

A border
region that embodies
the abuses
of the illegal
wildlife trade.

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Dark Appetites

Far left to right: A traditional Chinese medicine display in Mong La's central market; a baby black bear for sale as meat; fresh game meat fetches top prices; a Sambar deer.



THE ROAD to the town of Mong La in Myanmar's Shan State twists through mountains of swaying forest and swirling bamboo, sudden drop-offs and breathtaking vistas, turns past Buddhist shrines and temples and monasteries. It drops into valleys where the land flattens and shatters into brown and green rice paddies, marked by clusters of bamboo-sided and straw-thatched houses on stilts and animated by grazing water buffalo and cone-hatted farmers bent at the waist in the yellow sun, pulling up clumps of green rice and slapping them into the brown water. The setting is serenely pastoral, and since we have travelled during the dry season, the predominant colour is brown, while the main smells and tastes are subtly associated with dust... until, suddenly, from out of the dry land and the brown-watered valleys emerges a flood of lush, green grass surrounded by bright-green shrubbery and trees. It's a golf course, which is immediately followed by a high gate, a pair of armed, grim-faced guards in military fatigues, and then, beyond the gate, the unfolding vision of a great white McPalace, a vaguely Greek revival statement in heavy rectangles and white stucco.

One of my two travelling companions comments, as we drive past, 'A lot of New York City junkies paid for this.'

Shan State's Special Region 4 was created in April 1989 as a semi-autonomous piece of northeastern Myanmar after a ceasefire between the Myanmar army and certain drug-dealing communist rebels. 'Semi-autonomous' means essentially autonomous. This is a place with its own visa requirements, civil service and army, and with all public and private vehicles marked by the distinctive 'SR4' license plate.

Sharing a border with China's Yunnan province, Special Region 4 has also taken on a decidedly Chinese flavour. The telephone signals pass through Chinese networks. The currency is the Chinese Yuan. Most ordinary conversations take place in Mandarin. The guy who appears to be in charge, General Sai Leun, while a young man (then named Lin Mingxian) exerted himself on behalf of the Chinese Cultural Revolution as a Red Guard. But from those youthful origins in China, Sai Leun rose to become a contender in Myanmar: a communist rebel leader and opium entrepreneur with enough influence to warrant his own mugshot on the official US list of international drug lords and criminals. Today, General Sai lives more modestly as the anti-drug lord for Special Region 4.



Top: Looking across the border from Myanmar to China.
Top, right: Opium use continues in Special Region 4.
Above: The opening up of the area has helped to fuel the cross-border trade between China and Myanmar.

Welcome to Mong La

Green reverts to brown. The road rambles and wavers into the town of Mong La, which is the jewel in the crown of Special Region 4. We stop for lunch at an ordinary Chinese restaurant, open to the street, and while savouring green tea after fried rice, are surprised by the sight of a large blue-and-white garbage truck backing up to some bags of trash. This just might be the only mechanised garbage pick-up in all of Myanmar, I'm thinking, and as if to stress the distinction, a back-up warning signal beeps out an electronic rendition of 'Santa Claus is Coming to Town.'

Located at the heart of Southeast Asia's notorious Golden Triangle, Special Region 4 was ten years ago producing nearly 9,000 kilograms of raw opium annually.

Still, Mong La is a Buddhist town, and after lunch and then a hotel check-in, we drive to the top of the hill at the centre of town and climb to the summit of the great golden temple and pagoda. Mong La is surrounded by high hills, but the upside-down ice cream cone of the golden pagoda reaches high enough to rival those hills, and in the late afternoon, we stand up there and look over the town, while the sounds of pattering motorbikes and chugging Chinese tractors, of children's high-pitched voices and laughter, and a cock-a-doodle cacophony of cocks – those sounds rise and turn insubstantial, and a mild breeze attenuates the heat of the day. Our translator, standing next to me, points to a green and watery area at the edge of the river flowing through town, and says, 'All those rice fields used to be poppy fields.'

Located at the heart of Southeast Asia's notorious Golden Triangle, Special Region 4 was ten years ago producing nearly 9,000 kilograms of raw opium annually. The opium was refined into morphine and heroin, smuggled through the mountains and across the border into northern Thailand, transported south to the hub of Bangkok, and then passed into the jetstream by Chinese criminal syndicates.

On 22 April 1997, however, Special Region 4 was officially declared a drug-free zone, and to celebrate that auspicious moment, Mong La's narcotics museum was opened. Located inside a pink and spiky bit of architecture not very far from the great pagoda, the museum includes dramatic photographs of dead addicts and live interdiction personnel, and, beneath cracked and taped-over glass, samples of dried poppies and the drugs manufactured from them. An extensive diorama illustrates, with the help of dressed-up mannequins, the degrading effects of drugs on addicts and the curative effects of intelligent medical treatment and law enforcement. The drug museum's historical section, meanwhile, describes the arrival of opium poppies on ships manned by Arabic and Portuguese traders during the 15th and 16th centuries, and it explains that 19th-century British colonialists introduced the phenomenon of addiction. At last, as I can read, 'The state has raised the momentum of efforts in all sectors for prevention of the scourge of narcotic drugs, the enemy of all mankind.'





The drug-prevention efforts during the late 1990s proceeded in two phases. First was the police work, which consisted of decapitating plants, burning fields, apprehending criminals, smashing refineries, and so on. Second was the economic work. Opium was and still is a major cash crop in this part of the world. The opium poppies (*Papaver somniferum*) grow easily and well in these hills, and a tribal farmer can make as much as US\$250 per year farming them, a sum that is at once pitifully small and significantly better than any income he can hope to earn from other crops. A ban on opium could have a disastrous effect on the lives of hundreds of thousands of opium growers in these mountains. Still, the government introduced alternative cash crops for the small-plot farmers and provided, according to one pro-government report, the ‘necessary assistance to the local populace to help them meet the basic needs,’ as well as ‘income generating enterprises’ and ‘other suitable business enterprises.’

Income generation? Suitable business enterprises? As mentioned, Special Region 4 shares a border with China’s Yunnan province, and the town of Mong La sits right on that border. The Chinese people, then, represented a market and Mong La a potential tourist destination. But tourists of what sort? The guerrilla generals of Special Region 4 had spent their lives fighting as good communists while responding as good capitalists to human appetite – the taste of addicts for drugs – and profiting from the powerful market forces

Mong La’s economy flipped like a switch from boom to bust, and now, as I visit the place during the 10th anniversary of the drug ban, it remains busted.

Above, left: A fresh leopard skin is hung out to dry by the side of the road.
Above: a pheasant is hung to dry outside a village in Special Region 4.

created when desire meets resistance. Addicts make the best customers, in other words; and, so the generals may have asked themselves, what new business would respond smartly to the sort of human appetites that, like the addict’s desire for drugs, are deep, irrational, and often legally restricted?

A Town Transformed

The Las Vegas-isation of Mong La happened quickly, and it began with a paving of the streets, followed by wiring for electricity to power the flashing lights that soon flashed happy thoughts in Chinese and English, such as, ‘Oh! That’s wonderful!’ Dozens of great, gaudy casinos, discos, and hotels were built. A non-stop pornography channel was cabled into the hotel telly. Prostitutes from Thailand and eastern Europe were shipped in, their phone numbers displayed prominently in each hotel room. Perhaps most famously, a glamorous Thai transvestite revue was established, and it became commonly known, for English speakers at least, as ‘The Ladyboy Show.’

For the kiddies, meanwhile, Mong La offered an amusement park, the Mongla National Paradise, complete with a

Ferris wheel, a herd of polo-playing elephants, broad lawns and a large pond with plastic paddle-boats for rent, and even a great barn containing a bear farm.

So the new Mong La, though built with drug money, was by the start of the new millennium selling gambling and sex – and the Chinese began to buy. Suddenly there was, according to a reporter from Toronto’s *The Globe and Mail*, ‘a new economy of casinos, karaoke bars, golf courses, brothels, hotels, bowling alleys and tourist gimmicks such as the elephant polo.’ Just outside town, dozens of luxury condos were being built, while, according to the same Canadian reporter, ‘the night sky of Mong La is brightly lit by the neon lights of the gaudy casinos and posh hotels.’

As many as 600,000 Chinese tourists with several million dollars worth of Yuan in their pockets were crossing the border annually, streaming in on day-trip buses into Special Region 4 and determined to sample Mong La’s exotic and forbidden wares. Chinese high-rollers were tossing enormous sums onto the tables inside those grand casinos, and for those who had lost more than they could afford, industrious loan sharks were circling nearby and offering to pitch in – for a small percentage.

But then, according to one newspaper account, the beloved relative of a well-placed Chinese official returned home from Mong La humiliated and poorer by the equivalent of US\$100,000, and so the Chinese army was called out. Troops marched to the border, and, at least for those day-trippers without a sober or boring need to enter Special Region 4, the border gate was closed.

It is impressive what a few troops at a single spot can do. Mong La’s economy flipped like a switch from boom to bust, and now, as I visit the place during the 10th anniversary of the drug ban, it remains busted. The one luxury hotel still operating stinks and is badly run by a skeleton staff. The Ladyboy Show is gone, the transvestites sent back to Thailand. The eastern European prostitutes are no longer in evidence, except for that single tawdry dance show just down the street from my hotel. The flashing lights no longer flash, and the palatial casinos and discos are looking prematurely withered, worn and weather-stained, with only their noble profiles yet reflecting architectural ambition and a few big signs still recalling hopeful names – Myanmar Royal Leisure Company. Even the amusement park known as Mongla National Paradise has fallen on hard times, with the polo-playing elephant herd reduced to a single bull elephant and the plastic paddle-boats beached and bleached and cracking in the sun, while a dead cat floats in the pond’s green scum.

Our translator informs me that Special Region 4 includes about 85,000 residents (with approximately three Chinese for every native Myanmarese), so even while the decaying casino corpses litter the centre of town, Mong La still operates as a real place with people to feed and business to transact. Actually, prostitutes still gather in the red light district next to the central market, and one evening my travelling companions and I spend a half hour walking past the long row of sex boutiques, saying hello to some of the more friendly workers and trying to estimate their numbers: perhaps 50–100 slender young women inside the boutique stalls, watching TV, talking to each other, looking bored, a few of them playing netless badminton in the dark street outside the stalls. But where are all the customers?

And, although all the high-stakes gambling is closed down, the night brings out a much smaller and more amateurish sort of gambling with, inside one rough shed, crowds of men smoking and a few women, all gathered around eight homemade tables marked with crudely hand-numbered squares. You place your money on a numbered square and set your hopeful gaze upon three giant wooden dice temporarily restrained by a rope at the top of a washboard-style slide.

The giant dice are released one at a time, whereupon they roll down in a wooden racket and come to rest on the numbered squares, instantly generating a human racket of raging shouts, cries, and screams. And that seems to be the big excitement in Mong La these days.



Wild elephants
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Above: Young macaques are common fare at Mong La's central market and many restaurants in town.

Above, right: At the town of Tachilek on the Myanmarese-Thai border, the once open trade in wildlife has begun to move underground.

The Tiger Trade

Business is the activity of stimulating, then feeding, human appetite, and now that the gambling and sex businesses are apparently on the wane, what's left? Well, there are the various extraction enterprises: the ambitious removal of big timber and truckloads of coal, for example, which follow the draw of capital into China. Then there is the business of extracting animals, a business that works like a giant vacuum cleaner hoovering through the forests of Special Region 4 and the rest of northeastern Myanmar and sucking out, for Chinese middle-class consumption, animals common and rare, endangered and not endangered, live and dead, whole and disassembled. This is Economics 101, the place in the textbook where the downward curve of disappearing supply is stabbed by the upward spike of eager greed.

Wild elephants are long vanished from this part of the world, so I am told, while the tigers are just about gone. In the markets and dealers' private compounds of Mong La, we find plenty of fake tiger skins, but that real tiger skin seen by my friend at a dealer's house a few months ago has now been sold for 50,000 Yuan, we learn, along with a beer-crate full of tiger bones for 80,000 Yuan. Altogether, then, that one dead and dismembered creature – for all anyone knows, the very last tiger from the entire region – was worth roughly US\$15,000 as a commodity.

The purpose of a tiger skin is obvious: to service a psychological appetite, to raise the symbolic banner of someone's limp ego. Tiger penises and tiger bones likewise have great symbolic value in this part of the world. Tiger penises are worth many Yuan as a traditional medicine supposedly good for putting the growl and purr back into your sex life; and, although my fellow tourists and I fail to find any clearly non-fake tiger penises, we do find many real penises from several other species.

Actually, penises are very big in Mong La, and late one afternoon, we spend some time looking over a selection of deer penises, gift-wrapped in elaborate red-and-gold boxes and being offered at one of the town's more prosperous pharmacies. With the help of our translator, we ask the young woman at the counter what a deer penis is for.

'For the man energy,' she explains.

Older is better, interestingly enough, so one penis that's supposed to be more than 10 years old sells for 680 Yuan, or about US\$90, while a younger penis sells for slightly more than half that figure.

Although the woman says they have no tiger penises for sale at that time, they do, she assures us, manufacture and sell guaranteed tiger wine. As a matter of fact, we can see the brewing process right there in the pharmacy sales room: those 20-gallon fish tanks filled with whitish ginger roots and

a few curved bones within a brown, tea-coloured brew. The bones, we are told, are from a tiger, and they lend oomph to the final concoction, which is bottled in fancy decanters and sold to Chinese nationals who take them back into China.

Caged and Worse

I suspect there may some bears left in the woods of Special Region 4. Over a few days, we find 90–100 live bears in Mong La – all of them kept in cages so small the unfortunate creatures inside can barely turn around. These live animals started out as the babies left over when their wild mothers were shot or chased off with dogs, and many of them now are grown up: huge mute creatures with big sniffing noses and improbably long tongues. But these days, so the dealers tell us, wild-caught bears are no longer coming into the market.

Bears, too, are important piecemeal commodities for the business of traditional Chinese medicine. Their most valuable piece is the gall bladder, which is commonly sold in the markets and looks like an old, rather oily change purse. Meanwhile, pharmacists at the bear farm in Mongla National Paradise have embedded catheters inside their 50 live bears, all of whom are kept individually in steel-barred cages elevated – like huge birdcages – one metre above the concrete floor.

A happy-thought mural painted on the cinderblock wall at the far end of the barn shows wild bears playing gaily in a

forest, but these captive bears, raging and pathetic, have rubbed their faces raw by swaying back and forth, back and forth against the bars that confine them. Each day, a technician from the facility walks from cage to cage with a big syringe while the hungry bears are suckered by food to the squeeze end of their cages. Once a bear is gobbling and immobilised in the squeeze, the technician, crouching underneath the cage, inserts the syringe into the catheter and milks away the daily supply of gall.

Literature from the merchandising end of the barn explains that bear gall bladder medicine is good for whatever ails ya, just about. It will 'protect the liver and brighten the eye, clear up and remove evil heat, diminish inflammation and relieve pain, benefit the gall and remove stone,' as well as cure 'various acute and chronic hepatitis, icterus, hepatomegaly, cirrhosis, cholecystopathy and biliary tract, aphta, glossitis, gastritis, bronchitis, stagnated fire, mania and spasm in children' – and so on. The medicinal promises seem to me about as prodigal and blatantly fake as the happy-thought mural at the end of the barn; but even if they are true, the uninhibited cruelty of this operation, with its 50 live bears permanently catheterised and confined inside steel birdcages, remains as untranslatable as stagnated fire.

Bears are also valued as an exotic food, at least by some middle-class Chinese from Yunnan province, and so a number of the bear merchants in Mong La are fattening up their caged charges with an expectation of the big killing to be made. One man we talk to, for example, keeps seven bears folded into seven very small cages beside his house. He sprays those big, black-haired creatures down with a hose daily – they seem to love the water spraying into their mouths. And he feeds them their usual sloppy gruel, which they lap up fiercely.

The man explains to us that in the old days, when the gamblers were coming into town in big numbers, he was selling many bears for much money. Now that the gamblers are being turned away at the border gate, business has gotten slower, but he continues feeding the bears because, sooner or later, some rich customer from China will have a wedding and wish to show off by roasting a bear. At that point, the bear owner will shoot one, butcher the carcass, and the pieces of meat will be transported across the border. While it's true that the Chinese are still keeping the official border gate closed to gamblers, nobody cares about the trade in animals or exotic meats, he indicates.

Also, whereas his house and seven bears are located some distance away from the official gate, they are still about five metres away from the big hole in the wire fence separating Special Region 4 from China; and, as we can see, large numbers of people are casually passing back and forth here all the time, stepping right on through the hole, which is indeed big enough for two people walking side by side to carry one disassembled bear between them.

Humans at Risk

Both China and Myanmar have signed the international treaty known as the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), which is meant to protect species threatened with extinction, such as tigers and bears, from a trade across international borders. Thus it would seem that at least a portion of the wild animal business in Special Region 4, as it serves Chinese business and markets, is blatantly illegal, and ought to be stopped by the governments of China and Myanmar.

But aside from the legal aspects of a business that continues to violate CITES restrictions, and aside from the serious conservation issues raised by an activity that indiscriminately removes key species of wildlife from Myanmar's northeastern forests, there is a very worrisome public health aspect to what is happening in Mong La. A visit to the town markets one morning turns up not only the usual – butchered dog's head displayed alongside the head of a goat, various wild birds, wild cats, lizards, monkeys, pangolins, toads, turtles and snakes, along with assorted bones and feathers and organs, scales and skins – but also, I notice, a couple of dead civet cats.

Civet cats are actually unrelated to cats, and they look rather like big weasels or raccoons. They are also the direct source of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) virus that appeared and began spreading among humans in southern China during 2002. By 2003, the SARS virus had

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A young black bear for sale outside a game meat restaurant in Mong La.

spread globally and killed some 800 people before a radical series of quarantines and an official Chinese prohibition on 'the slaughter, cooking and selling of wild animals like the civet cat' succeeded in curtailing, at least temporarily, the developing pandemic.

The public health issue may be the biggest cause for alarm in considering the wild animal capitalism of Special Region 4. After all, some three-quarters of all human infectious diseases, including AIDS, tuberculosis and the plague, originally came from animal microbes given the opportunity to migrate into human populations, while a number of human diseases long considered non-infectious – multiple sclerosis, for example – could also be the result of contact with microbes.

But what concerns me most immediately about the animal business here at Mong La is something at once harder to describe and to justify, which is my own personal sense of the cruelty involved.

Greed and lawlessness are common enough, but there is also that cold callousness, that strangely hard attitude I note among the animal marketers – those smiling-faced purveyors of tiger skins and bear bladders and deer penises, of live

snakes and birds and monkeys and dogs, of reptiles and amphibians – that has sneaked up on and surprised me. I have come to a place where many things human and all things non-human are for sale, live or dead, whole or dismembered. It is a place where the stimulation and feeding of human appetite is the reigning force, the sole significant value and motivation, a place where the party goes on, where the happy-thought sign in flashing lights always says, 'Oh! That's wonderful!'

Yes, I am feeling a serious cultural disconnect here. Surely, I think to myself now, I am moving among a strange and rather frightening place where few people have sympathetic feeling for animals, not any kind of sympathy for any kind of animals whatsoever.

The Wedding Party

It is on the final evening of our stay in Mong La, Special Region 4, that this disquieting feeling becomes strongest. We visit a street our translator can only tell me is called 'Live Ani-

mal Restaurants Street,' and we slowly stroll up the road and past the restaurants. These are sidewalk restaurants, with the tables and chairs spilling out in the open from under a roof, with the concrete floors drifting out as well until they become sidewalks terminating at the curb. At curb's edge, the menus are all on animated display.

Moving along the street from restaurant to restaurant, we examine the menus, which include (but are not limited to) a pair of fluffy, brown-and-white slow lorises, two or three dozen cobras weaving inside mesh-topped baskets, several fat owls blinking serenely inside owl-sized cages, a collection of diamond-scaled pangolins curled into self-protective balls, a trembling baby raccoon, numerous large toads in plastic bags, turtles, a writhing monitor lizard, a baby rhesus monkey on a chain, several fat little white dogs, a large eagle, caged...

The third restaurant along leads in the competition for customers this evening, with a boisterous crowd inside and spread out on the sidewalk, everyone dressed to kill in dark suits and bright, puffy dresses. It's a wedding party, and the bride and groom, sleek and shiny and full of promise, are the centre of attention, while the honeymoon car (a cream luxury sedan with roses taped in aerodynamic rows along its sides,

and a bouquet of red and yellow roses in the shape of a valentine heart taped onto its hood) waits at the curb. Members of the wedding party, meanwhile, are slowly settling into their seats and tables for the grand dinner to come, and in the process shifting through a series of social tableaux: kisses, hugs, wrapped arms and bright smiles lit by strobing cameras.

The night is early, so perhaps appetites and business will pick up soon enough. Still, as we move up the street, looking at the menus and trying to identify species, we reach the last restaurant where, away from the noisy comings and goings of the wedding party, things are much more sedate. At this final restaurant, only four or five customers are seated, while the woman who appears to be both cashier and waitress occupies herself by sweeping down the restaurant floor and sidewalk.

She ignores us, as we pause to examine the menu at curbside, including four cute little white puppies, but when we bend down to look at a pangolin inside a cage, pathetically trembling and hugging a turtle that is inside the same cage, the woman gratuitously and even furiously steps over and begins jabbing through the wire of the cage at the face of the pangolin with the plastic tip of her broom handle, as if she intends to kill the creature on the spot.

'Stop it. Stop it. Stop! Stop!' I say, then shout, but she obviously doesn't understand English and, in any event, doesn't care. She does at last stop after I grab the broom and risk a tussle and a scene – or worse. ■

A baby-sitter from a tribal group tends to her young charges and watches over their father's traditional Chinese medicine stall.



Law and Disorder

MANY OF THE REGULATIONS FOR MANAGING THE INTERNATIONAL WILDLIFE TRADE ARE ALREADY IN PLACE; THEY ARE JUST AREN'T BEING FOLLOWED.

CITES (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) is an international agreement between governments to manage the trade in wild animals and plants so that their ultimate survival is not threatened. At the moment, CITES accords varying levels of protection to over 30,000 species of animals and plants. Another international organisation that works to monitor the wildlife trade is TRAFFIC, a joint programme of the Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) and the World Conservation Union (IUCN).

The international wildlife trade encompasses millions of animal and plant specimens, ranging from live animals and plants to the many products derived from them (including medicines, food products, leather goods and tourist souvenirs). This trade is believed to be worth billions of dollars.

CITES lists threatened species on three appendices based on the level of risk they face:

Appendix 1: All international trade is banned.

Appendix 2: International trade must be monitored and regulated.

Appendix 3: Trade bans by individual governments, while others are asked to assist.

Although CITES is legally binding, it does not take the place of national laws but provides a framework for each country to adopt its own legislation to ensure the implementation of CITES.

But any form of regulation is toothless without the will for enforcement. Because the trade in wild animals crosses international borders, regulating it requires different countries to cooperate in order to safeguard certain species from over-exploitation. Mong La is simply one example (by no means the most extreme) of what can happen when regulations fail without the will or ability to enforce them.

The News in 2007

In June 2007, CITES held its triennial conference at The Hague, Netherlands. The delegates adopted over 100 formal decisions to strengthen the regulations governing the international wildlife trade. Trade will now be forbidden for the slow loris (*Nycticebus coucang*, *Nycticebus bengalensis*, *Nycticebus javanicus*, *Nycticebus menagensis* and *Nycticebus pygmaeus*), a primate native to Asia, among others species. Another issue on the agenda was the growth of the wildlife trade via the Internet.

Delegates also reviewed the progress being made by conservation programmes for the tiger, leopard, Saiga antelope, black rhinoceros, hawksbill turtle and sharks, as well as other CITES-listed species. The next CITES conference will be held in Qatar in 2010.

Resources

CITES
www.cites.org

TRAFFIC
www.traffic.org

World Conservation Union (IUCN)
www.iucn.org

Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF)
www.wwf.org

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