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14. ABSTRACT In the latter half of the 20th century Southeast Asia became an epicenter for the production and trafficking of drugs as well as development of hydro-electric power generation in the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS). This paper draws linkages between these phenomena by analyzing how the history of cross-border trade among some ethnic groups in the GMS has advantaged transnational organized crime groups (TOCs) in their production & trafficking of drugs. What roles do locals play in cross-border trade and how has trade contributed to the formation of out-group identities among ethnic groups within the GMS? The paper finds that some ethnic groups have formed					
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Thinking Globally, Acting Locally:

How hydro-electric development of the Mekong River facilitates transnational criminals in the production & trafficking of ATS/methamphetamine and other drugs¹

The literature on drug trafficking and the broader illicit drugs industry in Southeast (SE) Asia grows more robust with each passing year, however many aspects continue to remain under-theorized—especially regarding the support and patronage that traffickers receive from disadvantaged ethnic groups that dot the border regions between China’s Yunnan province, Burma, Lao PDR, and Thailand.² One need look no further than official reports from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and the United States State Department to see that seizures of manufactured drugs continue to rise and that ATS/methamphetamine trafficking and abuse are gradually increasing relative to heroin in SE Asia. These changes have been attributed to a range of factors that include unrestricted availability of heroin from Afghanistan and ATS precursor chemicals from China to the institutional incapacity of weak states and corruption of their governmental representatives.³ However, few sources have discussed how local communities contribute to illicit trade or elucidated the reasons why many communities hold resentment for the Chinese and Burmese governments. In the following paper, China’s development of hydro-electric power along its portion of the Mekong River⁴ and its attempts to develop hydro-electricity in Burma are used to illustrate how border communities become disaffected by

¹ This material is based upon work supported by, or in part by, the U.S. Army Research Laboratory and the U.S. Army Research Office under grant number W911-NF-11-1-0035.

² For the majority of its existence, the country now known as Myanmar was named Burma. It is hereafter referred to as Burma for the remainder of the paper.

³ See *Global and Illicit Drug Trends* (1999-2003), *UN World Drug Reports* (2000-2013), *International Narcotics Control Strategy Reports* (1996-2013). See also Holmberg and Rothstein (2011), Hunter et al. (2010), and the Study of Anticorruption Measures in EU Border Control (2012).

⁴ Within Chinese territory the Mekong River is known as the Lancang-Jiang River. For the remainder of the paper it is referred to as the Mekong River.

economic development in the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) and how this in turn affects the drug trade.

It is no secret that traffickers utilize the river to move ATS/methamphetamine and ATS-precursor chemicals out of China and ATS and opiate products out of Burma's Shan State. Yet there is growing evidence that suggests hydro-electric development within the GMS increases navigability of the Mekong during the dry season and spurs construction of new roads and infrastructure around dams, which simultaneously benefits drug traffickers and disadvantages states' security agents by forcing them to spend more time and resources patrolling viable routes along and around the river. Although these developments strain states' resources, they present an opportunity to look into how the effects of alternative energy generation can change the dynamics of the trans-border drug trade.

Some of the security studies literature has looked at state security in the context of long-term threats like climate change and rising sea levels,⁵ but few studies have looked at the security implications of ecological change that is brought about by attempts to harness the power potential of freshwater rivers⁶ and seemingly none have explored a link between this and the rise of methamphetamine trafficking in SE Asia. For millennia, the Mekong River has been a crucial conduit for the movement of people and goods between the towns that lie along the river's banks,⁷ and trade between China and SE Asia has historically relied on the river and overland routes through Burma and Lao PDR.⁸ Yet over the past three decades, the river has undergone significant ecological changes due to increasing hydro-electric damming along both the main

⁵ See Paul D. Williams (ed.) (2008), *Security Studies: An introduction*, chapter 18. Also see Costa-Cabral et al. (2008) and Kingston et al. (2011).

⁶ One notable exception is recent work by Christopher G. Baker. See Baker (2012).

⁷ Mekong River Commission State of the Basin Report 2010, p. 192.

⁸ Siriphon (2007), p. 224-226.

artery of the river as well as its tributaries, and since the 1990s the river basin has become one of the most active places for hydro-power development (relative to its size) on the planet.⁹ China's dams remain controversial and have often been implicated as one of the main causes of low river levels that disrupt economic transportation along portions of the river. While physical evidence of this remains inconclusive, the damage that these kinds of accusations have on China's reputation are real for many of the peoples that inhabit the GMS. What is not in dispute is that uncharacteristically shallow water levels *have* impacted commerce by preventing Thai businesses from expanding cruise boats along the Mekong, stranding Chinese boats in the river's bed until upstream water was released, and preventing Chinese cargo ships from navigating their way to Thailand.¹⁰ Likewise, drug traffickers *have* utilized the river to both store and move drugs up and downstream by way of cargo ships and individuals that swim from riverbank to riverbank.¹¹ Some local communities in the GMS have even facilitated and participated in these activities by maintaining decades-old connections between cross-border traders and militia.¹² Thus the main goals for the paper are to explore the role that locals play in cross-border trade and examine how such trade re-creates an out-group identity that reinforces opposition to the central governmental authorities in China and Burma for many of these communities.

The paper proceeds as follows. I begin with a review of the literature on hydro-electric dams' social, ecological, and commercial effects in the Mekong River Basin, which is followed by a brief discussion of China's hydro-electric dams in Yunnan Province and the changes that have occurred as a result of their construction. The next section discusses the historical role of Yunnanese traders in cross-border trade and how they helped reinforce and institutionalize a

⁹ Mekong River Commission State of the Basin Report 2010, p. 184.

¹⁰ *Global Travel Industry News*, February 17, 2010; *Voice of America News*, March 29, 2010.

¹¹ *Thai Press Reports*, August 2, 2011; *CNN Wire*, March 1, 2013; *South China Morning Post*, September 26, 2013.

¹² See Chang (2009).

system that empowered former Kuomintang (KMT) in the border regions between China, Burma, Lao PDR, and Thailand. The paper concludes with recommendations for what could be done to counteract the neglect that many of the region's ethnic groups have suffered at the hands of China's and Burma's governments, including how the US government and even US businesses might contribute to the development of licit economies in place of the illicit trades that continue to thrive in many parts of the border regions.

Hydro-electric development and its impacts in the GMS

Hydro-electric dam construction along the Mekong River continues to expand each year, partly as a result of rapid economic growth and increasing demand for electricity in SE Asian states, but also due to some of these states needing large-scale projects in order to generate foreign exchange.¹³ Dam construction nearly always relies on foreign investment and expertise.¹⁴ While dams do alleviate some of the growing energy needs of some of the peoples of SE Asia, they also have substantial social and ecological consequences for others that depend on the river to deliver fresh water to crops and replenish soils during the wet season. Tilt et al. (2008) identify a number of social impacts that dam projects have on downstream communities, including the forced migration and resettlement of people whose lands become inundated by reservoirs, changes to the structure of rural economies, infrastructure, and housing, and impacts on cultural and communal health.¹⁵

Ecological impacts of dam development have been documented by numerous studies over the past few years. Hydroelectric dams impact river volume, timing, and duration of flow—

¹³ Bakker (1999), p. 216.

¹⁴ Bakker (1999), p. 211.

¹⁵ Tilt et al. (2008), pp. S253-S255.

all of which affect aquatic habitats and fish stocks and especially fish species that spawn during the dry season. In the Mekong River Basin in particular, the alteration of the flow has caused the character of the river to change,¹⁶ while the obstruction of the flow of sediment and nutrients downriver has starved soils, negatively affected the health of crops,¹⁷ and altered river aquatic environments and biota.¹⁸ This has been especially detrimental to communities that depend on river-basin agriculture.

Reduced discharge of water has been said to concentrate pollutants¹⁹ and metals²⁰ in reservoirs, while reduced flood duration and changes to the onset time of wet-season floods has disrupted the flood-pulse character of the river.²¹ This is significant since the flood-pulse is the process responsible for generating the intricate land-water interactions necessary for stimulating fisheries, maintaining salinity gradients in the delta, and flushing acidic soils in order to enable rice farming. Disruptions can have severe impacts for many of the 80 million people that live in the lower basin and depend on healthy crops and predictability for seasonal plantings and harvests.²² Many of these communities rank among the poorest and underdeveloped within Lower Mekong states.

¹⁶ Mekong River Commission Flow of the Mekong Report 2009, p. 7.

¹⁷ See Lu and Siew (2006), Kummu and Varis (2007), Fu et al. (2008), Li and He (2008), Kummu et al. (2010), Kingston et al. (2011), Wang et al. (2011), and Zhao et al. (2012a-c).

¹⁸ For example, Humborg et al. (1998) found that the balance between diatom and non-diatom types of algae in dam-generated stagnant bodies of water became disrupted over time and caused non-diatom species to increase relative to diatoms. Mimura (2008), p. 44.

¹⁹ Dudgeon (2000), p. 794.

²⁰ Shrestha and Nakamura (2008).

²¹ *Mekong River Commission State of the Basin Report* (2010), pp. 187-188.

²² Sneddon and Fox (2005), pp. 188-189; Caballero-Anthony et al. (2006), p. 225. Water releases can also wash away or bury eggs in reservoir sediment and block fish from migrating up or downstream. *Mekong River Commission State of the Basin Report Executive Summary* (2003), p. 19.

Dams also modify channels via erosion or depositing sediment, which destroys river banks and necessitates dredging and other modifications to the river.²³ Even temporarily restricting the Mekong's flow has the potential to disrupt entire sectors of states' economies like export agriculture and river-based transportation. The latter is especially detrimental to poor communities since more than a third of the population in the Lower Mekong Basin lives further than 10 km away from inland roads in Lao PDR and Cambodia. An estimated 915 Laotian villages with a combined population of approximately 320,000 also depend on inland waterways for navigation and transport, which is cheaper than travel by road. These communities use the Mekong to get to markets, health clinics, and education services in district and provincial centers—especially during the monsoon season when roads often become impassable for months on end. For many communities, the river is their only means of transport.²⁴

The Mekong is also increasingly important for the movement of commercial goods because it provides a cheaper alternative to road transport for moving large volumes of products long distances.²⁵ However, the passage of vessels is restricted by size due to annual water variations and a lack of regulation of the flow and depth of the river.²⁶ Low water during the dry season limits the expansion of trade, especially in the upper portions of the river that are narrower and more turbulent than downstream portions.²⁷ Yet despite this, port infrastructure continues to grow to accommodate expected future increases in trade volumes, and 300,000 tons of goods already traverse the river between Kuming and Bangkok each year with items that range from timber, rubber, and construction materials to agricultural products, fertilizers, and

²³ *Mekong River Commission State of the Basin Report Executive Summary* (2003), p. 45.

²⁴ *Mekong River Commission State of the Basin Report* (2003), p. 218.

²⁵ *Mekong River Commission State of the Basin Report* (2010), p. 192; *Mekong River Commission State of the Basin Report Executive Summary* (2003), p. 231.

²⁶ *Mekong River Commission State of the Basin Report Executive Summary* (2003), p. 224.

²⁷ Indeed, volumes of water-based trade decline by more than 50% during the typical low-water season.

food exports.²⁸ River customs checkpoints provide a large source of income for the Laotian government, especially for logs and timber products that are moved by river since their heavy weights can damage roadways, and Thailand also increasingly utilizes the Mekong for bilateral trade with Yunnan Province.²⁹

Manwan, Yunnan province's first hydro-electric dam to be built on the main channel of China's portion of the Mekong, became partly operational in 1993³⁰ and fully operational in 1996.³¹ The construction of the dam created a reservoir that inundated 1027 acres of farmland, 1403 acres of woodlands, and significantly impacted 114 villages.³² Many villages had to be resettled, and for those villagers that were resettled far away from the reservoir region, traditional social capital and interpersonal relationships suffered greatly. Although the dam improved transportation infrastructure in the region, it did not lead to the construction of permanent bridges and tunnels and actually contributed to the disruption of transportation during the summer monsoon season.³³ In the years that followed Manwan becoming partially operational, the downstream water flow was found to be lower than in the years prior to the dam coming online.³⁴ A study by Li and He (2008) found that its construction disrupted month-to-month water-level variation,³⁵ while Wei et al. (2009) found that the dam negatively affected the self-purification system of the reservoir in the dry season during the first seven years after the dam was completed.³⁶ Among rural areas adjacent to the dam, local economies experienced

²⁸ *Mekong River Commission State of the Basin Report* (2010), p. 192.

²⁹ *Mekong River Commission State of the Basin Report Executive Summary* (2003), pp. 219-223.

³⁰ Mimura (2008), p. 76.

³¹ Tilt et al. (2008), p. S253; Mimura (2008), p. 44.

³² These values come from Tilt et al. (2008), p. S254, and were converted to acres.

³³ Tilt et al. (2008), p. S255.

³⁴ Xi et. Al (2008), p. 47.

³⁵ Li and He (2008), p. 175.

³⁶ To be sure, the authors also found that the dam had a positive effect on reservoir quality in both the wet and dry seasons during the following five years. Wei et al. (2009), pp. 1777-1778.

significant ecological changes after the dam came online, including a decline in agricultural productivity and forest resources, shortages of water for the irrigation of fields, and increased costs for electricity after the completion of the dam. As a result, rice yields decreased and farmers were forced to shift to other crops like maize and sugarcane.³⁷

Towards the latter part of the 1990s and beyond, China began to cooperate more with its neighbors in the GMS through the Greater Mekong Sub-region Initiative. In 1996, representatives from China, Lao PDR, Vietnam, Burma, Thailand, and the UN began to discuss ambitious plans for developing a pan-SE Asia railway network when they met at the Lancang-Mekong Subregional Economic Cooperation Investment and Trade conference.³⁸ In 2003, China and the other GMS states signed an Intergovernmental Agreement on Power Interconnection and Trade, which built on two decades of various bilateral memorandums of understanding (MOUs) and agreements, and empowered energy companies to negotiate power purchase agreements.³⁹ 2003 also saw Dachaoshan, China's second hydro-electric dam on the Mekong, become fully operational.

Gongguoqiao, China's third Mekong dam, became operational in 2008 and now exports electricity to Guangdong province.⁴⁰ This is consistent with a broader pattern of Chinese-built hydro-electric dams diverting river resources away from immediate geographic regions, and China plans to continue adding more hydro-electric dams along its portion of the Mekong River

³⁷ Tilt et al. (2008), p. S254.

³⁸ Deng (1998), pp. 24-25.

³⁹ *Mekong River Commission State of the Basin Report* (2010), pp. 184-185.

⁴⁰ Spears and Lou (2006).

over the next few years.⁴¹ Ultimately, these dams are planned to generate more electricity than the Three Gorges Dam by 2019.⁴²

Transnational crime in the Mekong River Basin

Transnational organized crime (TOC) is crime by organized crime groups that are a) based in a single state; b) commit crimes in states where conditions are most favorable (which can be one state but often involves multiple states); and c) conduct illicit activities while minimizing their risk of apprehension as much as possible.⁴³ TOC groups pose especially severe problems for states that are weak and/or in process of transitioning to democracy because they undermine the judicial process, corrupt the political order, and supplant the delivery of goods (including security) where the state cannot deliver. Representatives of TOC groups work to infiltrate state institutions and corrupt government officials both in states where TOC groups are based as well as in states where they operate.⁴⁴ These effects radiate throughout states' economies in the form of extortion and market monopolization, leaving environmental and social scars in their wake.⁴⁵

In the GMS, TOC groups have had decades-long involvement in numerous illegal trades, including logging, gun, jade, and cigarette smuggling, money laundering, and human and drug trafficking.⁴⁶ Along Lao PDR's portion of the Mekong River, drug traffickers use wooden long-tail speedboats to transport opium grown in Lao PDR in one direction and methamphetamine

⁴¹ *Xinhua*, June 19, 2008.

⁴² Grinter (2006), p. 461.

⁴³ Shelley (1995), p. 464.

⁴⁴ Shelley (1995). P. 468.

⁴⁵ Shelley (1995), p. 471.

⁴⁶ Weatherbee (2008), p. 178; Reynolds (2011), p. 5.

(yaba) manufactured in Burma in the other.⁴⁷ Historically, traffickers have had close contact with cross-border traders across what are now the Yunnan-Burma-Lao PDR-Thailand border regions,⁴⁸ and their interactions have been enabled both by shared languages and customs between Yunnanese traders (since many members of TOC groups are ethnic Chinese)⁴⁹ but also by the fact that long stretches of mountainous terrain strain already limited resources of security agents in the border regions between northeastern Burma, northwestern Lao PDR and northern Thailand.⁵⁰

Since 1996 ATS/methamphetamine production has largely increased in Burma and the Mekong River has been vital to its trafficking.⁵¹ The gradual shift towards trafficking of more ATS/methamphetamine and less opiates is likely due to a number of factors. One is the growing availability of precursor chemicals which TOC groups smuggle into Burma's Shan State from China, Lao PDR, and Thailand. China is especially advantageous due to weak regulatory oversight of its precursor chemical industry as well as the fact that there are an unknown amount of unregistered and/or illegal Chinese factories that produce such chemicals.⁵² Also at work is the fact that much of the ATS/methamphetamine production by the United Wa State Army (UWSA), Shan State Army-South, and ethnic Chinese Kokang in Burma increasingly occurs in labs that are co-located with heroin refineries, which reduces production costs.⁵³ Yet another factor is the Burmese government's permitting of the production and trafficking of opiate drugs

⁴⁷ *South China Morning Post*, September 26, 2013. Lao PDR is also an important area of transit for heroin, ATS, and ATS precursor chemicals. See *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report* (2013), p. 66.

⁴⁸ See Chang (2009).

⁴⁹ Huang et al. (2012), pp. 3-4; Siriphon (2007), p. 220; Chang (2009), p. 545; *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report* (2007).

⁵⁰ Mogg (2006), p. 10.

⁵¹ *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report* (2013), p. 10.

⁵² *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report* (2013), p. 57 & p. 65.

⁵³ *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report* (2007); *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report* (2012), p. 112.

during ceasefires between 1989 and 1997.⁵⁴ Many groups pledged to be opium-free by 2000 yet this deadline passed with some of the most powerful groups not heeding to it. The UWSA finally began implementing the ban on opium production and trafficking in 2005, however they allegedly compensated for the loss of opium by increasing production and trafficking of ATS.⁵⁵

Corruption and state institutional incapacity are also likely contributing to the shift towards more ATS/methamphetamine.⁵⁶ According to Holmberg and Rothstein (2011), access to clean water is positively correlated with government effectiveness and negatively correlated with control of corruption,⁵⁷ while other literature suggests that decentralized government systems are vulnerable to corruption because there is more interaction at the local level and thus more opportunities to penetrate lower levels of government.⁵⁸ China's government has been centralized since the establishment of the PRC,⁵⁹ while Thailand's government was centralized until the 1997 constitution began a new era of gradual decentralization.⁶⁰ In contrast, Lao PDR's government decentralized all governmental sectors to the provincial level in 1987,⁶¹ while Burma historically has never had full control of its border regions and continued to face insurrection from multiple ethnic groups through the 2000s.⁶² In other words, the two richest

⁵⁴ For example, in 2001, Burma began to improve counternarcotics cooperation with China and Thailand and cracked down in the Kokang Chinese region controlled by Peng Jiasheng's Burma National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA). This was one of the groups that had pledged to be opium-free by 2000.

⁵⁵ *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report* (2007).

⁵⁶ This is possible because the drug trade's lucrative profitability for mafia groups like the Chinese triads and the Japanese yakuza enable them to buy off corrupt politicians, judges, and security forces. Emmers (2003), p. 4.

⁵⁷ The authors also found that richer states have more capacity to provide access to safe water than poor, autocratic states. Holmberg and Rothstein (2011), p. 7. Likewise, Hunter et al. (2010) found that access to safe water was positively correlated with GDP and government effectiveness. This is consistent with data from MDG indicators: China and Thailand have historically been far ahead of Lao PDR and Burma in their abilities to deliver essential services like access to clean drinking water to urban populations. See <http://mdgs.un.org/unsd/mdg/data.aspx>.

⁵⁸ *Study of Anticorruption Measures in EU Border Control* (2012), p. 24.

⁵⁹ For example, the central government pays the budget for the People's Armed Police (PAP), which is tasked with securing China's hydro-electric infrastructure. See Wang (2006).

⁶⁰ Nagai et al. (2008), p. 2.

⁶¹ Phommasack (2005), p. 523.

⁶² Reynolds (2011), p. 10.

countries in the GMS have the most centralized governmental systems, while two of the poorest countries have some of the region's most decentralized systems.

Yet perhaps most detrimental to the interdiction of ATS and heroin trafficking in SE Asia is the ideological similarity between TOC groups and some of the ethnic groups that inhabit the border regions between China, Burma, Lao PDR, and Thailand. Many of these groups' identities have been formed in opposition to traditional notions of the 'state'⁶³ and illegal cross-border trade, smuggling, and trafficking has occurred for decades,⁶⁴ providing insurgent groups with considerable sources of income as well as the means to continue insurgent activities.⁶⁵ One aspect of this that has been consistently overlooked (at least in the literature on drug trafficking) is the role that Yunnanese migrants played in enabling this trade.

Yunnanese have long traveled the Yunnan-Burma-Lao PDR-Thailand border regions, at times in search of economic gain while at others in pursuit of political refuge during domestic unrest.⁶⁶ Cross-border trade and travel has occurred regularly for centuries and has both contributed to and benefited from the fact that many of Yunnan's and Southwestern China's minorities share languages, religions, and customs with ethnic groups across the border in Burma, Lao PDR, and Thailand.⁶⁷ The mule-driven caravan trade between Yunnan and neighboring countries historically satisfied the consumption needs of mountain-based communities and facilitated the spread of social networks, knowledge, messages, news, and information. One result of this was the creation of numerous connections between various communities that spanned both sides of the modern-day border and were maintained by cross-

⁶³ Siriphon (2007) pp. 229-230.

⁶⁴ Weatherbee (2008), p. 178; Reynolds (2011), p. 5.

⁶⁵ Reynolds (2011), pp. 11-12.

⁶⁶ Chang (2009), p. 545.

⁶⁷ Huang et al. (2012), pp. 3-4; Siriphon (2007), p. 220.

border marriage, family visitation,⁶⁸ and as the establishment of Yunnanese diasporas and transnational networks throughout the region.⁶⁹ These ethnic communities often had more in common with people across state borders than with Han Chinese or Burmese, and Burma's natural geography reinforced this since mountain ranges kept regions isolated and discouraged the weak Burmese state from delivering infrastructure and public services to these areas. Over time, this resulted in many communities gaining considerable autonomy and maintaining independent cultures.⁷⁰ This was exacerbated by Burma's experience with British colonialism, as British actions alienated some ethnic groups and artificially empowered others by allowing them to retain special patronage and tributary relationships with other states.⁷¹ Following Burma's independence in January 1948, it immediately fell into a cycle of insurgency, armed conflict, and civil war that allowed armed groups along Burma's frontier to prosper,⁷² and this cycle has yet to fully subside.

When the Communists won the civil war in China in 1950, many Yunnanese fled to Burma at an unprecedented rate; for the communities that stayed behind (such as the Tai), the end of the war meant the beginning of forced ethnic assimilation and classification.⁷³ Among the refugees were Yunnan-based KMT members that soon organized into guerrilla forces in 1950. Many civilian refugees sought protection from these forces due to the threats posed by the Burmese Army and ethnic militias, however many of these forces were forced to disband by

⁶⁸ Chang (2009), p. 558; Siriphon (2007), p. 225.

⁶⁹ Chang (2009), p. 546.

⁷⁰ This is one explanation as to why the Karen and Shan in Burma's northeast have kept close links with Thailand while tribes of the Rakhine historically kept strong links to India.

⁷¹ For example, when Britain abandoned its attempts at central control of Burma it imposed separate forms of administration on different regions of the country. One result of this was the empowerment of compliant minorities whose existing leaders and headmen were retained in the frontier regions. The Chin and Kachin were allowed to maintain political legitimacy in Burma's north and west, respectively, and the Shan in the east, while the Karen, Chin, and Kachin were all allowed to serve in the military. In contrast, Burmans, the largest ethnic group in Burma, were excluded from serving in the army.

⁷² Reynolds (2011), pp. 7-12, 23.

⁷³ Siriphon (2007), p. 222.

1961. Two groups in particular—the Third and Fifth armies—responded by entering northern Thailand with many civilian refugees following after them, and they settled in villages along the border of Chiang Rai, Chiang Mai, and Mae Hongson provinces. The origins of many of the regions TOC groups can be traced back to these KMT soldiers who were intimately involved in drug trafficking and whose armies dominated the trans-border trade of goods during the 1960s and 1970s.⁷⁴ They associated with militias for convenience of movement, including groups from Shan, Kachin, and Kokang, and they also provided small amounts of weapons to KaKwe Ye (KKY) forces.⁷⁵ After the Burmese government was overthrown in 1962, the social and economic reforms of the ‘Burmese Way to Socialism’ further entrenched poverty and allowed the illicit trans-border trade to thrive. Over time a complex system of shared interests and interdependence developed between ethnic armed groups and the weak Burmese state—one that relied upon the continuance of trans-border trade yet kept intact the main structures and activities that fueled insurgency and instability in the first place.⁷⁶

Yunnanese refugees continued fleeing China during the Cultural Revolution⁷⁷ and into the 1970s and 1980s. The same villages where the Third and Fifth armies settled after 1961 became havens for Yunnanese migrants, and the illegal trade of goods continued mostly unabated.⁷⁸ Although some Tai exiles returned to live in China following the Cultural Revolution, others remained inside Burma and maintained their kin and cross-border trade networks.⁷⁹ By the early 1970s, illegal trade dominated Burma’s economy⁸⁰ and along the Thai-

⁷⁴ Chang (2009), p. 549-550.

⁷⁵ Chang (2009), p. 556.

⁷⁶ This included ethnic armed groups’ control of local economies and public administrations as well as their support from local peoples. Reynolds (2011), p. 9.

⁷⁷ Chang (2009), p. 559.

⁷⁸ Chang (2009), p. 549.

⁷⁹ Panyagaew (2010), p. 46.

⁸⁰ Chang (2009), p. 567.

Burmese border Yunnanese traders made up 70-80% of cross-border traders. Although Burmese market demand drove Yunnanese to take part in this trade, their participation was also a reflection of their stateless status, the diasporas that emerged from centuries of movement, and the military support they received from the KMT.⁸¹ Ethnic Wa militants, KMT forces, and local warlords along the southern Yunnan-eastern Burma border controlled the cross-border flow of people and goods, levied taxes, and collected tolls,⁸² while Kachin, Shan, and Wa armies produced and trafficked narcotics.⁸³ Mule-driven caravans remained the preferred mode for transporting goods until cars began to displace them in the middle of the 1980s,⁸⁴ and informal agreements between militia and Thai Border Patrol Police (BPP) allowed caravans to traverse the formal border unimpeded.⁸⁵ The 1980s also saw the beginning of an opening of diplomatic relations between China, Burma, and Lao PDR that legalized some of the ongoing illegal cross-border trade and resulted in a flood of Chinese migrants, merchants, and goods into Burma.⁸⁶

From the middle part of the century through the 1980s, Yunnanese migrants' mobility and links to KMT and other militia forces helped them transform the borderlands of Yunnan, Burma, Lao PDR, and Thailand into a center of transnational trade.⁸⁷ The gradual opening of borders between these states, as well as the modernization of their economic policies, would continue following the conclusion of the Cold War.⁸⁸ Free movement along the southern Yunnan-eastern Burma border region lasted until the establishment of the first checkpoint in Da

⁸¹ Chang (2009), p. 550-551.

⁸² Panyagaew (2010), p. 45; Reynolds (2011), p. 12.

⁸³ Indeed, this was a crucial source of hard currency for the Burmese military-led regime. Reynolds (2011), p. 12.

⁸⁴ Chang (2009), p. 549-551.

⁸⁵ Chang (2009), p. 565.

⁸⁶ Panyagaew (2010), p. 45.

⁸⁷ Chang (2009), p. 568.

⁸⁸ Siriphon (2007), p. 224; Panyagaew (2010), p. 56.

Menglong in 1992,⁸⁹ while economic reforms through the remainder of 1990s had the mixed effects of increasing foreign direct investment⁹⁰ but also contributing to rising rates of drug abuse and HIV/AIDS infections, especially among Tai communities in Xishuanbanna and Dehong Autonomous Prefectures.⁹¹ All the while, the Golden Triangle remained a major supplier of heroin, opiates, and ATS/methamphetamine that usually were destined for North America, Europe, and in more recent years, China and emerging SE Asian markets. Likewise, TOC groups continued to take advantage of weak governance wherever possible since it provided them opportunities to solidify their support within various communities throughout the region.⁹²

This is not to say there were not some profound changes along the way. By the middle of the 2000s, two thirds of Burmese ethnic groups in insurrection signed ceasefires with the government, although some groups with tens of thousands of followers refused to come under the command of the central authorities.⁹³ Recently, there has also been more intra-state coordination concerning Mekong River security issues. One well-known event that helped increase coordination between China and other GMS states was the October 2011 murder of 13 Chinese sailors whose vessels were stolen to transport methamphetamine pills from Yunnan to

⁸⁹ Panyagaew (2010), p. 56.

⁹⁰ For example, Chinese citizens that hold Burmese identity papers can invest without having to seek approval of Burma's government. Thawngmung and Sarno (2006), p. 49.

⁹¹ Denga et al. (2007), p. 1561.

⁹² See *US Embassy Cable*, June 7, 2007.

⁹³ Reynolds (2011), p. 10.

Chiang Saen in Thailand.⁹⁴ Ever since this incident, joint patrols involving China, Burma, Lao PDR and Thailand have occurred regularly.⁹⁵

Concluding remarks

TOC groups' longstanding relationships with cross-border traders have given them advantages that state security agents do not possess, and these advantages have been reinforced by shared ideological and cultural similarities between TOC groups and the ethnic groups that dot the border regions between China, Burma, Lao PDR, and Thailand. The main lesson to take away from this is that when ethnic groups form cultural identities in opposition to the 'state,' or when historical experiences and traumas help solidify in-group and out-group distinctions between ethnic groups,⁹⁶ these can have profound security implications. In the GMS, these identities have made it more difficult for the governments of Burma and Lao PDR to staff security forces that are capable of duplicating the level of coordination that exists between TOC groups and the region's local inhabitants.⁹⁷ They have also negatively affected joint Chinese-Burma hydro-electric development projects by stirring anti-China resentment among many of Burma's citizens who reject the idea of Burmese electricity being exported to China while blackouts still plague Burmese villages.⁹⁸ Although TOC groups have obvious global aims, it is the fact that many of their members are connected to regional kinship networks in the GMS that enables them to 'act locally' and find continued success in trafficking drugs in and out of the Golden Triangle. In the long term, reconciling these disconnected communities with the Chinese

⁹⁴ The gang responsible for this was based on the Shan State-Thailand border and included Burmese, Chinese, Laotian, and Thai members. Not too long after the incident, the gang's leader was caught, extradited to China, and executed. *South China Morning Post*, September 26, 2013.

⁹⁵ Zheng (2013).

⁹⁶ For an introduction to this literature, see William Connolly (2002), *Identity / Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox, Expanded Edition*, Innes and Steele (2013), and Stoltz Chinchilla and Hamilton (2013).

⁹⁷ For example, the Kachin population is more radical than the Kachin Army and leadership. Dapice (2012), p. 5.

⁹⁸ Dapice (2012), p. 8.

and Burmese central governments and allowing them to benefit from the resources that are generated from these groups' ancestral lands may be more effective at constraining TOC groups' ambitions and activities than any amount of domestic or foreign funding that states throw at drug trafficking interdiction.

Looking ahead, China and the United States have a number of shared interests that could be a source of cooperation between the two states. Both have an interest in further restricting the supply and movement of ATS and ATS precursor chemicals as well as providing resources to weaker, poorer states like Burma and Lao PDR that cannot stop the flow of ATS/methamphetamine, heroin, and opium on their own. The reality is that the Mekong River is currently a drug factory that gives opium from Lao PDR and ATS/methamphetamine and heroin from Shan State an outlet that runs north and south.⁹⁹ Lao PDR has recognized the threat that ATS/methamphetamine poses but continues to lack the resources and will needed to effectively stop it.¹⁰⁰ Likewise, Burma's Shan State continues to be largely off limits to the central Burmese authorities. China remains the only regional power that is capable of interdicting the flow of drugs along and around the river on any significant scale.

The United States has begun the process of helping to reintegrate Burma into the community of nations, and actions like President Obama's signing of a national interest waiver in September 2012¹⁰¹ will hopefully continue to nurture cooperation on drug interdiction issues and strengthen Burma's government. One option that could see more widespread implementation is the growing of grapes in place of opium poppy or other drugs industries, which the US has

⁹⁹ *South China Morning Post*, September 26, 2013.

¹⁰⁰ *US Embassy Cable*, June 7, 2007.

¹⁰¹ *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report* (2013), p. 115.

encouraged in Afghanistan¹⁰² and which Thailand's hill tribes have had some success in growing.¹⁰³ With assistance from US-based business owners, perhaps even a wine-making industry could someday rise up to replace the ATS/methamphetamine industry that currently dominates Burma's Shan State. The challenge for both China and the United States is to find ways to transcend typical patron-client relationships with Burma, Lao PDR, and Thailand and figure out how to destabilize the convergence of interests between this region's TOC groups and its ethnic minorities. Only then will the roots of ongoing conflict and the illicit drugs industries in these areas begin to be properly addressed.

¹⁰² Gamel (2010).

¹⁰³ Nilnond (2001).

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