtler, but no less destructive processes which undermine traditional constraints on certain deleterious behaviors. Increased exposure to a broad spectrum of material goods (which become newly valued) coincides with diminished resources to acquire them. This is not to imply that hill people live in some sylvan idyll, contemplating the beauty of the land, free of material desires. Farming in the mountains is hard, and most people would like more rice or more opium or more pigs or a new silver neck ring or a new gun. However, the range of useful consumables is limited; satisfactions can be obtained in other ways.

Rapid immersion in the market system tends to reduce all values to market values. Commodification is not an event, but a process; and while sex among Southeast Asian highlanders (or Americans, for that matter) has always had economic aspects, it has not generally been reducible to an economic transaction. A Thai scholar, Prof. Vitit Muntarbhorn, has correctly noted that "many societies that are poor do not have a high degree of prostitution, so prostitution does not necessarily follow from poverty."¹⁸ However, while poverty alone may not be a sufficient condition for commercial sex, it is often a necessary one in the transformation of women into trans-national commodities.

Mr. Morita of the ADB has stated, "There is a need to build road networks to enable governments to reach remote areas and introduce them [the highlanders] into the market system..."¹⁹ Others advise greater caution. The UNAIDS experts believe that the projected road network linking China, Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and eventually Burma will make Laos a major transshipment route for HIV as well as goods. In terms of HIV/AIDS, "Laos seems headed where Thailand has been."

Supply and Demand Factors Influencing the Traffick in Girls and Women:

Prostitution is not new in Thailand, nor (as is sometimes maintained) is it some unexploded cultural ordinance left over from the Vietnam War. In the sixteenth century, throughout the trading ports of Southeast Asia, there were systems of "temporary wives" who would contract with foreigners to "marry" for the length of their stay for a negotiated price.²⁰ Variations on this institution were reported by Chou Ta-kuan, the famous Chinese visitor to Angkor, in the thirteenth century. A custom of "hired wives" was reported by *The Bangkok World* in Udon in 1969.²¹

When the British sent an embassy to the Kingdom of Ava in Burma in 1795, Michael Symes noted the system in place at the time.²² He also notes in Rangoon an entire "village of prostitutes." These women were "slaves", as were many of the prostitutes in S.E. Asia during this period. However, as there were many categories of persons loosely designated by the English word *slave*, it is unclear to what extent (if any) these women exercised any degree of social or economic autonomy and if they had any control over their earnings.

In Thailand, the involvement of the State in prostitution dates at least from the Ayudthia period. A monopoly and license system was put in place so that by the 1680's, a designated Thai official controlled all prostitution in the capital on a warrant from the King. This official oversaw some six hundred women who were purchased or had lost their freedom for various criminal offenses.²³ At the time, this clearly represented a significant source of revenue to the State.

Western visitors to Bangkok in the first half of the 19th century remarked on the large number of brothels in the city. *The Siam Free Press* (May 2, 1900) carried complaints about rampant prostitution and police inaction. However, prostitution continued to be sanctioned and taxed by the State, and was seen as vital source of revenue for the country as it attempted to shield itself from colonialism by rapid modernization. Under the Contagious Disease Control Act of 1908, brothels and prostitutes were required to register with the aim of controlling venereal disease. They were also required to pay fees to the Government.²⁴

The first clinic for venereal disease opened in Bangkok in 1937. In the same year, an important Thai novel -- *Ying khon chua* [The Prostitute] -- presented a sympathetic portrait of a village girl lured into prostitution. Written by the now famous woman author K. Surangkhanang, the book was widely read at the time and was the first portrayal of the context of prostitution in Thailand for a Thai audience.²⁵

Nevertheless, there is little doubt that the influx of large numbers of Americans on R&R from Vietnam changed the economics and social context of sexual services in Thailand. It is important to note, however, that despite the notable expansion of the sex industry during this period, the participation in the trade of hill tribe women and Burmese (whether Burman or otherwise) was negligible. Moreover, the age of the young women was generally close to that of the young men who sought them out (though, of course, there were many exceptions).

Demand Factors:

Economic expansion in Thailand and development in much of Asia has generated increased demand for sex workers.²⁶ In the past decade, the large increase in disposable income for Thais as well as the expansion of the tourist trade has expanded the effective demand for sexual services at precisely the time when alternative employment opportunities (e.g., factory work) became available. Thai women from poor areas of the North and Northeast still are drawn into the sex trades (as in the 30 years following WWII), but factory work, foreign employment, even moving into the upper end of the sex trade in Japan and Hong Kong are competing with older patterns. This has resulted in a need to expand the pool of potential recruits outside of the Thai and Chinese who traditionally worked in the sex industry. As yet, it is unclear what effect the recent devaluation of the Thai baht and the ensuing economic crisis will have on this pattern. More and more women are likely to be laid off from factories, and new jobs will be hard to come by. It may well be also that the aggregate demand for sexual services will drop since men will have less disposable income. However, because of the baht's weakness versus foreign currencies, Thailand may once again become something of a bargain for tourists, bringing more foreign patrons. Nevertheless, it is clear the pattern will continue where-by the differential economic growth of lowland Thailand in comparison to neighboring countries and her own upland minorities has pulled Burmese, minority, Cambodian, and Lao women into the sex trade in increasing numbers.

Moreover, the rapid spread of HIV/AIDS in Thailand has resulted in an increased valuation of younger girls from remote areas. Virginity, always highly prized by Chinese and Japanese customers in particular, holds out not only the promise of restored youth and virility, but the "guarantee" of safety as well. Safety is not a minor consideration. The Ministry of Public Health of Thailand has started distributing condoms in brothels²⁷, and will give away about 60 million of them this year. In the past 10 years, condom consumption has climbed from 10 million to 170 million annually. Nevertheless, 46,000 Thais will die of AIDS this year alone. The epidemic may kill up to 800,000 by ten years from now.²⁸ Dr. Jennifer Gray, an Australian AIDS researcher, in a paper delivered at SOAS in London, called AIDS in the uplands of Thailand "a crisis just waiting to happen."²⁹ That was nearly three years ago; and although new infection rates for HIV are presently declining for Thailand as a whole, the crisis has happened.

Burma (Myanmar), which came late to the AIDS epidemic, is thought to have 400,000 cases of HIV infection, but no one really knows. What is known is that condoms are not easily available (until recently, they were illegal), and that the government is neither willing nor able to undertake a significant prevention campaign. I learned from sources inside Burma, however, that although the Government is no longer enforcing the law and is attempting some AIDS prevention activities, a woman found with condoms is taken, *prima facie*, to be a prostitute. Furthermore, the association of condoms with prostitutes causes many Burmese women accuse their husband of using prostitutes or treating them like prostitutes if he attempts to use a condom. Needless to say, this does not encourage widespread condom use.

A report to the United Nations International Drug Control Programme summarized the problem: "*Condom use is so rare as to be virtually non-existent and at present is playing no role in the prevention of HIV in Myanmar.*"³⁰

The first HIV case was reported in 1988. Each year since has seen a dramatic increase in HIV infections. By the end of 1993, 7,152 people had been identified as HIV positive. However, compared to Thailand, there is little hard prevalence data for Burma. The Burmese authors of one of the very few scientific articles on HIV/AIDS in Burma point

out that "the relatively low number of HIV infections reported in the country compared with neighboring countries reflects the limited screening conducted."³¹

In Northern Burma, in particular, AIDS is reported to be "out of control" as a result of girls and women returned from the brothels of Thailand and injecting drug users (IDUs).³² It should be noted, however, HIV has started to be detected in lowland, Burmese villages among people with none of the obvious risk factors.

From the point of view of the procurers and brothel owners, young girls are cheaper to obtain and more docile -- particularly if they have entered Thailand illegally, lack language skills, and have no local contacts. A girl's virginity can be sold for more than her family was paid for her in the first place. Moreover, she may be sold as a virgin more than once. Although subsequently the price for her services drops to less than ten per cent of the initial value, the profits to the brothel owner remain very high indeed. The maintenance costs for the girls are minimal, and they are forced to pay off the original money given to their families -- often at extortionate rates of interest. The heaviest expenses for brothel owners are payments made to police and recruiting agents.

Unfortunately for both their customers and themselves, young girls are more susceptible to HIV infection. In the first place, sexual intercourse is more likely to cause vaginal lesions in an immature girl than in an adult woman, especially when (as is often the case) force is used. Secondly, a young girl, often barely able to communicate in the language of her customer, is less able to enforce or cajole condom use -- even if she were aware that it was important to protect herself. Condoms are virtually never used the first few times she "loses her 'virginity'." In fact, health workers have explained in interviews that girls are most likely to be infected with HIV during their first six months of sex work. This leads to the displacement of the AIDS epidemic onto those least able to protect themselves or cope with the results.

Chilling empirical confirmation of these factors comes from an important study, which followed 800 CSWs, finding an overall HIV-1 prevalence rate of 22%. However, when the age of the start of commercial sex work was 12-15, prevalence was 36%; while when the age at starting was 21 and over, the rate dropped to 11%.³³ The same study found that another major risk factor, in addition to youth, was being non-Thai.

Supply Factors:

In addition to the pull of the expanding economy of lowland Thailand, there have been a number of economic, social and political elements which have pushed increasing numbers of girls and women from the Thai hills, Burma and the border regions of China into the sex trade in the last ten years. The past two decades have seen the impoverishment of the upland economies in Thailand, and a shift in the balance of trade between the highlands and the lowlands.

The frontier areas of highland S.E. Asia are both politically and economically interstitial. They were (and are) the regions in which social systems rub against one another, and where networks of cultural and social identity interpenetrate. The cultural discontinuities between Hill and Valley, swidden and padi-field, tribesman and peasant have never been as sharply contrastive as their symbolic representation. A complex network of relationships has long extended from the lowlands into the highlands, not merely across them. Nor is this simply intrusive exploitation. The highlanders also extend their influence into the plains through trade networks and military alliances. Opium and cattle, in particular, lend themselves to such extensions of influence.

In the case of cattle, the hills have a comparative advantage in raising them (including buffalo). For example, in Northern Thailand, until quite recently, it was common for lowland farmers to make cattle purchases in hill villages. The animal was purchased after

birth and left to be cared for by the hill people until it was full-grown. The payment for this care is on top of the purchase price. British district officer records from Shan states show that this practice was frequently followed there as well at the end of the last century and the beginning of this one. From the point of view of the hill person, livestock is one of the few possibilities for productive investment because of its low labor costs. An old Yao man once said to me, "to grow poppies, you must plant and harvest the fields; pigs plant and harvest themselves."

In the past, the balance of trade between the highland and lowland economies tended to be relatively equal. Upland people traded forest products (resins, medicinal plants and animals, wild honey, etc.), vegetables and opium -- most of which had a high value per unit of weight, and therefore low transport costs -- for a generally small range of goods desired from the lowlands.³⁴

Thirty years ago, relatively few products from the lowland were seen as necessities for the "good life." To cite a case in point, in 1967, the Akha villagers with whom I lived used kerosene, kerosene tins, matches, woks, kettles, shoes, plastic rope, some decorative beads, some tools, salt, plastic sheeting, and a few other things that caught their fancy in the local lowland market. However, I had the only radio in the village, and while this was considered an amusing toy good for a few moments diversion, no one would have sold a pig (or even, a chicken) to obtain one. Similarly, my watch was seen as primarily ornamental, and certainly, less desirable than even a light weight silver bracelet. Over the past ten to fifteen years, the desire for a broad range of lowland consumer goods has increased in the hills, while the demand for upland products has dropped in the lowlands.

Land degradation, lowland incursion, and the loss of opium production in Thailand; warfare, over-production of opium, and impressment of labor in Burma have led to economic and social breakdown in many minority communities.

Thailand is the rare country to significantly reduce its drug crop production. During the two years I studied opium production while living in an Akha village on the Thai-Burma border (1967-1969), Thailand produced about 167 metric tons per year. This year, it will produce, at most, around 35 tons. Interestingly, most of the drop took place by 1972, before either suppression or crop replacement programs were much in evidence. One unintended consequence of this modest victory in the oft-declared "War on Drugs" was that highlanders who smoked opium no longer grew enough of it for their own use. This meant that they lost control over their supply. They now had to buy what they used to produce, with less cash available to do so. The result was that heroin (derived from opium, but much more potent) was relatively cheaper than the raw product. There has also been a breakdown in the cultural constraints that ordered and limited drug consumption.³⁵ Well-meaning, but often ill conceived detoxification programmes brought relatively benign opium smokers out of the hills, and placed them in treatment programmes with heavy lowland heroin users. A cynic might well call this a "study tour." Heroin use (previously rare among many hill groups) increased -- first through smoking, and more recently, by injection. Needle use facilitated the transmission of HIV at the same time as the need for cash pushed more daughters into the sex trade who are likely return infected to the villages.

In Burma, 30 years of warfare has extracted a dreadful toll on the minority areas. When I first worked with Shans in 1964, Burma never produced more than 450 tons of opium. By the end of the U.S. sponsored suppression program in 1988, production had risen to 1200 metric tons.³⁶ (Ironically, it can be said that this was the most successful agricultural development program any place in the world.) This year, the U.S. Government estimates that Burma will produce about 3000 metric tons -- a record crop. It must be noted, however, that many UNDCP officials as well as knowledgeable Shans are skeptical of this figure, given what is known of labor supply and yields.³⁷

However, production at anything near these levels of a highly labor intensive crop benefits smugglers, but impoverishes farmers. My own studies have shown that (among the Akha) it requires a minimum of 387 man/hours to produce 1.6kg. of opium (1.6kg. = 1 *viss* or *joi*, the standard unit of opium). This is about 80% more than the labor input into upland rice. Opium is also a delicate crop: not enough rain or too much rain at the wrong time of year and the entire crop can be wiped out. This accounts for the fact that a single field can show up to 300% variation in yield from year to year. There are strong indications that current returns to the farmer per unit of labor are significantly lower than they were twenty years ago, while the costs of lowland goods deemed essential to village life have risen precipitously in both absolute and relative terms during the same period.

While opium is a tricky crop, requiring considerable labor and expertise to grow well, it has certain important advantages for the upland farmer. First, the hills have a significant comparative advantage vis-à-vis the valleys; in S.E. Asia, the poppy does not grow well below 1000 meters. Second, in regions with high transport costs such as the upland regions of Thailand and Burma, opium is desirable because it has a high value per amount of weight. Thirdly, it is more forgiving of land than rice is. In other words, it is possible to grow poppies on land that could not be put under rice. Areas such as Kokang and Wa State, which are poor rice producers, have been major opium producers for more than a century. The evidence for this continuity of regional specialization is clear. In the 19th century, the Wa states and Kokang produced the vast bulk of the opium grown in what is today Burma. This year these same two regions produced about 45% of the total illicit opium production.

Forced labor (often accompanied by rape) makes prostitution more attractive. Furthermore, as in other situations of political and social instability, the warfare and repression in Burma leads to heightened liquidity preferences among both highland and lowland peoples. (In simple terms, how would you rather hold your wealth during a war, gold coins or real estate?) This favors the production of drug crops over food crops, and (in a choice no one should have to make) the conversion of daughters to cash.

It is also true that given the documented proclivities of the Burmese army to use rape and atrocity as a major element in pacification policy,³⁸ keeping girls at home is no guarantee of protection against sexual abuse.³⁹ Many parents believe that girls will work in factories or as maids or waitresses. While some may "sell" their daughters without compunction, many are duped or faced with the anguished choice of sacrificing one child so that the rest of the family might not starve.⁴⁰

The permanent over-valuation of the Burmese Kyat (about 6.7 Kyat = \$1 at the official rate, vs. some 100 Kyat = \$1 at the black market rate some time ago) has meant that relative small sums of Thai baht can seem huge to a poor family. This has continued, despite the recent fall in the value of the Baht by some 30 per cent. In fact, the situation has been growing steadily worse. In the last eighteen months, the Kyat moved to 170 to the dollar and then to 200. The recent open market rate has been 240. However, even this figure does not give a true picture of the degree of uncertainty and instability in Burma. In one day in mid-July of this year (1997), the Kyat collapsed from just over 200 to the dollar to 340 in one day. Trading came to a standstill. It was widely rumored that the military threatened key dealers at gunpoint to make them exchange at 170. There were also rumors that the SLORC government would demonetize large bills, as had been done before in Burma.

Furthermore, this recent plummet of the Kyat further exacerbates the condition of poor households, so that even the meager payment given to the young women themselves often allow them to contribute significant amounts to the support of their families.

Recent political and military activities have also increased the economic and social pressures on the upland minorities in Burma. The recent "surrender" of Khun Sa (the well-known "King of Opium") has led to a new expansion of forced labor and an attempt by the Burmese to eradicate Thai influence in the Shan region. This will have the effect of pushing more refugees across the border. The attempt to enforce the circulation of the Burmese Kyat at the expense of the baht will have the perverse effect of further devaluing girls in terms of Thai currency at precisely the time when their families will be most strapped for cash.

Another recent change in the North of Thailand that will influence the trade is the movement from direct to indirect sex service establishments. It is clear that the profit margins are extremely high, depending on the nature of the establishment. It appears that brothels (in general) show a higher rate of return than so-called 'indirect' sex establishments (bars, etc.). However, brothels are more vulnerable to police action -- either to enforce laws, or to extract bribes. One trend in the North seems to be the conversion of direct CSW to indirect. Because of some pressures from the central Government on the police to take action, many brothels have converted to 'coffee shops', karaoke bars, and similar operations. While this has resulted in better working conditions for many women, it has made it more difficult for health officials to maintain monitoring programs. In addition, concerned about domestic and international attention on the issue of child prostitution, the police have advised brothel owners to treat the girls better so they will not be forced to take action. The director of the Centre for the Protection of Children's Rights told us that this has resulted in a significant drop in the number of complaints, which would have allowed them to take action. A new constitution is being considered in Thailand, and if it is adopted, a new government will be elected in Thailand. It remains to be seen what policies will be pursued in this area.

Increased forced relocations and economic hardships in Shan States are changing the pattern of recruitment in some areas. Instead of daughters being bought in villages and entering Thailand in a condition of debt bondage, more households are crossing the border, often with the aid of traffickers. The parents and boys seek agricultural work, while the girls gravitate to sex work. Again, the trend toward indirect sex establishments makes this transition easier.

As yet, it is not clear whether these trends evidence a significant shift in the sex industry in northern Thailand, or are merely temporary. What is clear, is that the sex industry will continue to be fed by cheap labor escaping intolerable political and economic conditions in Burma, and more and more girls and women from the hills of Laos will cross into Thailand. Despite the present economic crisis in the country, Thailand is still far wealthier than her neighbors.

If villages are not sustainable, neither the "War on Drugs", nor the newly declared war on sexual exploitation will have very much impact. International supply control drug policy can best be characterized as often in error, but never in doubt. In drug policy, nothing ever fails, even if it never succeeds. Many of the policies, which failed in Thailand, Burma, and even Peru, are now being pushed on the Lao PDR. It would be well to be aware that flawed plans of bureaucrats can have unexpected and devastating consequences for the women (and men) of the Southeast Asian highlands.

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². These figures are consensus figures derived from interviews with a range of researchers, officials and journalists -- both Thai and Western. In general, they do not account for return migration and seasonal sex work. Moreover, women will often be identified by nationality or ethnonym, but rarely by both.

Precise figures are difficult to obtain, which is hardly surprising in light of the fact that virtually all of the women have entered Thailand illegally, making them vulnerable to arrest, imprisonment and deportation. The situation is further complicated by the fact that the Ministry of Health, which conducts a census of commercial sex workers in Thailand every January, does not ask questions regarding ethnicity or national origin. To do otherwise, health officials maintain (with justification), would limit compliance and impair the accuracy of their survey.

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⁵ The discrepancy is due to the fact that many businessmen and other travelers use tourist visas for convenience.

⁶ Cohen, E.

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⁹Far Eastern Economic Review

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