

# **The Ethno-Narcotic Politics of the Shan People: Fighting With Drugs, Fighting for the Nation on the Thai-Burmese Border. By Thitiwut Boonyawongwiwat**

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**The Ethno-Narcotic Politics  
of the Shan People:  
Fighting With Drugs,  
Fighting for the Nation on  
the Thai-Burmese Border.  
By Thitiwut  
Boonyawongwiwat**

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As the country with the longest running civil war in the world, Burma (officially known as Myanmar today) has a tortuous history of ethnic insurgency and conflicts between a variety of ethnic minorities and the Bamar majority governments. This is particularly true in the Shan State, which has a history of insurgency deeply tied to the intrigues of Cold War regional geopolitics—a result of the support of the US Central Intelligence Agency and the Thai government for the Kuomintang, the Chinese nationalist troops who were defeated during the Chinese Civil War and invaded and occupied Burma's eastern Shan State for nearly a decade beginning in 1950. This Cold War past also laid the roots for the politics of narcotics along the border between Burma and Thailand, where the Kuomintang and other ethnic armed groups, including the Shan, used the handsome profits of the opium trade to finance their insurgencies. Within this history of narcotics and ethnic insurgency, Boonyawongwiwat's book discusses the role of narcotics in contemporary ethnic identity formation within 1 Shan community along the Thai-Burmese border.

The book's main argument is that, in the post-Cold War period, narcotics have been identified as a threat to the Shan people, and, thus, Shan nationalism has taken on a strong antinarcotic ideology.

Empirically, the book is based on ethnographic studies of a Shan village along the Thai-Burmese border, which used to be the base for the notorious Shan drug lord Khun Sa but is now a transit town for the support of 1 of the larger Shan insurgent groups on the Burmese side of the border. The author conducted field observations and carried out interviews in this village to document how the antinarcotics ideology has been promoted and internalized as part of the Shan nationalism itself.

The book is based on the author's doctoral thesis, and parts still read like one. It has 5 substantive chapters, an introduction, and a conclusion. In the substantive chapters, the book first discusses the theoretical framework of so-called antinarcotics nationalism, followed by a review of the history of ethnic conflict in Burma. It then analyses Thailand's highland development projects and the Thai state's role in the changing dynamics of narcotics politics along the borderland. The next 2 chapters specifically examine how contemporary Shan nationalist leaders conceptualize the role of narcotics in their versions of Shan nationalism, as well as how such an ideology has been internalized among the ordinary Shan people and manifests itself in daily encounters within 1 Shan village.

The strength of the book is its textual analysis of speeches made by Khun Sa and the current leader of the Shan State Army–South, Yord Serk. It includes long quotes from their political ideologies, which the author uses to trace the evolution of Shan nationalism and the changing relationship between ethnic insurgencies and narcotics. In this way, one can observe and evaluate how the role of narcotics has changed, at least in the official wordings from different generations of Shan leaders. Through such analysis the author demonstrates how the political logics of narcotics have changed from the Cold War to the post-Cold War periods.

That said, the book has quite a few problematic and unsatisfying aspects. Throughout the book, the author focuses quite narrowly on the issue of opium. However, currently the biggest narcotics epidemic along the Thai-Burmese border is methamphetamine, which goes by the Thai name *ya ba*. It is thus quite astonishing that the author does not discuss this. At the same time, one wonders how the Shan State Army is financing itself, given its past reliance on drug money. The author provides no material on how contemporary Shan insurgent groups are financed. There should have been more discussion about the issues of greed versus grievance among the Shan insurgents; the author alludes to these issues in the theory chapter but does not expand on them in the empirical chapters. For example, it is common knowledge that drug production in Burma is going up every year, and opium production has bounced back. It is difficult to prove that an ethnic insurgent group can financially sustain itself without getting its hands dirty. Methodologically, how can we really take the words of ethnic insurgent leaders at their face value? If asked, no one would willingly admit to being a drug lord. The author should have been more cautious in dealing with his interview materials from Shan insurgent leaders.

In addition, the chapter on the Thai state's highland development project seems disconnected from the rest of the book. It is not clear why the author includes it because its link with Shan nationalism is not that obvious. Furthermore, one cannot really talk about Shan nationalism as a whole by doing research within 1 refugee village in Thailand. Some of the claims the author makes seem a bit overblown. The Shan State is a very diverse place with multiple groups of ethnic insurgencies and multiple Shan armed groups and political parties. Some of the Shan insurgent groups fight against each other; for example, there have been recent clashes between the Shan State

Army-South and Shan State Army-North. It is a danger to generalize Shan nationalism for the whole of the Shan State on the basis of 1 borderland community. The author should have placed the book's focus more squarely on the unique circumstances of the borderland rather than venturing into the broad ethnonationalist politics within Burma in general.

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