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Institute of Current World Affairs
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MZW-4
SOUTHEAST ASIA

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Viva Mong La!

By Matthew Z. Wheeler

MARCH 27, 2003

Looking to the character of the country lying between the Salween [River] and the Mekong, it was certain to be the refuge of all the discontent and outlawry in Burma.

— Sir Charles Crosthwaite
Chief Commissioner of
Burma (1887-1890)
The Pacification of Burma, 1912.

SPECIAL REGION 4, Burma – The driver was anxious as we approached the last Burmese checkpoint on the road from Kengtung to Mong La. He warned me three times not to take any photographs. While he was in the checkpoint office, a soldier came from behind the bamboo fence to peer at me through the car window. He compared my face with the photograph on the purple travel document that I'd been issued (in exchange for my passport) upon arrival in Tachilek. After clearing the checkpoint we crossed a narrow bridge spanning the Nam Loi River and passed a guardhouse. The driver leaned forward to watch the bridge recede in the rear-view mirror. "You can photograph anything you want now," he said. "No more Army." He glanced back a final time, rocked in his seat, and then lit a cigarette. "No Army here."

The checkpoint marked the limit of Burmese Army authority in this remote corner of Burma's northeastern Shan State. We were still an hour's drive south of the Chinese border, but we were no longer in Burma proper. We had passed into Special Region No. Four, a strange, peripheral zone where the Burmese government is represented by little more than an Immigration Office on the outskirts of Mong La. That was my destination, a casino town on the Chinese border, a chintzy burlesque of the burlesque of Las Vegas. Mong La was the end of the line on the rather narrow corridor of Shan State allowed to tourists arriving from Thailand via Mae Sai.

It wouldn't do to stray too far from this corridor. Much of Shan State east of the Salween River is controlled not by Burma but by armed groups that traded insurgent status for autonomy by accepting cease-fire agreements proffered by Burma's military regime. The strongest and most important of these groups is the United Wa State Army (UWSA), an armed force of 20,000 that once formed the military backbone of the Communist Party of Burma (CPB). Prior to its collapse in 1989, the CPB was largest single insurgent force opposing the Burmese government, and the de facto authority in the mountainous regions from between the Salween and the Mekong Rivers. The Wa were the first group to accept a cease-fire with the Burmese Army, and the agreement set the pattern for several subsequent deals. In return for ceasing hostilities, the Wa leaders gained autonomy in the territory they controlled. In practice, this meant that the Wa were able to expand their heroin and methamphetamine production with impunity. Once notorious for hunting heads, the Wa are now recognized as the largest armed drug-trafficking organization in Asia.

Another beneficiary of the CPB collapse and subsequent cease-fire offers was Lin Minxiang, a.k.a. Sai Lin, the Sino-Shan former-commander of the CPB's Mekong River Division. Under terms of the cease-fire, Sai Lin's 2,000-strong National Democratic Alliance Army (sometimes called Eastern Shan State Army, or ESSA), retained its weapons, and the Burmese regime recognized Sai Lin as the ruler of his

old bailiwick, a tract of mountains tucked up against the Chinese border in northeastern Shan State. In 1991, the Burmese junta designated this area Special Region No. Four.

Like the Wa leaders, ex-Red Guard Sai Lin turned his attention to making money. As one Golden Triangle warlord once explained, "In these hills, the only money is opium."[1] Exploiting connections with his old Wa comrades and family ties to the powerful Kokang-Chinese drug producers, Sai Lin became an important figure in Burma's burgeoning heroin industry.

In 1991, even as the profits rolled in, Sai Lin pledged to make Special Region No. Four "opium-free" in six years' time. An opium-eradication program was implemented with assistance from the Burmese government and the United Nations. In 1997, in a ceremony attended by Lieutenant General Khin Nyunt, Burma's intelligence chief, Sai Lin declared Special Region No. Four opium-free. The Burmese government considers Special Region No. Four a model for what it hopes to achieve in other ex-insurgent areas. By 2000, Sai Lin had been dropped from the U.S. blacklist of drug traffickers.

Today, Sai Lin is not a well man. He has suffered a series of strokes in the past few years and is rumored to be convalescing in Singapore. However, the city that he transformed from sleepy Tai Lue village to sprawling Chinese tourist playground is thriving.

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Arriving from the south, the first thing one sees of Mong La is the golf course.

Sign of the United Wa State Army office in Mong La

[1] General Tuan Shi-wen, Kuomintang Fifth Army, 1967, cited in Martin Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*, London: Zed Books, 1991, p. 314.

After several hours barreling over dry mountains, past cracked fields and villages of thatch-roofed stilt houses, slowed now and then by militia checkpoints, herds of indifferent water-buffalo and dust clouds from passing trucks, the appearance of the scrubby greens and fairways left me slightly bewildered. My brief sojourn in Mong La would only amplify this sensation.

Mong La is a boomtown. On the surface, its economy is based on tourism or, as the driver put it, "Just eating, gambling and fucking." He might have added golfing, but I suspect that no one comes to Mong La just for the shabby links I saw outside town. They come instead for the round-the-clock casinos, the Russian dancing girls, the transvestite cabarets and a glimpse of "exotic" hill-tribe cultures. Kunming, the capital of Yunnan Province, which once sent busloads of Red Guards to Jinghong, now sends planeloads of tourists. There are 17 flights a day from Kunming to Jinghong. It's another four hours by bus to Mong La. On a good day, Mong La will welcome 10,000 Chinese tourists.

I went for a walk early in the evening, as the sun cast pale, orange light into the town. The streets were narrow and lined with hole-in-the-wall restaurants, electronics repair shops, noodle vendors, clothing boutiques and hair salons. All of the signs were in Chinese. Standing or squatting in doorways, people stared at me with mute curiosity. Here and there groups of four gathered around card tables to play mahjong. My earlier realization that I was not really in Burma anymore gave way to the awareness that I was—in essence if not in fact—in China.

I stopped to photograph a billboard showing Sai Lin shaking hands with Lieutenant General Khin Nyunt, Burma's intelligence chief. Khin Nyunt had engineered the cease-fire agreements with the former-CPB forces and he enjoys close relations with the Wa leaders and Sai Lin. Khin Nyunt's rival within the regime, General Maung Aye, spent his career fighting the Communists, and is said to resent the arrangements. Khin Nyunt, meanwhile, is believed to profit personally from the revenue generated in the Special Regions.

Visitors from China are greeted by maidens in Tai costume and invited to pose with peacocks, symbols of the exotic luxuries once carried as tribute from southern vassals to the Son of Heaven.

I found myself in the back alleys of the old Tai village, the embryo from which this brash new city had grown. The alleys curled past brick walls behind which antique houses tilted and sagged on their stilts. A Tai woman bent at the waist, wringing water from her long black hair into a plastic bucket. A young girl slurped noodles and watched me through the wooden slats of her veranda. Two teenaged girls loitered in an alley, leaning against a wall and passing a cell phone between them. Three bald little imps, novices from the Buddhist temple, scampered past me with wide eyes. Around one corner a shaman chanted incantations over a doleful young man who sat on the ground, his head bowed, surrounded by

Sai Lin, leader of Special Region No. Four, shakes hands with Lieutenant General Khin Nyunt, Burma's intelligence chief and architect of the cease-fire arrangements with the Communist Party of Burma splinter groups.

four baskets of folded paper holding candles and joss sticks. Further on I came upon a man butchering a small deer. He posed the viscera on a piece of cardboard.

Perhaps it was the light, or the fact that I couldn't communicate with the people around me, but a dream-like quality infused the scene. I was exhilarated at being in a strange, new place, but I felt constrained to move gingerly. A sudden move might rend the mirage.

Tai women wear their hair in a distinctive style.

I emerged from the back streets as if from the past. Groups of young Chinese in white shirts, red vests and black bow ties began to appear; the shifts were changing at the casinos. I walked down toward the shallow river that bisects Mong La and found the driver. He pointed to a salmon-colored hotel with black windows encased in bamboo scaffolding standing on the far side of the river. "That hotel wasn't there two months ago," he said. As we walked downhill, the small groups of casino employees multiplied until an army of red-vested croupiers extended across the bridge in a column that disappeared behind the new hotel. There were hundreds of them. Their numbers helped me to grasp the enormous scale of Mong La.

Croupiers hit the streets as the shifts change.

The town planners were not lacking in civic-mindedness. They had built a promenade along the river with hedges and transplanted saplings. Young couples strolled beside us while leering construction workers filed past. Tai women in pink or blue sweaters shuffled home with empty wicker baskets. More half-finished buildings rose up at the foot of the hills, one of them festooned with twisting, multi-colored streamers. Streetlights flickered on. The driver told me Mong La has electricity 24 hours a day, not just a few hours in the evening as in Kengtung. "China," he explained.

The driver led on to the town market, a massive square divided into quarters by four streets joined in the center by a roundabout. We entered near the quarter that served as the morning market, now empty, and proceeded toward the "night market" which was just coming to life. Here 60 or 70 tiny bars faced each other across the L-shaped street that formed one corner of the square. These bars were indistinguishable from each other except by the choice of posters (amorous couples, flower pots, cats) adorning their walls. Downstairs in each establishment lounged five or six young women. They sat on cheap plastic furniture, chatting, primping, eating, sleeping or watching TV. A few lingered out in the street, illuminated by red paper lanterns. I saw several girls in one place fall about as they mimicked the runway strut and vamp of the fashion models on their television.

When we reached the end of the row of brothels a young woman with blond hair and green eyes appeared before me. She cradled a large green bottle of Chinese beer. She said, "Ruski." I said, "American." And without another word we silently agreed that it was a shame we

The clock tower, a Mong La landmark.

couldn't understand each other. I had heard of Russian and Central-Asian prostitutes in various Asian cities. Indeed, the driver had offered to take me to see Russian dancing girls. Still, I was startled by the presence of this fair-skinned waif in Mong La. She smiled before disappearing into a nearby shop front.

I looked inside as we walked past and saw her sitting in front of a computer. There were five other Russian women there, hammering out Cyrillic missives to invisible friends or playing shoot-'em-up video games. I dragged the driver inside. If I was surprised to see this contingent of Slavic beauties in Mong La, the driver was equally astonished to see, for the first time in his life, the Internet. We watched the girls typing away and I explained to the driver in broad terms the uses of the information superhighway. For a few Chinese *yuan* (Burmese *kyat* are no good in Mong La), I showed him some newspaper websites, brought to us by Chinese servers. After a couple of minutes the *Washington Post* website was blocked, but Shan dissident websites loaded just fine.

Later I sat with the driver and one of his local friends on the curb of the roundabout, and we watched the nightlife of Mong La unfold around us. Parties of Chinese men with flat-top haircuts, dark suits and belts with square, silver buckles strode around the market, fiddling with their cell phones and pulling on cigarettes. Young women in knee-high platform boots, long leather coats and tight-fitting tops trotted to work. Behind us a woman wearing a towel on her head set up a shooting game, arranging plastic toy assault rifles on a table before a wall of multicolored balloons. A barefoot young man with tangled hair and a deranged grin lingered to my right.

I told the driver I'd been walking around the old Tai town, and he said that in the old days, one used to see mules and horses under the stilt houses. The animals carried opium to Thailand, usually via Tachilek. Back then, amphetamines were called "*ya ma*," horse medicine. Traffickers fed speed to the mules and horses so that they could carry more opium and travel farther, faster. Now, they call it "*ya ba*," crazy medicine, and there are no more mules or horses, nor any more opium to transport.

So, he believed Sai Lin's "opium-free" claim?

Yes, he told me. There is no poppy cultivation to speak of, but he wasn't convinced that Special Region No. Four was drug-free. There is a triangle of interests in Mong La, he explained. Sai Lin and his cronies run the show, the Wa and their Chinese benefactors launder their drug profits and Khin

Russian women at an Internet café in Mong La. The Internet is illegal in Burma proper.

Nyunt has a model of "opium-free" development, not to mention a cut of the proceeds. Each side has an interest in Mong La, so nobody rocks the boat. If anyone gets out of line, Sai Lin's security forces take care of it.

Meanwhile, the casinos that once just laundered money now turn a profit. The investors come from China and the overseas Chinese communities, particularly from Australia and Canada. If you lose all your money at the casino, the driver told me, you can take your credit card to the bank in town and get a cash advance. The casinos operate around the clock. (I stopped into one casino at 9 PM and found it packed with Chinese punters, placing their bets under a haze of cigarette smoke and a network of security cameras. I returned at 7 AM the next morning, to see a dozen bleary-eyed men at baccarat tables, sipping through straws from little brown bottles of Shark-brand energy drink.)

As we walked back across the bridge toward the clock

Mahjong players. Gambling is an obsession in Mong La.

tower, beams of blue light shot across town from the roof of a hotel behind us. The lights of the casinos blazed away, while on a hill to the north a gold temple glowed like a flame. The sight stirred a vague longing in me. I thought Mong La was the most romantic place I'd ever seen.

The next morning the driver took me to see some of Mong La's other tourist attractions. We stopped first at the "Shan-style" temple, completed in 1996—the temple I'd seen glowing in the distance the night before. Up close, it was utterly without charm, a brassy, monstrous tourist trap. A vast parking lot teemed with foreign visitors in matching hats. At length they filed up the steps behind a female guide in a flashy version of Tai costume and commenced taking snapshots of each other. I hurried through the gift shop, an S-shaped maze with one entrance and one exit, stocked with Thai and Vietnamese candies, dried fruit, chocolates, cigarettes, belts, lighters, booze, jade bracelets, mounted spiders, butterflies, and carved wooden animals: elephants, tigers and dragons. There was not a monk in sight.

The tourist trap temple, up close

Next we went to Mong La's "Museum of Commemoration of Opium Free in Special-Region 4." In 1997, Khin Nyunt had come to Mong La to help Sai Lin cut the ribbon on the museum, marking Special Region Four's brave, new opium-free era. The museum exhibitions are varied and instructive. One learns, for example, how foreigners introduced opium to Burma. Do-It-Yourself enthusiasts will be interested in the six-step instructions for refining opium into morphine. A series of black-and-white photos chronicles the Burmese military campaigns against the Kuomintang (Chinese Nationalists), the Communists, and the "drug lord" Khun Sa, who now lives under the junta's protection as a legitimate businessman in an exclusive Rangoon neighborhood. Glass cases hold opium pipes, rusty scales, lead weights and other artifacts of Mong La's extinct opium culture. Several framed photographs show

(Right) Mong La's museum commemorating the eradication of opium from Special Region No. 4. The visitors are overwhelmingly from China.(Above)A photo of Lt. Gen. Khin Nyunt in the opium museum.

drug-burning ceremonies, approvingly observed by members of the international community. One mural stretches the length of the room and depicts the transformation of Mong La from bucolic backwoods to boomtown. A series of four life-sized dioramas illustrates one young man's rehabilitation, from long-haired junkie to zealous member of the government youth league. Outside, Chinese couples pose in front of several desiccated specimens of *papaver somniferum*, the poppy plant.

I was most fascinated by a detailed diorama of Mong La in the museum's foyer. There was the border crossing, the temple, the river, the Catholic Church, the major casinos, the roads and hills, all faithfully represented. It occurred to me that this miniature Mong La was somehow redundant. Mong La itself is a simulation. It was as if the diorama were the template, and the town a reproduction. I could see the town from where I stood, spread out in the valley below like a child's building blocks. In its newness, its pretense and its narrowness of purpose, Mong La is very much a toy city.

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Recounting a visit to Mong La in his book *The Trouser People*, the British journalist Andrew Marshall asks, "How did a place as bizarre as [Mong La] ever get built?" A friend of Marshall's theorized that Mong La represents a gangster's paradise, a warped version of the outside world conceived by wanted men who watch too much satellite television. The dissipations of Mong La, however, are scarcely unique. The appeal of gambling and commercial sex extends far beyond the mafia underworld. What makes Mong La so freakish is not the varieties of vice available there, but the fact that they are concentrated in a remote fiefdom in the Shan hills, beyond the effective reach of any national authority. My question is, "How can such an anachronism exist today?"

A scholar who examined the kaleidoscope of Burma's ethnic insurgencies and the contradictions of the regime's counterinsurgency efforts—marked by cease-fires, betrayals and sudden exculpations of former enemies—was driven to ask, "Where is the rationality?" His answer is that the insurgents and government alike adhere to what he calls "premodern-nonrational" thought, the product of "a very different kind of cognition and outlook."[2] It's not a very satisfying answer. One might well ask, "Different from what?" Still, the recourse of appealing to premodern concepts of statecraft may be helpful in understanding how, given the peculiar circumstances in Shan State, the practice of surrendering sovereignty over distant parts of the nation to armed drug-traffickers is not only rational, but pragmatic and precedented.

The hereditary chiefs of the Shan principalities began to pay tribute to Burman[3] kings in the eleventh century. In exchange for formal acknowledgment of their status as vassals, these Shan chiefs, known as *saophas* (sometimes Romanized as *chao fa*, or *sawbwa* in Burmese), retained autonomy in the legal, administrative and financial affairs of their principalities. While the *saophas* recognized the suzerainty of the Burman kings through regular tribute, they sometimes paid tribute to China and to Siam as well. The Shan chiefs came to play a role in the Burmese court at Ava, and many Shan princesses became royal concubines. Throughout the pre-colonial period, however, the Shan chiefs retained autonomy within their states. As one Shan scholar wrote:

Relationships between the Burmese power centre and the Shan were never based on total domination or complete sub-

[2] Ananda Rajah, "Ethnicity and Civil War in Burma: Where is the Rationality?" in Robert I. Rotberg, ed., *Burma: Prospects for a Democratic Future*, Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 1996, p. 145.
[3] "Burman" signifies ethnicity. "Burmese" signifies nationality.

mission, but rather resembled the relationship between rushing waves at a stretch of rocky coastline. Strong winds and high tides would bring waves in, covering the coast, but there were rock formations or some pieces of high ground, here and there, above the foaming and eddying current, defying the sea, the waves and the winds.[4]

The British annexed the Shan States in 1885 and "pacified" the area over the next several years. Their method was to send a letter, backed by a show of force, to each of the *saophas* demanding submission to the British crown. The British aimed to supplant the Burman throne and to assume the deposed monarch's suzerainty while maintaining and utilizing the authority of the Shan princes. As one colonial official described the situation in 1886:

The Shans, Kachins and other mountain tribes live under the rule of hereditary chiefs, whose authority is generally sufficient to preserve order amongst them. Here, then, we have to deal . . . with large organized units, each under the moral and administrative control of an individual ruler. If we secure the allegiance of these rulers, we obtain as far as can be foreseen most of what we require . . . .[5]

What the British "required" was stability and revenue. By controlling the Shan chiefs, they found a heavy hand was not necessary.

The British colonial administration rested very lightly on the Shan States. The British divided their colony into two parts, namely, Burma Proper or Ministerial Burma, the latter comprising the Irrawaddy River Valley and the mountainous regions known variously as the Frontier, Scheduled or Excluded Areas. The Frontier Areas constituted more than a third of the area in British Burma, some 90,000 square miles of mostly mountainous territory, including the Shan States. Immediately prior to World War II, 40 Burma Frontier Service officials administered the entire Frontier Area. Just 14 British officers served in the Federated Shan States, an area as large as England and Wales.[6]

The story of the Shan states grows much more complicated following Burma's independence from Britain in 1948. The Shan chiefs maintained that their states were independent, and agreed to union with Burma on the understanding that they would be free to secede in ten years' time if they wished. This right was guaranteed by the 1948 Constitution. In 1950, following the Communist victory in China, Chinese Nationalist forces poured into the Shan states, where they established new bases and attempted to regroup. The Chinese Nationalists, desperate to fund their invasion of Red China, began producing opium on an industrial scale. After several failed attempts to invade Yunnan, opium became the end rather than the means. In 1953, the Burmese army entered the Shan states in an effort to drive out the Chinese. In 1958, largely in response to the Burmese army presence, Shan insurgents launched a rebellion. In 1962, Ne Win carried out a *coup d'etat* in Rangoon and nullified the Constitution. There has been war in Shan State[7] ever since.

In 1963, in a bid to undermine the various rebel factions then active in the remote Shan mountains, the Burmese government introduced home-guard units, known as *Ka Kwe Ye*, or KKY. In fact, the Burmese government did nothing more than deputize armed groups that were already operating in Shan state, allowing them to trade in opium so long as they battled the government's enemies. The KKY program was abandoned in the early 1970s, as several of these groups had grown too powerful and capricious. Many of Shan States' most notorious drug dealers, including Khun Sa, got their start as KKY commanders.

The current cease-fire arrangements and business relationships between the regime and ex-insurgent groups represent a striking continuity with a long-established pattern of relationships between lowland centers of power and the traditional Shan states. Today, the Burmese government is unable to administer much of Shan State, especially those "Special Regions" controlled by the UWSA and Sai Lin and the much smaller areas along the Thai border contested by the Shan State Army-South. Indeed, no power emanating from the lowlands of the Irrawaddy River valley, whether Burmese or British, has ever directly administered the Shan highlands. In historical context the autonomy enjoyed by the UWSA and Sai Lin appears to be unexceptional.

The historian Michael Aung-Thwin explained the British approach to rule in the Shan States:

A 'pacified' society was . . . measured by two primary criteria: the absence of 'significant' military resistance articulated . . . as 'nationalistic' .. .; and second, the existence of a successfully administered territory, defined largely in terms of revenue collection.[8]

These appear to be the same criteria the junta uses to measure the success of its relations with the so-called "Special Regions." Indeed, the cease-fire agreements represent the regime's most sophisticated means of coping with the distance and ethnic differences that challenge

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[4] Chao Tzang Yawnghwe, *The Shan of Burma: Memoirs of an Exile*, Singapore: Institute of South East Asian Studies, 1987, p. 69.
[5] Lord Dufferin, cited in Smith, p. 41.
[6] G. E. Harvey, *British Rule in Burma: 1824-1942*, London: Faber and Faber, n.d., p. 85.
[7] The Shan states became Shan State in 1959 when the *saophas* relinquished their hereditary rights to an elected Shan State government.
[8] Michael Aung-Thwin, "The British 'Pacification' of Burma: Order Without Meaning," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 16, no. 2 (1985): 246.

A view of Mong La. From left to right are the flags of the Eastern Shan State Army, Shan State, and the Union of Myanmar.

their will to rule Shan State. As for revenue collection, it is widely known that profits from drug trafficking have been a vital source of revenue for Rangoon. "[S]ince 1989, hundreds of millions of narco-dollars have been re-invested in the country's legitimate economy, contributing more to Burma's relative economic stability than any other single business activity save for the oil industry."[9]

Certainly, the Burmese government is trying to assert greater control in areas ruled by cease-fire groups. It has established a garrison of troops in Special Region One, controlled by the Kokang ethnic group. The Wa, however, remain too powerful a military force for the government to consider resuming hostilities. The autonomy "granted" by Burma under terms of the cease-fire agreements is simply an endorsement of a reality the junta is, for now, powerless to change.

An encounter on the drive from Mong La to Kengtung illustrated for me Burma's tenuous position in Shan State. We were just outside of Mong La when two sport-utility vehicles passed us. They bore license plates reading "SW3," signaling that these cars belonged to the UWSA Southern Command. The driver said, "I know the driver of that first car. He is a Burmese Army officer in Kengtung. The Number 2 guy." But why was he driving a car with Wa plates? "Maybe *ya ba* in that car."

An hour or so later we saw the second car that had passed us stopped in the road ahead. One of its tires was blown out. "Nobody rides with us," the driver admonished me, "If they want a ride, you tell them 'No!'"

A middle-aged man in a blue oxford shirt flagged us down. He introduced himself by name and position, and gave me his card. He was a high-ranking Burmese Customs official, and he was driving from Mong La to Kengtung with his family. Would I please give him a ride to the Burmese Army checkpoint?

I ignored his question, but offered to help him change his tire. He had no jack. In the end, I flagged down a passing truck and engaged the labor and tools of its bemused but affable driver.

The official and I stood together awkwardly. His fam-

[9] Bertil Lintner, "The Golden Triangle Opium Trade: An Overview," 2000; available at http://www.asiapacificms.com/papers/gt_opium_trade.pdf.

ily hid themselves behind their car. My driver kept his distance, feigning disinterest behind his cigarette.

We made small talk. Had he been in Mong La for business or pleasure? Some of both, he said. And me? Just a tourist. Beautiful country, great potential. But why couldn't I take the road to Panghsang (where the UWSA has its headquarters), I asked? Oh, it's not safe, you see. Perhaps someday in the future the road will be open. Had he been in Shan State before? Yes, as an officer in the army, fighting the rebels. Fifteen years in uniform, attained the rank of major, but then was transferred to Customs. He corrected himself: "I was ordered to Customs."

The official seemed anxious, almost nervous. He had been caught unprepared. The light was beginning to fade. Standing there on the road of crushed stone in his fancy loafers and slicked-back hair, he looked incongruous and vulnerable. That he'd sought help from me, a stranger and a foreigner, made him appear to me that much more helpless. The territory was by no means hostile, but it was wild and remote and some distance yet from the Burmese checkpoint at the Nam Loi River. I imagined him as a guest, an envoy, an agent of Rangoon collecting tribute in a vassal state. He was a long way from home.

Once the tire had been changed, we shook hands, and he urged me to call him if I, "ever have any problems in Rangoon."

My driver and I drove off first. After some time, just before we reached the Nam Loi River, we were halted by roadwork. Several dozen men pulverized rocks with sledgehammers while teams of four graded the road by scraping it with metal sheets. We settled in for a wait.

Soon the Customs official arrived. He got out from his car and spoke to the foreman. Now, within sight of the Burmese checkpoint, he seemed to have recovered some of his confidence. The foreman offered a smart salute, then ordered the workers to make way. The official gave a little wave and sped back into Burma, leaving behind Special Region No. Four and a cloud of rock dust. ❑

Fellows and their Activities

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Alexander Brenner (June 2002 - 2004) • **EAST ASIA**
A linguist who has worked as an French-language instructor with the Rassias Foundation at Dartmouth College and also has proficient Mandarin and Spanish, upper-intermediate Italian, conversational German and Portuguese, and beginning Cantonese, Alex received a B.A. in History from Yale in 1998 and has just completed a Master's degree in China Studies and International Economics at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies. He is prepariing for his two-year ICWA fellowship in China with four months of intensive Mandarin-language study in Beijing. His fellowship will focus on the impact of a new government and a new membership in the World Trade Organization on Chinese citizens, institutions and regions both inside and far from the capital.

Martha Farmelo (April 2001- 2003) • **ARGENTINA**
A Georgetown graduate (major: psychology; minor, Spanish) with a Master's in Public Affairs from the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton, Martha is the Institute's Suzanne Ecke McColl Fellow studying gender issues in Argentina. Married to an Argentine economist and mother of a small son, she will be focusing on both genders, which is immensely important in a land of Italo/Latino machismo. Martha has been involved with Latin America all her professional life, having worked with Catholic Relief Services and the Inter-American Development Bank in Costa Rica, with Human Rights Watch in Ecuador and the Inter-American Foundation in El Salvador, Uruguay and at the UN World Conference on Women in Beijing.

Andrew Rice (May 2002 - 2004) • **UGANDA**
A former staff writer for the *New York Observer* and a reporter for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the Washington Bureau of *Newsday*, Andrew will be spending two years in Uganda, watching, waiting and reporting the possibility that the much-anticipated "African Renaissance" might begin with the administration of President Yoweri Museveni. Andrew won a B.A. in Government from Georgetown (minor: Theology) in 1997 after having spent a semester at Charles University in Prague, where he served as an intern for *Velvet* magazine and later traveled, experienced and wrote about the conflict in the Balkans.

Matthew Z. Wheeler (October 2002-2004) • **SOUTHEAST ASIA**
A former research assistant for the Rand Corporation specializing in South and Southeast Asia, Matt will spend two years looking into proposals, plans and realities of regional integration (and disintegration) along the Mekong River, from China to the sea at Vietnam. With a B.A. in liberal arts from Sarah Lawrence and an M.A. from Harvard in East Asian studies (as well as a year-long Blakemore Fellowship in Thai language studies) Matt will have to take long- and short-term conflicts in Burma, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia into account as he lives, writes and learns about the region.

James G. Workman (January 2002 - 2004) • **SOUTHERN AFRICA**
A policy strategist on national restoration initiatives for Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt from 1998 to 2000, Jamie is an ICWA Donors' Fellow looking at southern African nations (South Africa, Botswana, Mozambique, Zambia and, maybe, Zimbabwe) through their utilization and conservation of fresh-water supplies. A Yale graduate (History; 1990) who spent his junior year at Oxford, Jamie won a journalism fellowship at the Poynter Institute for Media Studies and wrote for the *New Republic* and *Washington Business Journal* before his years with Babbitt. Since then he has served as a Senior Advisor for the World Commission on Dams in Cape Town, South Africa.

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Author: Wheeler, Matthew Z.
Title: ICWA Letters - South Asia
ISSN: 1083-4257
Imprint: Institute of Current World Affairs, Hanover, NH
Material Type: Serial
Language: English
Frequency: Monthly
Other Regions: East Asia; The Americas; Europe/Russia; Mideast/North Africa; Sub-Saharan Africa

ICWA Letters (ISSN 1083-4257) are published by the Institute of Current World Affairs Inc., a 501(c)(3) exempt operating foundation incorporated in New York State with offices located at 4 West Wheelock Street, Hanover, NH 03755. The letters are provided free of charge to members of ICWA and are available to libraries and professional researchers by subscription.

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